

Queen Mab: Essay Assignment & [Annotated] Sample

- Format: Argumentative Essay
- Prompt: Analyze Mercutio's Queen Mab speech. What is the significance of the imagery*, and what do the images imply** about Mercutio? What is the purpose of the speech?

*imagery (noun): description that appeals to any of the five senses

***imply* (verb): to suggest or hint at something without actually saying it; to state implicitly
implicit (adjective): understood but not stated

Example: When Thompson said, "All the other English classes you take after this one will seem easy," he was *implying* that this is a very challenging class. (See, he didn't actually SAY this is a very challenging class, but you are left to draw that conclusion for yourself.)

Assignment Specifications

Prompt: Compose an essay in which you analyze Mercutio's Queen Mab speech. Follow this format:

- **Introduction:** Attention-Getter/"Hook"; background information; thesis statement that directly addresses the prompt.
- **Section 1:** Analyze the imagery in the speech. What is the significance of the images and what do they imply* about Mercutio? (Answer the question with a complete sentence to create your **claim** for this section of the essay.) Example: From the Queen Mab speech, we can tell that Mercutio is _____. Be sure to include at least three (3) short pieces of **textual evidence** (quotations from the speech) and **reasoning** (explanations for why the textual evidence supports your claim). Address potential **counterclaims** by noting other possible ways the passage could be viewed and why your view is better. Include a **Conclusion/Transition** to the next section.
- **Section 2:** What is the purpose of the Queen Mab speech? What is motivating Mercutio to talk about Queen Mab on this night? (Answer the question with a complete sentence to create your **claim**.) Example: The reason Mercutio talks about Queen Mab is _____. Be sure to include at least three (3) short pieces of **textual evidence** (quotations from anywhere in Scene 4) and **reasoning** (explanations for why the textual evidence supports your claim). Address potential **counterclaims** by noting other possible ways the passage could be viewed and why your view is better. **Conclude** this section with a sentence summing up the argument in Section 2.
 - **Note:** Each section may contain multiple paragraphs. This does not have to be a traditional "five-paragraph" essay.
- **Conclusion:** Restatement of thesis & claims; brief summary of argument; conclusion statement (so the reader knows you have made your point and your essay is complete).

Your final essay should be close to 500 words long, and no more than 75 of those words can be quoted from the play. Most of the writing should be YOUR words, so select your textual evidence purposefully and carefully!

See the annotated sample on the following pages.

[Annotated] Analysis of the Queen Mab Speech

[Attention Getter] Did you know that a tiny fairy flies each night over your bed and brings you dreams, either good or bad, depending on how you spent your day? **[Background Info]** This is what Mercutio tells Romeo during Act I, Scene 4 of *Romeo and Juliet*, which is a well-known play by William Shakespeare that most ninth graders study. In what is usually referred to as the “Queen Mab speech,” Mercutio teases and scolds the young lover believing in silly dreams. **[Thesis]** Mercutio’s speech is an imaginative description that not only paints a vivid and entertaining picture of the fictional Queen Mab but also serves as a sarcastic scolding of a friend he is trying to cheer up. **[Transition]** In the course of the speech, the audience learns a great deal about the character of Mercutio.

[Claim #1] From the Queen Mab speech, we can tell that Mercutio is creative and entertaining but sometimes unkind. **[Textual Evidence #1]** His rich description of Queen Mab and her chariot includes many intriguing details about the dream-making fairy. “...no bigger than an agate stone on the forefinger of an alderman,” she is “drawn with a team of little atomies [creatures] over men’s noses as they lie asleep.” **[Reasoning #1]** Most people would say that this kind of description is very imaginative because most of us could not make something like that up on the spot the way Mercutio does. He is clearly one of those people that others are drawn to -- quick-witted and highly verbal -- which makes him what is often referred to as “the life of the party.” **[Counterclaim]** Some would rightly point out that this kind of character can become overbearing and obnoxious, and Mercutio does do that at times, but most will agree that his personality is engaging and entertaining. **[Textual Evidence #2]** This becomes clear when he goes on to describe Mab’s chariot in great detail: “Her chariot is an empty hazelnut...her wagoner, a small grey-coated gnat” with a whip made of cricket’s bone. Her wagon’s wheels are made of spider’s legs, and the cover on her chariot is made of grasshopper wings. **[Reasoning #2]** This kind of attention to detail shows that Mercutio has a very precise and intelligent mind. Not everyone could imagine so many specific and creative images to begin with, let alone present them in such a clear and poetic way. These qualities are hallmarks of a popular person.

[Transition to New Paragraph, But Still Developing Claim #1] While he is clearly very creative and entertaining, Mercutio also illustrates a certain unkindness in his speech, which turns dark near the end. **[Textual Evidence #3]** The happy imagery of the first lines in the speech gives way to a kind of cynical tone when he discusses the people that Mab visits on her travels. He describes them as greedy: “She gallops through lovers’ brains, and then they dream of love; O’er lawyers’ fingers who straight dream on fees...And sometime comes she with a tithe-pig’s tail tickling a parson’s nose as he lies asleep, then he dreams of another benefice.” **[Reasoning #3]** All the people Mercutio describes at first are selfish, desiring money or, in the case of the young ladies, kisses. Generally, this kind of self-interest, putting one’s own desires before the well being of others, is considered a negative personal trait. By focusing his descriptions on people’s selfish desires, Mercutio reminds us (and Romeo) that dreams often reflect the ugly side of humanity. **[Counterclaim]** Some might say that Mercutio is just being silly, but such a long, impassioned speech that turns so serious at the end does not seem to be something a mere “sillyheart” could conjure up on the spur of the moment. **[Textual Evidence #4]** The tone of the speech grows more sinister in the final lines: Soldiers dream of cutting throats and Queen Mab “plats the manes of horses in the night, baking the elflocks in foul, sluttish hairs.” **[Reasoning #4]** Most would agree that this violent imagery and harsh language is rather unsettling. **[Textual Evidence #5]** “This is the hag when maids lie on their backs that presses them and learns them first to bear...” Here Mercutio talks of the fairy queen Mab as an old demon who brings sexual dreams to young virgins. It is clear not only to the viewer or reader but also to the other characters in the play that at this point he has gone

too far. Romeo cuts him off before he can continue in this impolite and unsettling direction: "Peace Mercutio! Peace!" **[Reasoning #5]** Most would agree that what began as a flight of fancy, a light-hearted description of a mythical character, has turned into a darkly sarcastic tirade. **[Transition]** As the speech goes from fantastical to cynical and scary, it becomes clear that Mercutio has a particular purpose in mind while delivering this speech.

[Textual Evidence/Summary to Set Up Claim #2] Romeo has been dragging his feet, refusing to join in the fun as he and his friends head to the Capulet party. He has said that he will hold the torch while his friends dance because he "has a soul of lead that so stakes me to the ground I cannot move." After a brief exchange in which Mercutio tries to cheer Romeo up, he becomes frustrated that Romeo is being such a drag, and this is when he launches into the Queen Mab speech. **[Claim #2]** Mercutio's purpose is obviously to show Romeo that his ominous dream is meaningless and he should not put so much stock in that kind of silliness. **[Textual Evidence #1]** When Romeo breaks the speech off, saying "Thou talk'st of nothing," Mercutio replies, perhaps sarcastically, "True. I talk of dreams." **[Reasoning #1]** This illustrates his conception that dreams are, in fact, nothing, and therefore Romeo should not be so bothered by a dream. **[Textual Evidence #2]** Mercutio is implying that Romeo should just go to the party and enjoy himself rather than worry about something "begot of vain fantasy; which is as thin of substance as the air and more inconstant than the wind." **[Reasoning #2]** Most of us are familiar with a "stick in the mud," someone who refuses to enjoy himself even when the circumstances are appropriate for it. **[Textual Evidence #3]** Mercutio even describes Romeo as such a stick, saying, "...we'll draw thee from the mire (mud pit), of this sir reverence love, wherein thou stick'st up to the ears." **[Reasoning #3]** His frustration is understandable because despite Mercutio's many attempts at teasing and humor, Romeo has repeatedly retreated into a moody state, despairing over the impossibility of his love for a girl who has no interest in romance. Most people are familiar with the frustration of having friends that are forever in a funk; frankly, they are often difficult to be around. Mercutio taunts Romeo in the interest of getting him to either perk up or pipe down so the rest of his friends can enjoy themselves.

[Conclusion] The Queen Mab speech portrays a colorful description of a magical bringer of dreams, and it is presented by an equally colorful character who wants his friend to see the error of a foolish faith in dreams. Although the speech becomes dark and menacing at the end, we sense that Mercutio's passion is a result of his caring for Romeo enough to want him to join the fun. In essence, we actually learn more about Mercutio himself than we do about Queen Mab, that tiny fairy who flies each night over your bed and brings you all those strange dreams.