

# Mercutio's Dance: Aspects of Inversion in Luhrmann's Film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*

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This paper derives from a shared interest in Baz Luhrmann's film *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet*. Although we were both fascinated by the character of Mercutio in the film, and in particular his prominent role in the party scene during which the two lovers meet, we realised that our individual perspectives were leading us to formulate separate, and yet not incompatible, readings: on the one hand a post-modern critique focusing on Queer theory and dance culture, and on the other, an analysis informed by Sartrean Existentialism and intertextuality. The common denominator is Mercutio's, and indeed the film's, use of inversion. Just as the term inversion itself covers a multitude of genres and meanings, this paper will explore different possibilities and draw seemingly contradictory conclusions. That is the nature of inversion, Luhrmann's film and Shakespeare's play itself. As Barbara Babcock writes, "[...] symbolic inversions create *Spielraum*, a space in which to take chances with new roles and ideas" (Babcock, 1978: 25). Whether he be considered to be toying with Romeo's affections and making sport with adolescents, or guiding lovers to a place where love may be all there is, Mercutio has a role to play as a go-between (variously he bridges the gaps between childhood and adulthood, existence and essence, male and female). He creates a space in which adults can play.

But whereas Babcock's edited volume generates a discourse of rites of passage, which suggests an inverting of one trope into another, a shift 'away from' and 'into', with Mercutio standing as a facilitator of the transformation, a more carnivalesque reading of Mercutio's dance is possible, according to which the Montagues' feast can be seen as Bakhtin's medieval marketplace. For Bakhtin, carnivals were the necessary and constant underside to the official discourse of authority and power in the Middle Ages; decrees and draconian rules of etiquette were always accompanied by revelry and laughter, in which otherwise strict social distinctions melted away. Consider the following description of people meeting in an amphitheatre, as quoted by Bakhtin in his work on Rabelais:

Crowded together, its members are astonished at themselves. They are accustomed at other times to seeing each other running hither and thither in confusion, bustling about without order or discipline. Now this many-headed, many-minded, fickle, blundering monster suddenly sees itself united as one noble assembly, welded into one mass, a single body animated by a single spirit. (Bakhtin, 1994: 225)

The description is by Goethe, and the imagined scene is set, appropriately, in the amphitheatre of Verona. This allows us to reassess, before we even begin, what we understand by inversion in Baz Luhrmann's film version of *Romeo and Juliet*: the wild party scene, according to the discourse of the carnival, is not a break from the rule of order, as delineated by the feuding families; rather it is a restoration of order, a diffusing of the boundaries that separate Capulets from Montagues. The path trodden by Romeo and Juliet is not as simple as a trajectory from love into death; instead their very meeting is part of a fusion in which their death must carry in itself life, their tragic fate a new beginning. By pointing up elements of the carnivalesque (his Mercutio is painted in the gaudy colours of grotesque realism), Luhrmann appeals to a

synthesis of binary oppositions, a medieval Weltanschauung, according to which: “[...] people do not perceive a static image of their unity (eine Gestalt) but instead the uninterrupted continuity of their becoming and growth, of the unfinished metamorphosis of death and renewal” (Bakhtin, 1994: 225-26). Mercutio is synonymous with this concept of renewal, not only at the level of his own character, nor even in relation to Romeo and Juliet, but at a cosmic level; his body – and this is what Bakhtin means by grotesque realism – is removed from the private sphere and made public, an allegory for change within the whole spectacle, in which the crowd and the performer become one and the same (the Shakespearian concept of the whole world being a stage is fully in tune with Bakhtin’s carnival space). As Bakhtin says of representations of the body in Rabelais: “This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable” (Bakhtin, 1994: 205).

Not only is Mercutio dressed up to party in the body language of the carnival; his exaggerated mood-swings throughout the play also smack of billingsgate, characteristic of which, as Bakhtin again points out, is “the passing from excessive praise to excessive invective” (Bakhtin, 1994: 216). In being led to the dance by this character in whom both sides of so many binary oppositions are on display, Romeo is led away from language of official denotations into the marketplace where all are as one. His name, Capulet, carries no meaning while the carnival is in town. In existentialist terms, he is able to cast off what Neil Levy refers to as his “shallow being”,<sup>17</sup> throwing himself into the world as a simple existent. At the same time, Juliet descends from the stars, descending from her own private, essential sphere into the public space. It is when the party ends that the private sphere reasserts the boundary lines and the essential Juliet finds herself with a man who is defined by his name, in a world where Love (with a capital ‘L’) cannot, logically, exist. In the following discussion of Luhrmann’s film, the uproarious laughter of the marketplace will attempt to harmonise various different readings of Mercutio’s display.

For centuries now, audiences have seen in *Romeo and Juliet* one of the great representations of romantic heterosexual love, a story of love that, by virtue of its purity and authenticity, ignores social expectations, constraints and prohibitions. It is this very purity, this authenticity, it would seem, that dooms the lovers to destruction at the hands of a grubby world of family obligations, worldly honour and material considerations. Yet such a reading is not quite as inevitable as it may first appear.

In pitting partnership based on family interests against partnership based on sexual desire, Shakespeare’s play enacts the conflict between traditional and modern notions of marriage. Whereas pragmatic considerations such as exchange and consolidation of property, the formation of interfamilial alliances and the development of an extended support group all underpinned traditional marriage arrangements, modern partnership is an emotional state predicated upon the great partnership myth that there is one, and only one, object of complete desirability in this world, and that that object will inevitably be found. Such an emotional relationship goes under such epithets as ‘true love’ or ‘essential love’, and, in its purest form, entails the initial stage of love at first sight. What is particularly strange about this modern notion of love is its foundation in irrational beliefs. There is no rational basis for assuming that there is one and only one Mr or Ms Right. Despite the fact that we live in a world that

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<sup>17</sup> In his study of Sartrean Existentialism, *Sartre*, Neil Levy refers to the levels of being through which a man can be said to *be* as shallow modes of being, any profound sense of ‘essence’ being reserved for inanimate objects that alone can be said to be self-founding.

has done away with most aspects of fate or destiny, we still believe in some mystical inevitability when it comes to finding our long-term partner. Thus although we may regard Shakespeare's mention of "star-cross'd lovers" as a reflection of the tragic, and hence pre-modern, world-view, it simultaneously presents an essential element in the constitutive instant of modern love.

Whilst we shall go on to read *Romeo and Juliet* - and Baz Luhrmann's film, in particular - from the perspective of twentieth- and twenty-first-century philosophical, anthropological and cultural view points, it is clear that Shakespeare's play can also be read in relation to a literary tradition that pre-dates the bard by some centuries. We know, for example, that Shakespeare adapted the plot of this play from existing sources as he did with all his plays. Moreover, the conflict between individual desire and worldly responsibility is a theme that runs through the whole of Western literature, and is most probably an anthropological constant. An old German folksong *Es waren zwei Königskinder* tells of a prince and a princess who loved each other but were separated by a large stretch of water. A bit of skulduggery on the part of an interfering nun ensures that the young prince soon finds a watery grave. The princess follows him, and there is much mourning to be done. Or there is the far older Celtic legend of Tristram and Iseult, whose love becomes what we might in these modern times call a fatal psychosomatic illness. In what is now the best known version of the story, Wagner's music-drama, *Tristan and Isolde*, a wounded Tristan allows passion to interfere with convalescence and dies in Isolde's arms, whilst she simply gives up the ghost in sympathy without resort to external agency of any kind (Holden, 2001: 1040).

Wagner's opera presents a romantic love as pure as only the nineteenth century could figure it. Popular readings of *Romeo and Juliet* tend to see the play in the same tradition. Rather than recognising it as the conflict between two legitimate and legitimated forces, family and individual, popular contemporary readings of the play affirm the primacy of individual desire, at the same time delegitimizing the claims of family as evil. Thus the play becomes a reflection of contemporary partnership ethics, namely, that the partner should simply be the prime object of sexual desire, and that such partnerships should be consummated, unencumbered by material or social interests.

The problem with this argument as so far presented is the fact that the families represented in *Romeo and Juliet* have hardly earned any claim to legitimacy. Bent on revenge - not only a crime but also a sin specifically forbidden by the Church - these families are no better than bands of outlaws, or in Luhrmann's terms, gangsters. Yet, as in all family vendettas, the matter at stake is the very honour of the family itself. In other words, family loyalty is over-expressed in the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets.

In this respect, the story of Romeo and Juliet follows the mythical structure of the great classical tragedies, presenting a world that is out of balance. Claude Lévi-Strauss's structural analysis of the Oedipus tragedy, for instance, reveals a fundamental problematic revolving around the overrating and underrating of blood relations (Lévi-Strauss, 1968: 215). Oedipus kills his father, severing one parental link, and has sex with his mother, forging an unacceptably close link with his other parent. The same fundamental problem with kinship ties is played out in the next generation with the two sons killing each other, with one sister exhibiting excessive loyalty to the two of them and the other sister exhibiting too little. This is not the place to look at conscious, rational presentations and unconscious, non-rational motivations, which would necessitate the incorporation of Freudian theories of the

constitution of identity through the Oedipal drama of human psychology; rather, it is sufficient, for our purposes, to point out that over-expression/under-expression of kinship ties provides the fundamental structure motivating the Oedipus story

*Romeo and Juliet* shows a similar over-expression of family loyalty, but this time it is counterbalanced by an over-expression of romantic love. Unbalanced personal life comes into conflict with unbalanced family life, or, to put it in more psychological terms, the young lovers rebel against the neurotic condition of the repressive fortress-family, moving into a state of perversion, of claiming total freedom of desire. The degree of their hysterical infatuation is most manifestly evident in the final scenes. The errors, misapprehensions and near misses are not simply the games played by cruel fate; they are at the same time the result of hasty, emotive overreaction. For all its pathos and emotional appeal, the demise of the two lovers is the only possible outcome. Much as we might not wish it, hysterical infatuation must come to an end sooner or later in the real world. (If we stubbornly adhere to our romantic ideals, however, we can be consoled by the possibility that Romeo and Juliet might continue their love in the next world.)

Whilst Shakespeare's play presents a debate between, and hence a destabilisation of, traditional and modern models of social and sexual organisation, it has been misread and deproblematised by modern Western society, being put into the service of the modern configuration of romantic love, compulsory heterosexuality, clearly defined gender roles and the nuclear family. As Jonathan Goldberg says in his discussion of the play's conclusion:

The idealization of the lovers, to be brief, serves an ideological function. The marriage of their corpses in the eternal monuments of "pure gold" attempts to perform what marriage normally aims at in comedy: to provide the bedrock of the social order. Or, to speak somewhat more exactly, the heterosexual order. (Goldberg, 1994: 219)

The balcony scene has become the mythical model of courtship, so much so that Luhrmann feels the need to breathe new life into the cliché by inverting it: the beloved no longer occupies the balcony, but walks on the ground. Romeo is no longer below Juliet, but above.

By recovering the play's inherent ideological indecision, we will come to an understanding that is more relevant to the realities of our times. Whilst we may see in the play a debate between pre-modern and modern conceptions of partnership and sexuality, the very fact that these matters are open to debate indicates a point of crisis in social and sexual politics, a moment of shifting and indeterminate identity, a moment which, in our times, we might call 'queer'. Examination of the transition from the pre-modern to the modern will shed light on the current transition from the modern world of fixed, identifiable and identified sexual and gender identities to the post-modern world of shifting, ambiguous and multiple - in other words, queer - identities.

This is not to say that Shakespeare's play has a prime focus that is other than heterosexual. In the novella by Luigi da Porto that provides the source for Shakespeare's play, Romeo gains access to the Capulets' party disguised as a woman. In Shakespeare's play, Romeo is hidden in a cape which itself is known as a romeo. As Laurence Senelick notes, "in this case, at least, he preferred a play on words to a play on gender" (Senelick, 2000: 142). On the other hand, we must not forget that Juliet would have been played by a boy on the Shakespearean stage, so there is the

implicit dimension of a male attesting his desire to another male playing a woman. The play does counterpose heterosexual relations with other possibilities.

Of course, there are enormous problems with using modern categories of sexuality in relation to a late-sixteenth-century text. We know that the medical/psychological category of the homosexual (and, by extension, heterosexual) only comes into existence in the second half of the nineteenth century, and that previous eras tended to categorise people's acts rather than the people themselves. As Mary Bly puts it in her book *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage*:

The term 'homosexual' does not appear in the English language until the 1890s, and there seems to be no equivalent seventeenth-century term. Early modern England apparently did not assign a 'binarized identity', in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's term - a label of heterosexual or homosexual - to each man or woman. Even 'sodomite' does not label a discrete social identity; the term was applied flexibly to atheists, traitors, women, or men attracted to their own sex. (Bly, 2000: 5)

Also, we are interested not simply in same-sex relations, but rather in sexual desire and expression in all its unexpected forms. The word 'queer' more adequately covers this variety, although it, too, has its problems when referring to a late-sixteenth-century text. The word did not have the same meaning then as it does now; in fact, the term as we use it in this paper has only existed for a little over a decade. Admittedly, the word has been used to refer to homosexuals for a century or more; nevertheless, it is only since the early nineties that the word has been appropriated and rehabilitated, or rather habilitated, by queers themselves. The term can therefore only be used as an observer-category when dealing with phenomena from the sixteenth century. Nevertheless, Queer's ability to embrace a multiplicity of sexual practices and attitudes makes it a useful term when looking at an era that had a clear concept of transgressive sexual behaviours yet few fixed terms to describe these behaviours or the people who engaged in them.

The person who is most obviously queer in *Romeo and Juliet* is Mercutio. Scholarship has long recognised that this character voices same-sex interest, most obviously in his banter with Romeo, which is liberally laced with phallic puns (Bly, 2000: 64; Goldberg, 1994: 230-232). Two examples will suffice: early in the piece he advises Romeo to "prick love for pricking" (1.4.28), and later he describes his own role with the words "I conjure only but to raise up him" (2.1.29) Yet Mercutio's queerness is not only manifested or limited by his interest in Romeo's cock. Of all the characters in the play, Mercutio has been given the most convoluted language, the greatest wit and the largest number of wordplays. In other words, Mercutio queerifies language, making it mean something more than at first appears, making it work on various levels, making it something other than straight-down-the-line. There is also a queer discrepancy between the interest that Mercutio voices on behalf of himself and his actions on behalf of Romeo: he bespeaks his personal desire for Romeo, yet, by means of an entrée card and an ecstasy tab, initiates Romeo into a realm where the latter is able to pursue his own desire.

What is most significant is not the fact that Mercutio is queer, but rather the fact that Mercutio *does* queer. This is, in fact, one of the central interests of queer, not of some kind of queer essence, but of queer performativity. In this sense, a queer reading of Mercutio fits into an existentialist framework: he *exists* queer before he can be said to *be* queer, existence preceding essence. (And yet, as we shall see, Mercutio

may also be considered to have an 'essential', or determined, quality.) First feminist, then queer theory, have perceived the culturally determined basis of gender roles and the fact that these are by no means wholly congruent with biological sex. As Teresa de Lauretis writes: "The sex-gender system [...] is both a sociocultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning [...] to individuals within the society" (De Lauretis, 1987: 2-3).

If biological sex is not the determinant of one's gender role, then gender becomes an act, something that one performs, usually unconsciously, sometimes consciously. As Judith Butler states: "Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time" (Butler, 1990: 33).

The most obvious place where Mercutio does queer in Luhrmann's film is, of course, during the party, where he performs. To say that he performs a drag act is not enough, for there are many forms of drag that communicate many meanings. Firstly, drag can be seen as a denigration of the female body by misogynistic men. As Mark Simpson states:

Much of the entertainment of drag depends upon the improbability and inappropriateness of a man in a frock, wig and 'falsies'. But this in turn depends upon not just the improbability of a man dressed as a woman but the 'improbability' of the female body itself. The man in a frock looks preposterous but this is just a shadow of the essential preposterousness of the female body itself, that which the frock represents (and hides). (Simpson, 1994: 179)

Read thus, drag plays on the male fear of the difference of the woman's body by appropriating the image of this difference, rendering it harmless by ridiculing it. Yet, as in Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque where objects of ridicule are always also objects of adulation, drag can have a liberating aspect, too:

In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative nature of gender itself - as well as its contingency. Indeed, part of the pleasure, the giddiness of the performance is in the recognition of a radical contingency in the relation between sex and gender in the face of cultural configurations of causal unities that are regularly assumed to be necessary. (Butler, 1990: 137-138)

So is Mercutio's performance a denigration of femininity or the resuscitation of the feminine in a new, celebratory androgyny? Mercutio is not the only person who cross-dresses: Juliet's mother goes through a similar transformation in preparation for the party. Lady Capulet, a natural blonde, opens the party scene with an inverted striptease: she, like Mercutio, is wearing a corset and stockings; as she dresses, she transforms into an Egyptian queen, crowning her disguise with a black wig that strongly resembles Mercutio's real hair. Drag is not just the prerogative of males but can also be engaged in by females. One could even view the whole premise of a costume ball as a pretext for all participants to don their own form of drag.

Yet despite all this cross-dressing and dressing up, Luhrmann's party scene - the very centre of the film's inversions and mutations - may in fact be understood as showing people as they really are. Marjorie Garber asserts that "transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture" (Garber, 1992: 17). Rather than concealing people's identities, it allows these identities to unfold outside the confines and definitions of the established society of the time. Studies of festival

behaviour have shown how licentiousness does not offer, as it is often assumed that it does, a cathartic role reversal. In their article, "Ranges of Festival Behaviour", Roger D. Abrahams and Richard Bauman write of an ideal against which festival may be read:

What we are suggesting, then, is that the inversion and license of festival must be approached in terms of the general interrelationship between order and disorder in the moral and social universe of the communities in which "rites of reversal" are conducted. [...] We cannot suggest the festival represents the antithesis of behavior at other times, only, perhaps, that it is the antithesis of behavior called for by the ideal normative system, which is a very different thing. (Abrahams & Bauman, 1978: 195)

At the party, rival factions come together; Capulets and Montagues endure one another's presence (although begrudgingly) for fear of a scandal (that is intolerable in the family home).<sup>18</sup>

There is, however, a deeper symbolism to Mercutio's costume and that of his opposite number. To the silver wig that he is wearing when he entices Romeo into joining the festivities, Mercutio adds white stockings and a silver cloak. He becomes the embodiment of the messenger he is - winged like Mercury or Hermes - and, in so doing, offers a negative image of Lady Capulet. Whereas Mercutio assumes the garb of a spirit of the air, Lady Capulet dons the regalia we best know from mummy cases and other funerary objects. Her costume symbolises mortality, death, and the return to the earth. The coupling of Mercutio and Lady Capulet across a binary opposition reflects their respective positions as spirit of the air and spirit of the earth: they aim to bring Romeo and Juliet together and to marry Juliet to Paris, respectively.

What Luhmann is doing here is instating, or perhaps reinstating, the sacred connection of the queer: Mercutio becomes a mystic, a divine androgyne who, by embodying both sexes, is able to mediate between the polarities and forge unities in the world around him. In so doing, Mercutio is performing the function of a shaman.

Shamanism, the transfiguration of a person for religious activities, exists in a wide variety of cultures. The anthropological investigations carried out by James L. Peacock into the traditional drama of Java reveal grotesque signifiers whose signifieds have long since faded out of the collective memory. As he explains, the religious culture of the region teems with transvestism, and when this is transposed onto the stage, it is immediately recognised by the local audience for what it is: a device without which the drama would not work. And yet, there is signification behind this theatrical inversion of gender. The onlookers respond enthusiastically to the arrival on stage of the transvestite, and they expect a genuinely and flamboyantly feminine performance. They already know the actor to be a man: what they desire from him is a show of absolute femininity that will unite with his maleness, thereby representing the

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<sup>18</sup> This tolerance in licence is a phenomenon that has been observed amongst the *belsnickles*, or Christmas Mummings, of the La Have Islands, Nova Scotia. *Belsnickles* are the agents of disorder within the community throughout the year. They ostensibly bring chaos into the home, the place of order par excellence. They furthermore terrify the children of the house. They do, however, have to ask for permission to enter the home, which puts the authority on the side of the householders; they then actually reward children for good behaviour, that is for having behaved according to their parents' law throughout the year (the parents' reprimands being accompanied by a reminder that to misbehave will mean that the *belsnickles* will come to eat you up). Perversely then, these agents of disorder throughout the year are transformed, on festival night, into upholders of the law. (See Abrahams & Bauman, 1978.)

integrity of a universe that is based on this fundamental polarity. On stage, the transvestite recalls the *basir*, “[...] men who adopt the dress and existence of women and serve as priests and shamans [...] uniting the two basic divisions of Ngadju cosmology, which are associated with the division between male and female...” (Peacock, 1978: 210). He notes further that the whole of Javanese theatre becomes synonymous with this recognition of inverted roles. Quoting Pigeaud, he writes:

Javanese theatrical plays are, one may say, imbued with the idea of classification. The *dramatis personae*, although not altogether without some characteristics of their own, are thought of mainly as representatives of the party they belong to. Originally these parties were neither political factions nor social classes, nor ethical divisions, good or bad, they were just partitions in the universe and in society, both human and superhuman. (Peacock, 1978: 215)

Javanese drama revolves around comical cases of inversion. For example, a typical scene would be one in which a clown, playing the role of servant, dances hypnotically before his master in such a way that an exchange of roles takes place. When the master adopts the servant’s role and begins to sweep the floor, a transvestite arrives on stage and orders “both the servant and master to assume their proper positions” (Peacock, 1978: 214). The transvestite is a symbol of reassurance, exciting the audience with a portrayal of the combination of male and female traits, restoring harmony by synthesising the divisions of the cosmic order. His role on stage is to represent the ‘way of things’, to act with divine authority and to invert inversion itself.

This account of Javanese theatrical shamanism correlates to a large extent with the role played by Mercutio, the shaman in Luhrmann’s film. Whilst confounding and exciting his audience with his gender-bending performance, his seductive efforts actually lead Romeo to be drawn into the charms of that other white-clad spirit of the air – namely the winged Juliet. Thus Mercutio’s function as a messenger transcends any self-interested desire for Romeo: he embodies forces of sexuality that go beyond the individual, and beyond his conscious intentions. It is for this reason that Mercutio remains under the misapprehension that Romeo is in love with Rosalind.

Yet in contrast to the shamanistic transvestites of Javanese theatre, Mercutio’s role does not bring about a restoration of order, because there is no stable order in this world of amorphous, shifting and deflected desires. Luhrmann’s film posits sexuality, and by extension humanity, as a performative social construct, whereby identity is constituted through individual performativity and the social recognition thereof. Yet it also entertains the possibility of a transcendental basis to sexuality, one that has its wellspring in polytheistic paganism. Dissatisfied with essentialist notions so dear to modernism, Luhrmann provides models of human behaviour derived simultaneously from the post-modern and the pre-modern. This perspective is, in fact, the dance-culture perspective, for what is the modern dance party but a twenty-first-century phenomenon made possible by computer-generated music, laser lights and other high-tech equipment, whereby participants engage in the age-old activity of taking mind-altering drugs and dancing for hours on end. The very words used in dance culture reveal the strong identification with the pre-modern and mythological: whether you are into ‘jungle rhythms’ or ‘trance’, you belong to a ‘tribe’; and in the words of a recent dance track, you might even be a ‘shape-shifter’.

These reversals of real-life situations are the very stuff of drama. One could go as far as to say that theatre is the home of inversion. Laurence Senelick points to a



Mercutio who, as a divine construct disguising, or rather confusing, his biological nature, represents the very essence of theatrical performance itself:

[...] The shaman has been cited as a natural paradigm of the showbiz star, whose hysteriogenic charisma resembles the tribal magician's arts of possession and hallucination. [...] The shaman's conflation with the actor, particularly an actor of exceptional allure credited with both magical abilities and sexual heterodoxy, has the most archaic of origins. (Senelick, 2000: 18)

And Baz Luhrmann exploits this to the full in his film version. The party scene in *Romeo + Juliet* revels in role reversals to such an extent that the symbols become of greater dramatic value than any potential meaning that they may be said to symbolise. The challenge that this use of caricatural symbolism poses to the reader is, nonetheless, to question the obvious, to seek to subvert; in short, to join Mercutio in his dance.

It may, on the other hand, be argued that Mercutio's dance is designed to showcase the 'true nature' of the love shared by Romeo and Juliet, i.e. that it is indeed 'essential' in the sense that it *is* - on an abstract, Platonic plane - but that it does not exist. That most famous lover's complaint ("Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?") neatly encapsulates this dilemma. Of course, what Juliet is asking is why the man who has just come into her world should have to bear a name that makes her marriage to him impossible. If we apply the terminology of Sartrean thought to Juliet's most famous line, her question places their common dilemma in a context of Existentialism versus Essentialism: Why *is* Romeo, Romeo? And why must she *be* Juliet? If the two lovers could continue to exist free from their names, as existents in Sartre's world, or players in Bakhtine's carnival, their love could survive. And yet, their love is couched in the discourse of essences, and once the dissolution of binaries oppositions that is the party (and in which an essential love can for a moment exist on Earth) is over, it must cease to exist. If we read the play through Sartrean Existentialism, therefore, it is logically impossible for Romeo and Juliet to exist in a contingent universe: in short, their very conjuring on the stage signs their death warrant. David Horowitz discusses this existential aspect of the lovers' plight in the following terms:

In its integrity, the romantic vision is more than fiction and answers to an experience that is authentic; there are rises in the human landscape that transcend the plain of mere physical action and decay. Love is such a transcendence and has its own language of being; it cannot be comprehended in the transactional terms of a prosaic world scheme. [...] Death of lovers, which is a fundamental figure in the romantic world image, signs the fact that love is absolute in a world of relatives: lovers must die in order to be born to each other. (Horowitz, 1965: 4)

From this existential perspective, our aim here will be to examine whether the inversion that Mercutio incarnates can be seen to strengthen a philosophical reading along these terms or whether, in fact, it inverts it.

This perspective of theatrical transvestism as symbolic inversion - or reversal of inversion - allows us to situate Mercutio against the philosophical/metaphysical background of Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. As a righter of wrongs, Mercutio could be seen to be responsible for creating a situation in which Romeo can meet Juliet and their love be born. In this way, he facilitates a platonic ideal of love at the

expense of marriage as experienced in the real world with all its exigencies (and as being planned for Juliet by her parents). This facilitation itself is brought about by a kind of reverse psychology: by taking human behaviour to its extreme (and grotesquely existential) point, Mercutio coaxes Romeo into the essential courtship to which he is already predisposed. Romeo's love of the fair lady Rosaline will easily be transposed onto Juliet, which introduces a touch of Surrealism into our existentialist debate: Romeo's chance of making a serendipitous encounter at the party is increased by his desire for (another) woman. Rather like André Breton, Romeo appears to be in love with love, in which case his meeting with Juliet may be read as a case of objective chance.<sup>19</sup>

This Mercutio who acts queer also, then, acts as an agent provocateur, *appearing* to determine Romeo's fate.<sup>20</sup> And if much of the film's narrative tension is derived from Romeo's tormented rite of passage and his struggle to define a path between free will and fate, Mercutio's role on one side of the divide is paralleled by that played by Father Laurence on the other. For whilst Mercutio's curse that a plague descend on both houses puts him on the side of the determinism established by the newsreader at the beginning of the film (or the chorus in the play), Laurence's attempts to thwart the ineluctability of the ending align him on the side of free will. The ultimate thwarting of Laurence's plans (to fake Juliet's death and reunite the lovers) represents the victory of determinism over human choice. Shakespeare's play and Luhrmann's film are inversions of Existentialism. The lovers' death is pre-ordained by essence; inasmuch as they are synonymous with their love for each other, Romeo and Juliet *are* before they become. In short, essence precedes existence.

Laurence himself is also open to an inverted reading. The scene immediately following Mercutio's death opens on the priest tending his orchids, bare-chested, while talking to a couple of his choirboys. It might be tempting to read this as an implication of paedophilia, though a further look at the semantics of the scene suggests that there is less likelihood of this. The priest is tending orchids - plants that, according to their name, have subterranean organs like testicles, yet which are more obviously known for their flowers like vaginas.<sup>21</sup> The priest is dissecting one of these plants, analysing, atomising the male and the female. Thus rather than bringing the two sexes together, the priest actually tears them apart. Moreover, he does this from the position of the observer/experimenter, in other words, from a position *outside* the sexual game. He is, in fact, asexual, as any good Catholic priest should be. The prepubescent choirboys thus present us with further images of asexuality. Like Mercutio, Father Laurence conspires to bring the two lovers together, yet his clever plans are doomed to failure. He marries the two young lovers, thus going against the warning that Mercutio presented in his song, and making them submit to the laws of institutionalised heterosexuality.

He also tries to achieve his ends through the administration of a drug, but whereas the ecstasy worked to give Romeo a heightened sense of reality within a social context, the sleeping draught takes Juliet away from reality and the social world.

<sup>19</sup> In the same way as Breton's meeting with *Nadja* in his famous surrealist text of the same name.

<sup>20</sup> In terms of the Shakespearian tragedy, Romeo's fate is, of course, not determined by Mercutio; it is something that he carries within himself, or which is set out by the stars.

<sup>21</sup> The most obvious instance is the vanilla orchid, which derives its name from a corruption of the Spanish word for vagina.

Ultimately, the Mercutio/Laurence dichotomy as presented by Luhrmann argues for sexual expression over asceticism, for queerness over straightness, for the Dionysian over the Apollonian, and for the pagan over the Christian.

How does this defeat of the man of action sit with the existentialist reading of the play? It is possible to answer this question by indicating the place that Luhrmann's film (and Shakespeare's play) occupies in a family of texts, in which an ostensible Existentialism veils an underlying Essentialism. As do characters, texts themselves have an identity that extends beyond the limits of their individual pages. Luhrmann points to Juliet's Olympian ancestry through his leitmotiv of communion in water: she and Romeo initially, then repeatedly, meet in and across water. She is actually born into the film in water, rather as Venus herself traditionally emerges from the waves. As a goddess of love, Juliet is an essence, a heavenly body. (In his attempt to win her hand, Paris goes to great lengths to accede to the firmament: he turns up to the party dressed as an astronaut.) And if she is the very essence of love, the world in which she is trapped teems with existents.

Luhrmann's inflation of the party scene, and Mercutio's dance in particular, focuses the spectator's attention on the stark contrasts separating Romeo and Juliet from the rest of the world. Closer examination, however, allows us to undermine the very dichotomy between essence and existence on which a Sartrean reading of *Romeo + Juliet* is predicated. Before they set out for the masked ball at the Capulet family home, Mercutio offers Romeo a love token, in the form of an Ecstasy tab emblazoned with a heart pierced by an arrow (Ecstasy being known as the 'love drug'). By taking this Romeo appears to join the others in their perception of reality (i.e., he leaves his own dreams of love and falls to the ground). In order for Romeo to find Love (with a capital 'L'), he has to wash away the distorting effects of the drug (in which the world appears as it exists) and return to an idealised vision of the world (in which Juliet and he *are*). The water, in which the lovers are born to each other, becomes a filter of reality; when Romeo gazes through the aquarium into Juliet's eyes, it is a case of one essence beholding another. An example taken from post-war literature of the Parisian *rive gauche* provides an interesting parallel. In the following scene from Boris Vian's *L'Écume des jours* (1947), protagonist Colin returns from the realm of essences in order to perceive reality through the filter of an aquarium:

An enormous silence spread out around them, and the major part of the rest of the world faded into insignificance.

But, as they might have expected, the record came to an end. Then, and only then, did Colin come down to earth and notice that the ceiling was made of transparent Perspex and that the people upstairs were looking down at them. A wide border of water-irises sealed off the bottoms of the walls, and variously coloured vapours were escaping here and there through specially made openings in the ceiling. He also noticed that his friend Isis was standing in front of him with some refreshments on an onyx tray. (Vian, 1996: 43-44)

Vian's text has been widely read as a light-hearted parody of Sartre's existentialist classic, *La Nausée* (*Nausea*). The novel can be shown, however, to function around a mood of 'mad love' and 'objective chance' more in line with Surrealism. Central to *L'Écume des jours* is the tension between free will and determinism: the characters appear to succumb to fate (the unconscious pulls of Surrealism), but to a fate set in motion by the characters themselves (an action for which they must be held accountable - Existentialism). This tension is reflected

intertextually in the counter-weighting of references to Sartre's *La Nausée* in the novel with textual signposts pointing to Alexandre Dumas fils's *La Dame aux camélias*, in which the leading lady, Marguerite, is fated to die from the outset.<sup>22</sup> Thus, in Vian's novel, as in Luhrmann's film, there is a parallel philosophical tension.

The passage quoted above from *L'Écume des jours* indicates the importance of the role of water as home of the gods. On the first page of the novel, Colin is born into the text as he steps from his shower; here the use of the aquarium imagery indicates the essential distance that separates him from the rest of the world; the water-irises, via a conflation of paintings by Van Gogh and Monet, prefigure the death of Colin's wife, Chloé, who will succumb to a water lily in the lung. The narrative drive is localized, in both Vian's novel and Luhrmann's film, in the interstitial zone where water meets air. For both couples, to surface is to become mortal.

For Romeo, washing his face in cold water brings an altered level of perception that will allow him vision into the essential realm; for Colin, water brings home the truth. For Romeo, the dance of the shimmering fish not only tells of the dance of love in which he will lead Juliet; it also signifies a removal of a veil of existence (the fish are naturally coloured whereas the guests are adorned). By washing in cold water he cleanses himself of the drug he has taken; and when he looks into the aquarium, his own mask now removed, it is clear that he has removed a more ontological disguise. It is at this moment that he first sees Juliet. Her own costume is white and virginal, a reflection of her essence more than a disguise. She has no mask. For Colin, the real world crashes in as 'his song' comes to an end. Stepping from the shower - and becoming a protagonist - has definitively excluded him from essential being: the watery vision is a reminder not only that his love is doomed to failure, but that it is fundamentally flawed.

Colin, too, arrives at the party (curiously enough, on the heels of two young girls wearing stockings and suspenders<sup>23</sup>) predisposed to love. For as Romeo already loves Rosaline, Colin is already in love with Alise, who is partnered with his best friend. Unable to break the conventions of society, Colin elects to fashion a woman in the image of his desire. This he does at a party at Isis's house: perversely he goes upstairs to the realm of the Egyptian goddess of the underworld, thereby situating the narrative space at the interface between worlds. Similarly, Romeo and Juliet spend much of the party going up and down, between floors, in a lift, in an attempt to avoid hostess Lady Capulet and her Egyptian robes.

The meeting of Colin and Chloé is intertextually driven: she is not only the expression of his love for Alise, she also adopts the forms of his favourite piece of music, *Chloe* by Duke Ellington. She is a song, and fades when the record ends. In existential terms, she is an expression of Colin's bad faith, a synonym for the evasion of reality. Romeo's meeting with Juliet is also structured around song. The soundtrack, which is important throughout, reaches an apotheosis in the dance of

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<sup>22</sup> It is interesting to note how the meeting/party scene from Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* appears to owe an intertextual debt to Boris Vian's novel, for both authors clearly share an interest in the lady of Camélias: whilst Vian's text makes constant references to Dumas fils's novel, Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge* exploits a whole tradition of fated Parisian courtesans, covering, Henry Murger's *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, Dumas fils's *La Dame aux camélias* and the operas *La Bohème* and *La Traviata*.

<sup>23</sup> In *L'Écume des jours* and *La Nausée* the use of such leg-fetish imagery is strongly linked to Freud's 1929 essay 'Fetishism', in which the fetish acts as a screen memory, at once veiling and symbolising the sight of the female genitalia. In terms of a comparison with Luhrmann's film, dressing in this way fulfils stereotypes of glamour, accentuated femininity and transvestism.

Mercutio.<sup>24</sup> Mercutio has secured Romeo's entrée to the party where he has met his love, and has also given Romeo an Ecstasy tablet thus paving the way for Romeo's meeting with Juliet. So on the one hand he is literally love's messenger. Yet by the same token, he warns of the commitment of partnership in the song to which he lip-synchs:

What's the sense in sharing this one and only life  
Ending up just another lost and lonely wife  
You count up all the years and they will be filled with tears  
Love only breaks up to start over again  
You'll get the baby, but you won't have your man  
While he is busy loving every woman that he can  
I say I'm gonna leave one hundred times a day  
It's easier said than done, when you just can't break away

Young hearts - run free  
Never be hung up - hung up like my man and me  
My man and me<sup>25</sup>

The song is an indictment of marriage from the point of view of the woman, but at the same time it is an encouragement to romance, as the signature line reiterates. And if it advises against existent love (marital bonds and the desire to 'change your man', etc.), it just as strongly encourages essential love and the freedom that society always ultimately crushes. Romeo and Juliet's love enacts the words of the song, therefore, just as romance itself is inextricably linked with love stories.

In Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*, the party scene contains multiple inversions. Mercutio's transvestism sees him adopt a form that is an inversion of that taken by Lady Capulet; as a performance artist he bows out once the lovers have met. The meeting brings in turn a change of song and a new inversion. The black transvestite is replaced by a black woman. Mercutio's race, then, is also all-important in this scene. Mercutio is not just lip-synching to a song with apposite words, but a *black* song sung by a black diva. Its genre, namely the disco anthem, comes straight from the black gay underground,<sup>26</sup> which was the birthplace of disco, house and, to a large extent, the dance and rave cultures of today, the culture we see reflected and inflected in the party scene. Mercutio thus not only purveys androgyny and queerness but also black culture to his mixed audience.

The appearance of the black diva in *Romeo + Juliet* signals a shift to a new level of reality. She comes into view as the two star-cross'd lovers leave the quiet and return to the party, abandoning their haven for the gaudy chaos of the real world. This shift by degrees reinforces the idea of an interstitial level, between realities: rather

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<sup>24</sup> At the time of the film's release, Luhrmann's emphasis on music and visual techniques attracted a certain amount of criticism from those who would have preferred a greater fidelity to the 'original text'. Prokofiev's sixth symphony – *Romeo and Juliet* – was itself similarly snubbed by the Bolshoi when it first appeared, its conveying of drama through music appearing too radical at the time. And as for Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde*, in order to create what many consider to be the most emotionally intense piece of vocal music ever created, Wagner chose to ignore the intricacies of the full Tristram legend. Battles, love potions, banishment and substitute marriages are all reduced to a prehistory, a paragraph on "the story so far" in the program notes, as Wagner opens his drama on the last hours, minutes and seconds of two people who can only live and die in each other's love.

<sup>25</sup> *Young Hearts Run Free*, originally written by David Crawford and performed on the motion picture soundtrack by Kym Mazelle.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Brian Currid, "'We are family'" House Music and Queer Performativity' in Case, 1995, pp. 165-196.

than being more 'real' or authentic than Mercutio, the diva is, in fact, a mediating instance between the existential, real world as caricatured by the dance party and the sanctuary of the essential that is the chill-out room where Romeo and Juliet first meet. For them the real world, that Sartre would have contingent, is one in which their fate is sealed by Mercutio's curse. And yet in such a heady succession of inversions, reality itself becomes a difficult term to use.<sup>27</sup> In short, the world of *Romeo + Juliet* is one of constant flux, between free will and determinism, existence and essence, Existentialism and Essentialism.

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<sup>27</sup> According to anthropologist Erik Erikson, when seen within a context of adult play, inversions "[permit] us to infuse reality with actuality.[...] [where] reality is the structure of facts consensually agreed upon in a given stage of knowledge [and] actuality is the leeway created by new forms of interplay..." (Babcock, 1978: 25).

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