Mercutio's 'Queen Mab' Speech

Mercutio’s speech about Queen Mab in Act I, scene iv, seems to have nothing to do with Romeo and Juliet whatsoever. In fact, some Shakespearean scholars have argued that it was added to the script during the printing of the Second Quarto and was not, therefore, a part of the play as it was originally written. Other scholars argue that even if the speech was in the original script, it contradicts what we know of Mercutio: a hot-tempered and lusty youth who has no patience for the dreams and visions discussed in the Queen Mab speech. The Queen Mab speech, however, does hold consistent with Mercutio’s character in some ways, and it also points to some important aspects of the play in general.

"Queen Mab" is such a famous speech but it's really a bit of nonsense made interesting because of the psychology that underpins it. It's very poetic and pretty and it shows Mercutio's genius at being able to improvise, to make things up on the spot, rather like people do today in comedy workshops (Saturday Night Live, Who's Line is it Anyway? and so on). Mercutio loves word play and word association and once he gets started, he's on a roll - only rapidly he loses control. He starts off making a pretty little Ladybird book of Arthur Rackham fairies but very quickly moves on to underlying themes of sex and death. It doesn't, for example, take him long to switch from fairies in love to herpes. He talks of plagues of blisters on lovers' lips and breath tainted with 'sweetmeats' - i.e. the 'lover' has cold sores from fellatio. Then he talks of 'ambuscados', 'Spanish blades' and 'foul sluttish hairs' - of drinking and whoring. The imagery goes to nasty, dark, violent, misogynistic places and suddenly Romeo can bear it no more and has to stop him.

Some might say Mercutio has an underlying fear of women, a frustration, a violent self-loathing, a destructiveness. Romeo tells him to stop: he says "you're talking nonsense, it's just dreams, the children of idle practices." This scene encapsulates the Romeo/Mercutio relationship- what Mercutio is actually doing in this scene is wooing Romeo, only Romeo is unconscious of the fact, leading Mercutio to say that Romeo's 'bosom' is 'frozen' (line 101). He has nothing positive to say about women - he only has to open his mouth about women and something nasty comes out. Romeo's unwitting rejection of Mercutio angers Mercutio and sets him off. When he realises Romeo doesn't understand what he's talking about, he first saves himself by being clever, then turns away, frustrated. Both Mercutio and Tybalt are angry young men - which is why they spar.

At the time Mercutio makes his famous "Queen Mab" speech in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, he and Romeo, together with a group of their friends and kinsmen, are on the way to a party given by their family's arch-enemy, Lord Capulet. Their plan is to crash the party so that Romeo may have the opportunity to see his current love, Rosaline, whom they know has been invited to the Capulet's masque that evening.

Romeo, whom his friends seem to consider generally very witty and fun, originally thought the party-crashing would be a wonderful idea, but suddenly is overcome by a sense of great foreboding; although they "mean well in going to this mask . . . 'tis no wit to go" (I,
iv, 48-49). This annoys Mercutio, who does not recognize Romeo's reluctance as a genuine premonition, but feels it is simply another example of Romeo's lovesick whims. Romeo tries to explain to Mercutio that it is based upon a very disturbing dream, and Mercutio passes that off as silly, telling him that "Dreamers often lie." Here he is not saying that Romeo himself is a liar, but that people should put no faith in dreams. But Romeo is insistent; dreamers lie "in bed asleep, they do dream things true" (I, iv, 52).

This suddenly launches Mercutio into a speech that alters the entire pace of the scene. Up to now, the conversation has been typical of a group of people walking through the streets-short phrases, a generally relaxed mood. With Mercutio's words, "O, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you!" he plunges into a forty-two line speech which is actually composed of only two sentences, giving him barely enough breath to pause between phrases. The gist of the speech concerns Mab, whom Celtic mythology considered to be the midwife of the fairies, and who also is held to be responsible for human beings' dreams.

The Queen Mab speech is totally fanciful, describing, as if to a child, this tiny little creature who flies through the air in a small carriage, driven by a "wagoner" who is a gnat. On the surface this seems like it should be charming, but when one boils it down, it isn't charming at all. For example, Queen Mab's "cover" of her carriage is made of grasshopper wings, which implies that someone must have pulled the grasshopper's wings off to make it. Ditto for the spider's legs which serve as the wagon's spokes, and the riding-whip which is made of a cricket's bone. Mercutio points out that the entire apparatus is not "half so big as a round little worm / Pricked from the lazy finger of a maid"-but do living maid's fingers have worms in them?

He leaps off the topic of Mab's carriage, however, to describe its route. Mab's function is apparently to drive over the sleeping forms of human beings, and cause them to dream of things appropriate to their station in life. For example, she causes lawyers to dream of fees, ladies of love, and soldiers of warfare. Here, again, this sounds fanciful enough; yet he somehow veers off into a deluge of images that are at complete odds with the sweet, almost childlike story it seemed he was going to tell. It is not enough that soldiers dream of war: they must dream of "cutting foreign throats, / Of breaches, ambuscadoes, Spanish blades, / Of healths five fathom deep; and then anon, / Drums in his ear, at which he starts and wakes, / And being thus frightened swears a prayer or two / And sleeps again" (I, iv, 83-87). In other words, Mercutio began his speech with a reverie and ended with nightmares. Mab does not seem like such a cute little creature now.

In a sense, this is how the play goes, as well. Romeo begins by having a harmless crush; at the point in the story when Mercutio gives his speech, Romeo's infatuation with Rosaline is about to lead him to the home of yet another girl, Juliet, with whom he will fall madly in love. This love affair, however, is doomed in every respect. It is doomed not only because the Montagues and Capulets are sworn enemies; it is doomed also because Romeo and Juliet are too young to handle such a violent passion as their love turns out to be.
It is not accidental that Shakespeare begins this play by describing the feud which has separated Verona in two, and the first scene deals, not with love, but with a street brawl. Romeo and Juliet's Verona is a very violent place, and it would be strange indeed if these two children of Verona experienced a sweet and gentle love.

What is just as interesting as Mercutio's speech itself is how hysterical he gets while delivering it. At the beginning of the scene, when we first meet the friends on the way to the party, Mercutio comes off as a swift, wise-cracking joker. He and Romeo obviously enjoy a close bond, and they enjoy exchanging teasing banter with one another. They manage to do this even as Romeo insists that he is far too depressed over Rosaline to be good company. The conversation up to Mercutio's fateful "O, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you!" is reasonably light.

With those words, the entire mood changes; it is almost as if a stone, set at the top of a hill, has been loosed, and it gains momentum as it plunges downhill. As Mercutio's images become less "cute" and more patently alarming, the rhythm in Shakespeare's iambic pentameter becomes more driving, and Shakespeare allows less and less "breathing room" between phrases. By the end of the passage, Mercutio is literally galloping through his speech. Romeo, the very person everyone felt needed cheering up, is forced to interrupt Mercutio-"Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace! / Thou talkst of nothing"-to calm him down (I, iv, 95-96).

What has happened? Mercutio probably doesn't even know. But it seems fairly clear that Mercutio has caught a good dose of the foreboding that Romeo himself feels, despite the fact that he has already dismissed it as silly. The two friends are very close, and it is certainly not unlikely that they would be closely attuned to one another's moods. Whatever the reason, however, Mercutio's hysteria itself serves as a sort of foreshadowing of the disaster to come.

There is a very good reason for putting this speech toward the end of Act I. It is our introduction to Mercutio, and it presents him as a charming, likeable character. Also, at this moment Romeo is about to meet Juliet, but as yet has not; that "consequence yet hanging in the stars" has not shown its lovely and yet deadly face. And, in a very real sense, the feeling we had when Mercutio began his speech-that it resembled the loosing of a giant boulder, plunging downhill out of anyone's control-is replicated in the structure of the play itself. Here at the end of scene iv in the first act, in this last moment before Romeo and Juliet fatefully meet, is the last moment when the stone is still poised at the mountaintop. In the next scene it will be let go, and then there is nothing anyone on earth can do to stop it.

In this context, Romeo's last words in this scene are tremendously significant. His sense of dread, after Mercutio's strange behavior, has deepened rather than diminished, and for the first time he actually defines what it is he feels: he senses that the events which are about to unfold will result in his death-the ultimate dreamless sleep. He is, of course, right. The violence which Queen Mab will set in motion that night are no dreams, but real. And yet Romeo seems to realize that there is nothing to be done except face the future squarely; there is no running from it. "But he, that hath the steerage of my course, / Direct my sail!" (I, iv, 112-13). His final words, "On, lusty
gentlemen!", are to Mercutio and their other friends, but they might have been addressed to himself as well. It is his passion, his impetuosity, his lust, which will spell his doom—all of it foreshadowed in Mercutio's "talk of dreams."