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Language in *Romeo and Juliet*

“One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.” Almost everyone grows up hearing this famous title by the beloved Dr. Seuss. The legendary children’s author invented words like nizzards, yuzz-a-ma-tuzz, diffendoofer, and many more that delighted young readers. What most people do not know is that Shakespeare was a little like the Dr. Seuss of his time, having invented a whopping 1,700 words. Some critics argue the number is even greater. Just like Dr. Seuss uses colorful language to appeal to children, language is a key tool Shakespeare utilizes throughout *Romeo and Juliet* that provides each character with a unique identity and brings them to life. From Mercutio’s jocular jokes to Capulet’s spitting spels, the dialogue and literary devices are essential in the development of the roles. Shakespeare’s adept use of language in *Romeo and Juliet* reveals attributes of his characters: the comic, satirical nature in Mercutio and the domineering oppression in Lord Capulet.

[^{TS} Capulet uses coarse, repetitive language that demonstrates his desire for control] ^T For instance, ^{Lead-in Describes the sit.} when Juliet refuses to marry Paris, Lord Capulet exclaims, “How, how, how, how, chopped-logic? What is this?/ ‘Proud’-- and ‘I thank you’-- and ‘I thank you not’--/ And yet ‘not proud?’” (3.5.150-152). By repeating the word “how” four times, Capulet shows his extreme disbelief at the rebelliousness of his daughter, for he believes he is making the wisest decision for her future. As a man of high birth in his society, he has always maintained the role of power, especially over women, and this speech makes apparent the extent of control Lord Capulet believes he has over his daughter’s fate. He asks three rhetorical questions that mimic Juliet’s previous lines, effectively displaying the magnitude of

his fury in a compelling rhythm, as well as his quality of being quick to boil when anyone questions his authority. Additionally, when Tybalt becomes aggressive upon seeing Romeo at the feast, Capulet replies,

What, goodman boy! I say, he shall. Go to.

Am I the master here, or you? Go to!

You'll not endure him, God shall mend my soul!

You'll make a mutiny among my guests!

You will set a cock-a-hoop. You'll be the man!

(1.5.76-81).

Again, repetition is used to assert Capulet's dominance over his nephew; the last four exclamations all begin with "you will" which creates a pattern of shouts that is direct and condescending. Furthermore, Capulet calls Tybalt a scornful name that emphasizes the master's higher position, and another rhetorical question explicitly establishes him as head of the family. By challenging Capulet's orders with their audacity, Tybalt and Juliet ultimately suffer the same fate-- harsh censure and anger from the lord.

On the other hand, a sarcastic tongue and cunning wordplay are used to portray Mercutio as a witty, imaginative character. For example, when Tybalt confronts Mercutio in the public square, the Prince's kinsman retorts, "Consort? What, dost thou make us minstrels? And thou make minstrels of us, look to hear nothing but discords. Here's my fiddlestick. Here's that shall make you dance. Zounds, "consort"!" (3.1.44-47). Mercutio twists the meaning of the word "consort" to mean a group of musicians, a smart-alecky reply that reflects his quick-witted humor. Metaphorically comparing his sword to the bow of a violin, he deftly utilizes double entendre to get under Tybalt's skin and provoke

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him to “dance”, or fight, in a comical way. Mercutio’s knack for puns shows his wild whim, wit, and charm while providing comic relief all throughout the play. Moreover, when he converses with Romeo on the origins of dreams, he says,

“O, then, I see Queen Mab hath been with you. . .

Her wagon-spokes made of long spinners’ legs

The cover of the wings of grasshoppers. . .

Her whip of cricket’s bone, the lash of film”

(1.4.53-66).

Not only is Mercutio a master of puns, his extravagant imagination is unparalleled; his description about the fairy called Queen Mab is dramatic, detailed, and intricate. His lush vocabulary evokes vivid imagery of this phantom creature, especially in the dainty words like “spinners’ legs”, “wings of grasshoppers”, and “lash of film”. These detailed phrases spoken in his Queen Mab speech contribute to the depiction of Mercutio as the humorously mocking, creative force in the play.

The language of Capulet and Mercutio are exclusively singular, allowing each individual to become developed and memorable in unique ways. Not only does Shakespeare’s enthralling language make *Romeo and Juliet* one of the most famous plays in history, but the many literary techniques reveal facets of the roles that make them deeply entertaining. Though Shakespeare’s work may not contain words like zong, jibboo, or schlopp (and is a little dense for children to read), his innovative use of language allows him to leave a lasting impact on audiences for generations.