Romeo and Juliet

Act I, Scene IV – Mercutio & Queen Mab

This scene serves to augment the general sense of fate through Romeo’s statement of belief that the night’s events will lead to untimely death. This is an example of dramatic irony since the audience knows that he will indeed suffer an untimely death. When Romeo gives himself up to “he that hath the steerage of my course,” the audience feels fate take a tighter grasp on him (I.iv.112).

This scene also serves as an introduction to the clever, whirling, entrancing Mercutio. Spinning wild puns left and right, seeming to speak them as freely as others breathe, Mercutio is established as a friend who can, gently or not, mock Romeo as no one else can. Though thoughtful, Benvolio does not have the quick wit for such behavior. With his wild speech and laughter, Mercutio is a man of excess. But his passions are of another sort than those that move Romeo to love and Tybalt to hate. Romeo’s and Tybalt’s passions are founded upon the acceptance of two different ideals trumpeted by society: the poetic tradition of love and the importance of honor. Mercutio believes in neither. In fact, Mercutio stands in contrast to all of the other characters in Romeo and Juliet because he is able to see through the blindness caused by wholehearted acceptance of the ideals sanctioned by society: he pokes holes in Romeo’s rapturous adoption of the rhetoric of love just as he mocks Tybalt’s fastidious adherence to the fashions of the day. It is no accident that Mercutio is the master punner in this play. A pun represents slippage, or twist, in the meaning of a word. That word, which previously meant one thing, now suddenly is revealed to have additional interpretations, and therefore becomes ambiguous. Just as Mercutio can see through words to other, usually debased meanings, he can also understand that the ideals held by those around him originate from less high-minded desires than anyone would care to admit.

Mercutio’s Queen Mab speech is one of the most famous in the play. Queen Mab, who brings dreams to sleeping people, seems to be loosely based on figures in the pagan Celtic mythology that predated Christianity’s arrival in England. Yet the name holds a deeper meaning. The words “queen” and “mab” were references to prostitutes in Elizabethan England. In Queen Mab, then, Mercutio creates a sort of conceptual pun: he alludes to a mythological tradition peopled with fairies and attaches it to a reference to prostitutes. He yokes the childish fun of fairies to a much darker vision of humanity. The speech itself reveals this dichotomy. A child would love Mercutio’s description of a world of fairies replete with walnut carriages and insect steeds, its stories of a fairy bringing dreams to sleeping people. But take a closer look at those dreams. Queen Mab brings dreams suited to each individual, and each dream she brings seems to descend into deeper depravity and brutality: lovers dream of love; lawyers dream of law cases and making money; soldiers dream of “cutting foreign throats” (I.iv.83). By the end of the speech, Queen Mab is the “hag” who teaches maidens to have sex. The child’s fairy tale has spun into something much, much darker, though this dark vision is an accurate portrayal of society. Mercutio, as entertaining as he is, can be seen as offering an alternative vision of the grand tragedy that is Romeo and Juliet. “Thou talk’st of nothing,” Romeo says to Mercutio in order to force Mercutio to end the Queen Mab speech (I.iv.96). Mercutio agrees, saying that dreams “are the children of an idle brain” (I.iv.98). But don’t Romeo’s visions of love qualify as dreams? Don’t Tybalt’s fantasies of perfect proprietary and social standing count as dreams? And what about Friar Lawrence’s dreams of bringing peace to Verona? In Mercutio’s assessment, all of these desires “are the children of an idle brain.” All are delusions. Mercutio’s comment can be seen as a single pinprick in the grand idealistic passions of love and family loyalty that animate the play. The Queen Mab speech by no means deflates the great tragedy and romantic ideals of Romeo and Juliet, but it adds to them the subtext of a pun, that dark flipside which offers an alternative view of reality.

- Excerpted from SparkNotes