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Through the Eyes of the Present: Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama in Anglophone Cinema, 1936-2011

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THROUGH THE EYES OF THE PRESENT: SCREENING THE MALE
HOMOEROTICS OF SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA
IN ANGLOPHONE CINEMA, 1936 – 2011

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

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**Department of English
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May 2014

ABSTRACT

**Through the Eyes of the Present: Screening the Male Homoerotics of
Shakespearean Drama in Anglophone Cinema, 1936 – 2011**

by

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This is an analysis of representations of male homoeroticism in Anglophone Shakespeare film. Using the strategies made available by close reading, gay and lesbian studies, queer theory, and presentism, critical attention is directed to a corpus of fourteen movies, ranging from Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle's 1936 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to *Private Romeo*, Alan Brown's 2011 homoerotic appropriation of *Romeo and Juliet*. The overall purpose of the project is both to map and to interpret how Anglophone filmmakers have dealt with – or not dealt with, as the case may be – the male homoerotic elements Shakespeare wove into the textual fabric (the characters, the language, the plots) of a fair number of his plays, including *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. Such an endeavor is timely because it is one that the larger discipline of Shakespeare film studies has yet to address comprehensively despite the fact that a significant body of “male homoerotic moments” is now evident in Anglophone Shakespeare cinema as a whole.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SCREENING THE MALE HOMOEROTICS OF SHAKESPEAREAN DRAMA THROUGH THE EYES OF THE PRESENT

The Argument

As its title suggests, this is a study about representations of male homoeroticism in Anglophone Shakespeare film. It directs critical attention to a corpus of fourteen movies, ranging from Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle's 1936 lavish production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, to *Private Romeo*, Alan Brown's 2011 queer appropriation of *Romeo and Juliet*. The overall purpose of the project is to map and to analyze how filmmakers have dealt with – or not dealt with, as the case may be – the male homoerotic elements Shakespeare wove into the fabric (the characters, the language, the plots) of many of his plays in a way that the larger discipline of Shakespeare film studies has not yet addressed comprehensively. Given its *raison d'être*, "Through the Eyes of the Present: Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama in Anglophone Cinema, 1936 – 2011" embraces the insights, ideologies, and explicative strategies authorized by Gay and Lesbian Studies, Queer Theory, and the "new kid on the Shakespeare block," Presentism.

The Rationale

Fittingly perhaps, the Shakespeare film was born not in Hollywood, but in the United Kingdom, in the year 1899. As Judith Buchanan details in her book, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse*, the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company (BMBC) – a subsidiary of its American counterpart, a leading innovator in the earliest days of the film industry – was responsible for a very short, black-and-white,

silent rendering of scenes from *King John* starring Herbert Beerbohm Tree. This “constituted the first film ever made on a Shakespearean subject” (59). Buchanan goes on to explain that “it was certainly hoped that the mere fact of a Shakespeare film would function as a sanitising and legitimising influence on the questionable reputation of the industry as a whole and the BMBC in particular” (60). In other words, it was Shakespeare to the rescue of the BMBC and the then fledgling movie business as a whole. It was also not the first time, nor was it to be the last, that Shakespeare would be called upon to play such a redemptive role given the extent of what later scholars would, in true, postmodern form, label his cultural capital.

Russell Jackson adds to the history of the Shakespeare film in the “Introduction” to his collection of edited essays, *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*. In this piece he reveals that “Shakespeare’s plays played an honourable but hardly dominant role in the development of the medium” of film (2). Jackson proceeds to note that “[s]ome fifty sound films have been made of Shakespearean plays to date [the year 2000], but it has been estimated that during the ‘silent’ era . . . there were more than 400 films on Shakespearean subjects” (2). While, *in toto*, 450 may seem like a large number, Jackson provides the sobering reminder that “Shakespearean films and other ‘classics’ were hardly a staple of the new and burgeoning cinema business: it was comedy, melodrama, the Western and the exotic historical romance that were regarded as bankable” marketplace commodities (3). Furthermore, as the case of *King John* touched on above epitomizes, “[i]t was their prestige value or the power of a particular personality that recommended Shakespearean projects to film companies, or at least overcame their reluctance” to produce such esoteric material for the moviegoing masses (3). And, even

with taking into account the valiant efforts of directors and actors like Laurence Olivier, Franco Zeffirelli, Kenneth Branagh, Baz Luhrmann, Julie Taymor and others, producing the Shakespeare film remains a likely money-losing, albeit an esteem-enhancing, venture over 113 years after the works of The Bard first made their debut on the silver screen. Financial and audience appeal concerns aside, the fact that the Shakespeare film was, from the beginning, a product of its specific time in human history made dealing with the myriad issues connected to the ontological ideas of gender and sexuality inherent in the original plays particularly problematic as the genre evolved from *King John* in 1899 onward all the way to the early decades of the 21st century. Turning, briefly, to Foucault helps in understanding the social and cultural dynamics at work in these circumstances. It was he, after all, who explained so brilliantly in the first volume of his *The History of Sexuality* that what can be called, borrowing titular phraseology from the esteemed University of California, Santa Barbara sociologist George Lipsitz, “the possessive investment in heterosexuality,”¹ finds its beginning in the late nineteenth century when its opposite, the homosexual, “became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology” (43). Foucault is even more blunt than usual when he later asserts that the “sodomite [of past eras like Shakespeare’s] had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species,” a species—with all of that term’s negative, animalistic connotations—that the preponderance of “normal” heterosexuals had to police relentlessly in order to control, if not to eradicate outright, in the familial, religious, social, educational, psychological, and juridical realms of Western culture (43). Furthermore, from the precise moment homosexuals were classified as a

species by the heterosexist regime, homosexuals were simultaneously constituted by that same regime as sad, disgusting, sick, mentally ill, and utterly damaged individuals who went against nature, the Judeo-Christian God, family, society, and country. Understood from a slightly different perspective, the heterosexist regime, in what can be considered a classically Foucauldian exercise of power, had taken control of the homosexual narrative away from those it had condescended to categorize as homosexuals and, in turn, had co-opted that narrative for its own paranoid and reactionary purposes.

What the identification of the male homosexual led to in the earliest days of the cinema – the medium that, not unlike the theatre in Shakespeare’s time, came to appeal to both the highbrow and the hoi polloi alike – was, initially at least, avoidance followed by disparagement. Male homosexual characters and themes were, in the beginning, not dealt with by filmmakers, including those who ventured to produce the Shakespeare film. When the bona fide male homosexual did eventually appear on the silver screen, it was as a (presumably) non-threatening, effeminate fop. Later, and far more problematically, the male homosexual would be presented as little more than a sick villain deserving of death, usually at the hands of the hyper-masculine, straight hero who not only saved the damsel in distress, but all of Western society from the much-feared queer scourge. These two images of the male homosexual, the “screaming queen” and the “repulsive degenerate,” would dominate in the movies throughout much of the twentieth century.² And the Shakespeare film, as a niche genre with a limited audience was, in the main, part and parcel of these cinematic heterosexist paradigms. It is only a small wonder, then, that the Shakespeare film would not become, comparatively speaking, more or less comfortable

with representations of male homoeroticism until the last years of the 20th century and the first decades of the new millennium.

The Previous Literature

With the strong links between the cinema and Shakespearean drama, studies of Shakespeare's plays on film have not been lacking. These works can be broken down, roughly, into four main categories: guides and encyclopedias, histories and surveys, topical collections of essays, and more idiosyncratic monographs with a particular analytical thrust. As might be expected, there is a fair amount of overlap between these generic groupings, but they remain useful for delineating the larger trends in this extensive field of study. Considering the plethora of texts that comment on the Shakespeare film, it is striking that, comparatively speaking, there is a literal dearth of scholarship on Shakespearean cinema that addresses the subject from a gay and lesbian and/or queer studies perspective. Whereas volumes of the former number in the dozens, the latter has been limited to only book chapters and journal articles. This set of circumstances is even more conspicuous when, taking into account that, starting with Joseph Pequigney's, *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets*, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, both of which were published in 1985, and continuing all the way through time to the appearance of Madhavi Menon's 2011 edited collection, *Shakespeare: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare*, gay/lesbian/queer studies of Shakespeare's plays and poetry as written texts have proliferated almost exponentially. Since the early 1990s, clusters of discrete articles, book chapters, and a single monograph on a pair of films, Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* (1979) and Gus Van Sant's appropriation

of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* plays, *My Own Private Idaho* (1991), have made it into print and qualify as gay/lesbian/queer critical interventions on these cinematic texts. These include: Kate Chedgozy's "'The Past Is Our Mirror': Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jarman," Chapter 5 from her book, *Shakespeare's Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture*; Jim Ellis's "Conjuring *The Tempest*: Derek Jarman and the Spectacle of Redemption;" Joon-Taek Jun's "Thus Comes a Black Queer Shakespeare: The Postmodern Confrontation of Zeffirelli, Jarman, and Luhrmann;" and Chantal Zabus's "Against the Straightgeist: Queer Artists, 'Shakespeare's England,' and 'Today's London;'" as well as David Román's "Shakespeare Out in Portland: Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, Homoneurotics, and Boy Actors;" Richard Burt's "Baroque Down: The Trauma of Censorship in Psychoanalysis and Queer Film Re-Visions of Shakespeare and Marlowe;" Jonathan Goldberg's "Hal's Desire, Shakespeare's Idaho;" Matt Bergbusch's "Additional Dialogue: William Shakespeare, Queer Allegory, and *My Own Private Idaho*;" and Vincent Lubrotto's *Gus Van Sant: His Own Private Cinema*. Each of these studies offers an idiosyncratic look at Jarman's and Van Sant's films from outside the straightjacket of compulsory heterosexuality. Chedgozy, for example, analyzes *The Tempest* as emblematic of Jarman's "search for the cultural traces of a queer past" in Shakespeare (181), while Lubrotto examines the tropes of, among others, hustlers, gay sex, and loneliness as they are represented in Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* in ways that may well resonate with gay/queer audiences.

Meanwhile, Richard Loncraine and Ian McKellen's 1995 adaptation of *Richard III* has garnered similar attention to that of Jarman's *The Tempest* and Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*. In "Camp *Richard III* and the Burdens of (Stage/Film) History,"

Stephen M. Buhler's contribution to Mark Thornton Burnett's edited collection, *Shakespeare, Film, and Fin de Siècle*, the queer notion of camp is used as a lens through which Loncraine and McKellen's *Richard III* is interrogated as a work that plays subversively with historiography and calls attention to the homoeroticism attendant upon fascism. Michael D. Friedman's "Horror, Homosexuality, and Homiciphilia in McKellen's *Richard III* and Jarman's *Edward II*," on the other hand, claims that both films depict rather grotesque male characters who derive sexual pleasure through the act of murder (hence Friedman's coinage of the term "homociphilia") but still fail to present a serious challenge to heterosexist paradigms. And Robert McRuer's "Fuck the Disabled: The Prequel," which appears in Menon's *Shakespeareer* collection, reads Loncraine and McKellen's *Richard III* as a sexy, queer, disabled figure that manages to give the cinematic equivalent of the middle finger to all things heterosexual and able-bodied. Other articles or book chapters that warrant mention as precedents to "Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama" include: Peter S. Donaldson's "'Let Lips Do What Hands Do': Male Bonding, Eros and Loss in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*," Chapter 6 of his book, *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*; William Van Watson's "Shakespeare, Zeffirelli, and the Homosexual Gaze;" Maria F. Magro and Mark Douglas's "Reflections on Sex, Shakespeare, and Nostalgia in Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*;" Daniel Juan Gil's "Avant-garde Technique and the Visual Grammar of Sexuality in Orson Welles's Shakespeare Films;" Laury Magnus's "Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* and the Vexed Question of Performance;" and Anthony Guy Patricia's "'Through the Eyes of the Present': Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama." Each of these pieces is concerned in some way with the poetics

of representations of male homoeroticism in films ranging from Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* to Michael Radford's 2004 *The Merchant of Venice*. In addition, Richard Burt, in "The Love That Dare Not Speak Shakespeare's Name: New Shakesqueer Cinema," Chapter One of his eclectic, *Unspeakable ShaXXXspeares: Queer Theory and American Kiddie Culture*, looks at the gay and/or homoerotic moments in a wide range of Shakespeare film adaptations and appropriations (including pornographic versions) to make his case that they are emblematic of Shakespeare's texts having become by the late 1980s and early 1990s "signifier[s] of queer sex *and* of popular culture" (35) in ways that do, and yet do not always, succeed at posing a challenge to heteronormativity. And, finally, Madhavi Menon's monograph, *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film*, directs queer attention to Bollywood film appropriations of *Much Ado About Nothing* and to the smash, worldwide hit, *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

Unlike "Through the Eyes of the Present," none of the pieces discussed here uses representations of male homoeroticism in Shakespearean cinema as the central object of study. And, while a cursory glance at the available literature on the Shakespeare film in general versus the available literature on gay/queer readings of the Shakespeare film seems to reveal a parity between them, it must be remembered that none of the latter – in contrast to all of the former – are book length (either monographs or edited collections) studies; without exception, they are all discrete articles or chapters. Indeed, compared to the hundreds upon hundreds of pages of ink that has been spilled on analysis of the Shakespeare film from an ostensibly straight or, at least, a non-sexual/non-erotic, perspective, the discrepancy between these two fields is even more readily apparent. That

being the case, “Through the Eyes of the Present” is intended to address this significant gap in the criticism.

The Theory

In late June of 1969, the Stonewall Riots erupted in New York City at a mafia-owned clandestine gay bar in Greenwich Village called the Stonewall Inn.³ Though it had been fomenting since at least the late 1940s and the early 1950s in the United States, as evidenced by the efforts of such organizations as The Mattachine Society and The Daughters of Bilitis, the riots marked the violent advent of the modern gay rights movement. The movement took energy from the tumult of the historical moment, which witnessed, too, the appearance of feminist activism engendered as a result of the Sexual Revolution, the civil rights struggles of African-Americans, the anti-Vietnam war protests, and the upheavals of 1960s Counterculture. All of these forces were of a piece with one another as America moved into the brave new world of the postmodern. Today, nearly half-a-century later, in cities throughout the Western world, Gay Pride Festivals are held, in part at least, as celebrations that commemorate the heroic actions of a group of drag queens, transgender folk, fey young men, hustlers, and homeless youth who were fed up with being singled out for the most specious and arbitrary forms of harassment by law enforcement personnel acting on behalf of what they considered to be their moral, religious, social, legal, and ethical duty. And once this crucial moment had been reached, once gay and lesbian people began to stand up for themselves and fight back against the forces of oppression that sought to deny them their rights and liberties as human beings at every opportunity, the tide had finally turned toward acceptance, equality, and justice, and it would not be reversed – set back on occasion, yes, but never halted.

One important side effect of the Stonewall Riots was the instantiation of gay and lesbian studies in academia. Interestingly, the field would continue its originary focus on the project of recouping gay and lesbian history as its contribution to the larger push for equality until well into the 2010s. Jonathan Ned Katz's seminal *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (1976), which sought to bring "vividly to life a previously hidden past of same-sex affection and eroticism, oppression and, sometimes, the early resistance efforts of a group beginning to stand up for itself" (xv), would set this systematic recuperative impetus into motion. It would be followed by a cadre of similar works. Of course, thanks to the fact that 126 (out of 154) of his *Sonnets* were addressed to a young man whom the speaker – presumably the author himself – had a passionate same-sex relationship with, it must be noted that Shakespeare is a central figure in the larger project of excavating the gay and lesbian past that had been elided for hundreds of years prior to the mid-to-late 20th and early 21st centuries.⁴

Following on the heels of the advances made in and Gay and Lesbian Studies, and concomitant with the righteous anger of the ACT UP (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power) and Queer Nation civil disobedience movements that demanded Western governments – that of the United States, in particular – respond more forcefully to the AIDS crisis that had begun decimating members of the gay community in the 1980s, what quickly came to be known, not without contention, as Queer Theory, emerged as a powerful force in academia in the early 1990s. At its most basic, queering something – a Shakespearean text, for example – entails a thorough, uncompromising epistemological challenge to the always assumed heterosexual ethos that infuses the object being subjected to such analytical scrutiny. Teresa de Lauretis is the scholar who is credited

with inventing Queer Theory; as such, it is worth quoting her in some detail. She explains that Queer Theory was originally “based on the speculative premise that homosexuality is no longer to be seen simply as marginal with regard to a dominant, stable form of sexuality (heterosexuality) against which it would be defined by opposition or by homology” (*iii*). From this perspective, homosexuality was

no longer to be seen either as merely transgressive or deviant vis-à-vis a proper, natural sexuality (i.e., institutionalized reproductive sexuality), according to the older, pathological model, or as just another, optional ‘life-style,’ according to the model of contemporary North American pluralism. Instead, male and female homosexualities – in their current sexual-political articulations of gay and lesbian sexualities, in North America – may be reconceptualized as social and cultural forms in their own right, albeit emergent ones and thus still fuzzily defined, undercoded, or discursively dependent on more established forms. (*iii*)

Thus the concept of the queer takes as axiomatic the notion that homosexuality, in any form, “acts as an agency of social process whose mode of functioning is both interactive yet resistant, both participatory and yet distinct, claiming at once equality and difference, demanding political representations while insisting on its material and historical specificity” (*iii*). Furthermore, queer theorists felt that Gay and Lesbian Studies, both as a discipline and a practice, was far too complicit with the forces of heterosexism in the perpetuation of its own marginalization. Indeed, with its overriding quest for assimilation by society and culture at large, Gay and Lesbian Studies was too accepting of strict binaries such as: male/female, gay/straight, black/white, rich/poor, normative/non-

normative, natural/unnatural, and sick/healthy that the heterosexual, Anglo-Judeo-Christian regime sought to keep in place no matter the cost to themselves or to their fellow men and women. Queer Theory was, in other words, the antidote to the myriad proscriptions of compulsory heterosexuality, and it would not settle for anything less than a complete epistemological and ontological re-visioning of all of the limiting conventions the multivalent category of sexuality had acquired in the West since the late 19th century. For its adherents and practitioners alike, Queer Theory has proven to be a supple, generative, and resilient critical apparatus; the extensive body of groundbreaking work on the plays and poetry of Shakespeare produced in this field since its advent over three decades ago stands as a testament to that fact.

Gay and Lesbian Studies and, perhaps even more so, Queer Theoretical Studies, are, as Evelyn Gajowski, appropriating Jacques Derrida and Stephen Greenblatt, points out, “*always already*” presentist interventions (2, italics in the original). As what Helen Moore characterized, in the *Times Literary Supplement* a decade ago, “the new kid on the Shakespeare block” (22) where theoretical apparatuses are concerned, Presentism emerged as a challenge to New Historicism which, at that time, had been the dominant form of literary critical inquiry since 1980, when Stephen Greenblatt’s, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, was first published and created what amounted to a revolution in the field. Presentists were deeply troubled by New Historicism’s ongoing fetishization of facts as the only pure talismans that could ensure the production of readings of literature that were grounded in absolute fidelity to history as opposed to readings that were sullied by the biases of the present moments in which individual critics actually worked. This exaltation of facts above all else, presentists contend, had resulted

in New Historicism's abandonment of the social, political, economic, and personal imperatives that animated its discursive practices in the beginning.⁵ Terence Hawkes, a founding figure, along with Hugh Grady and Ewan Fernie, in Presentist circles, points out, however, that "[f]acts do not speak for themselves. Nor do texts . . . Indeed, they do not speak at all unless they are inserted into and perceived as part of specific discourses which impose their own shaping requirements and agendas" (3). To this Hawkes adds: "We choose the facts. We choose the texts. We do the inserting. We do the perceiving. Facts and texts, that is to say, don't simply speak, don't merely mean. *We* speak, *we* mean, *by* them" (3). It is this presentist spirit Hawkes identifies in his work that informs "Through the Eyes of the Present" with its particular brand of critical energy.

Hence, the genesis of "Through the Eyes of the Present" has everything to do with the fact that its author is a gay man who has been privileged to be alive during the second half of the 20th, and the early decades of the 21st, centuries, and to be a citizen of a prosperous and (relatively) progressive nation like the United States with its myriad educational opportunities for those inclined to pursue them. Who I am has guided me to Shakespeare and has allowed me to feel a powerful connection with his plays and his poetry. I have experienced the wonderful shock of recognizing my non-normative, non-heterosexual self – the gay man that I am – in a number of Shakespeare's works. I feel a kinship with characters like the two Antonios from *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*, with Mercutio from *Romeo and Juliet*, and, yes, even with Iago from *Othello*; I can relate in a palpable way to what Shakespeare puts them through as characters that mimic real life men who desire and love other men. In other words, I read the texts of Shakespeare in the specific way that I do precisely because I am that gay man. I also

screen Shakespeare film in the same way because I am that gay man. Thus, using Hawkes's inviting formulation of presentism, I focus "Through the Eyes of the Present" on the fact that male homoeroticism is evident in both Shakespeare's original playtexts and the cinematic texts that have been produced since the invention of film – and what the larger implications of this fact are. I have selected movie adaptations and appropriations of plays including: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, to critique because, individually and collectively, these productions are the most pertinent to, and the most representative of, my argument. I am, therefore, choosing this way of inserting myself as a gay man, a literary critic, and a scholar into the queer conversation that surrounds them so that I can offer my perceptions of them from this perspective to the world at large and, more particularly, to my GLBTQQI brothers and sisters and their allies and compatriots. As Gajowski rightly insists, to "re-write history is to write the future" (7). And that is, ultimately, exactly what I seek to accomplish in this study of representations of male homoeroticism in the Shakespeare film; I aim to re-write the history of the Shakespeare film to include the male homoerotic, the gay, and the queer.

Central to the project of "Through the Eyes of the Present" is Madhavi Menon's queer concept of what she calls homohistory or, alternatively, unhistoricism, which shows how "desires always exceed identitarian camps and resist being corralled into hetero-temporal camps. Arguing that the fantasy of sexual coherence is always already homophobic in its valorization of fixed difference at the expense of queer sameness, homohistory posits a methodological resistance to sexuality as historical difference" (*Unhistorical Shakespeare* 1-2). Indeed, the "specter of sameness undoes the stability of

difference in the same way that the homo undermines the hetero cast of historicism” (4).

What Menon critiques in her work is the received idea – the naturalized idea – that people of the early modern period in England had romantic, affective, emotional, and sexual lives and experiences that were completely unlike those of their 20th and 21st century Western counterparts.

By way of example, as Alan Bray has explained, men’s relationships with other men during the Elizabethan/Jacobean eras allowed for degrees of physical intimacy – inclusive of such gestures as kissing, hugging, and hand-holding, as well as actions like sharing the same bed – that the repressive and oppressive forces (the church, the law, the state, and the medical and psychiatric establishments) of modern time succeeded at controlling by rendering them unnatural, repugnant, and thus subject to disapprobation and punishments of all kinds.⁶ From Menon’s perspective, the problem is that many men in the current historical moment still have intimate relationships with other men. Such people have been branded, variously, as sodomites, invertes, Uranians, homosexuals, gays, and queers to mark the fact that their desires do not conform to the heterosexual desires thought to be natural and God-given. In other words, men in Elizabethan/Jacobean times did not know any better; they did not know that the kinds of intimacies they indulged in were wrong. 20th/21st century men, on the other hand, thanks to the advances of the Enlightenment and all that came after it, which would eventually result in the seemingly irrevocable codification of the sexual identitarian categories of gay and straight which remain stubbornly persistent in the present moment, have no excuses for behaving so inappropriately. Hence, the difference Menon identifies as the very thing that separates “us” from “them” – and which history has reified as an absolute – is concomitant with

sexuality as an identity that manifests solely on the basis of the specific kinds of sexual activities people choose to engage in. As such, Menon insists that contemporary “sexual categories are every bit as monstrous, hybrid, incoherent, and desirous as their early-modern counterparts, and that categorical difference might not be the best mode in which to think of either the past or of sexualities” in any period of time (7). Another way to put this is by saying that sexuality is queer in all eras; it is, therefore, the same in all eras. And the supposed difference that makes “us” not like “them” can be understood as the proscription of compulsory heterosexuality it really is transformed, in this case, into a historical imperative.

Menon also explains that she uses Shakespeare “as a complex text of and in the present. Rather than naming historical verisimilitude or intellectual authenticity, Shakespeare provides the basis for the exploration of homohistory by straddling chronological periods—he is the past-in-the-present, an old author generating new jobs” (4-5). The Shakespeare film, even more so than the written texts, is particularly suited as a medium for the kind of queer/homohistorical/unhistorical interrogations Menon outlines in her work. This is, of course, because film can represent how Shakespearean drama evokes the “past-in-the-present” as regards male homoerotics in a highly visceral, tangible way that lends itself well to the kind of analysis “Through the Eyes of the Present” offers.

The Terminology

Gay and Lesbian and Queer Theoretical studies of Shakespeare’s works in their written forms need to be concerned with the extended (i.e., the connotative, denotative, and etymological) definitions of such words as “friendship,” “buggery,” “sodomy,”

“catamite,” “homosexual,” “homophilia,” “homosocial,” and “homoerotic.” Where the Shakespeare film is concerned, the last of these, “homoerotic,” is most important in the context of “Through the Eyes of the Present.” As might be expected, this is because visual representations of male homoeroticism are manifested onscreen in different ways than their linguistic counterparts appear in playtexts. Both are, in turn, understood and interpreted in different ways by the respective constituencies of cinema viewers and readers.

On the phenomenon of homoeroticism, Mario DiGangi has put forth the following questions: “When is kissing an expression of sexual desire, of affection, or of a social bond? Under what circumstances might our ability even to distinguish these realms be frustrated? In a patriarchal culture, is intercourse always more ‘sexual’ than kissing? Is it more *erotic* (11)?” DiGangi’s answers to these queries form what amounts to an extended definition of homoeroticism that he uses in analyses of a wide variety of early modern dramas, including several by Shakespeare, the most pertinent to “Through the Eyes of the Present” being, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Othello*. Given the rigor and the sophistication of DiGangi’s thinking, the ultimate conclusion he reaches about whether or not kissing is always a sexual act or an act of fellowship and camaraderie, and whether or not intercourse is more sexual or more erotic than kissing, is that the matter is contingent on the specificities of the circumstances. So, whether the interactions between Oberon and Puck in *Midsummer*, Antonio and Bassanio in *Merchant*, Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*, or Othello and Iago in *Othello*, are homoerotic is dependent on the textual clues Shakespeare provides as well as the particular situatedness of the critic working with these characters. “Through the Eyes of

the Present” takes the position that, as opposed to a strict differentiation between them, that both kissing and intercourse are (homo)erotic regardless of the literal sexual content such actions may also involve. It also regards the “ability even to distinguish between these realms” as less problematic where the Shakespeare film is concerned because the evidence cinematic images provide is far more intelligible and far more visceral than the evidence textual traces provide. For both film and print, of course, what remains dynamic is the critic’s interpretive impulse.

In his work on medieval English literature, Richard E. Zeikowitz, meanwhile, considers “how bodies interact—literally, imaginatively, discursively” (3). Drawing on the insights of Roberto Gonzáles-Casnovas, he goes on to posit that a blending, rather than an absolute demarcation, between the homosocial (social relations between men in all spheres of life), the homophilia (intimate same-sex friendships), and the homoerotic (romantic love between members of the same sex), in order to interrogate medieval texts like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and Chaucer’s *Troilus and Cressida*, among others (3). “Through the Eyes of the Present” is also interested in how male bodies interact “literally, imaginatively, [and] discursively” in the respective cinematic simulacra the Shakespeare film presents to viewers onscreen. In Shakespearean cinema, the male homoerotic is rendered visible via male characters that kiss, hold hands, and embrace; male characters that risk their lives for the other male characters they happen to desire and to love; and by male characters that, in homosocial terms, look out for the best interests of other male characters with the expectation that their efforts will be rewarded with the reciprocation of romantic affection in some form.

What remains to be added builds on an idea that Shakespeare himself expressed through the character of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*. Moments before the deadly brawl between the Montague men and the Capulet men erupts, Mercutio tells Benvolio: “Men’s eyes were made to look, and let them gaze” (3.1.53).⁷ Mercutio is making it plain here that he does not care a whit about the fact that they are in the middle of a public square and that, therefore, all of Verona’s citizenry will be witnesses to their fisticuffs. What is incorporated into “Through the Eyes of the Present” is the notion that, regardless of what they are doing – whether it be fighting one another or loving one another – men’s eyes were made to look at other men and that doing so is an act of male homoeroticism in the broadest sense. This is another way of saying that, as the author of this study, I am owning up to my subjectivity as a gay man in early 21st century America who has a vested interest in mapping the representations of male homoeroticism in the Shakespeare film in order to write the future by re-writing the past or, to put it another way, to write the future by re-writing the history of criticism of Shakespearean cinema that has, for the most part, elided the queer for far too long.

The Scope

Because the field is such a large one – especially when worldwide cinematic and television productions are taken into account – “Through the Eyes of the Present” focuses specifically on selected Anglophone Shakespeare sound films. Therefore, Chapter 2, “The Course of True Love Never Did Run Smooth: Screening the Male Homoerotics of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*,” begins by noting that the popularity of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is, in part, evidenced by the fact that there have been eighteen film, television, and computer versions of the play produced between 1913 and 2008 – in

addition to the myriad theatrical stage versions of the play since it first premiered on the stages of early modern England. In keeping with the Anglophone sound film rubric of the study as a whole, five *Midsummer* films are singled out for attention: Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), Peter Hall's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1968), Adrian Noble's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1996), Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), and Tom Gustafson's *Were the World Mine* (2008). The central argument of this chapter is that, in the 73 year span in which the five pictures chosen for analysis appeared onscreen, a marked progression from avoidance of the male homoerotic to an increasingly sophisticated representation of non-normative male eroticism emerges when the productions are subjected to comparative study.

Chapter 3, "Say How I Loved You: Screening the Male Homoerotics of *The Merchant of Venice*," starts by explaining that, although there have been a total of 12 productions of *The Merchant of Venice* that have been shown in movie theaters or broadcast on television since the dawn of the 20th century, only one fits within the parameters of this study – Michael Radford's sumptuous, full-length feature, *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice* (2004). The argument here is that the male homoeroticism Shakespeare wove into *Merchant* via the characters of Antonio and Bassanio is made apparent throughout the bulk of Radford's film. However, it is also explained that if Radford falters in his treatment of the male homoerotic, it is at the end of his *Merchant* when Antonio is shown alone and once again descending into melancholy as Bassanio and Portia walk away – presumably to consummate their marriage. It is contended that this conclusion, no matter how faithful it may seem to Shakespeare's

playtext, evinces a heterosexism that is jarring considering all that occurred earlier in the film where Antonio and Bassanio are concerned.

Chapter 4, “I Do Adore Thee So: Screening the Male Homoerotics of *Twelfth Night*,” commences with the claim that *Twelfth Night* reigns as one of the most popular of the so-called mature comedies that Shakespeare wrote. But despite this fact, a total of only eight film or television adaptations of the play have been produced in the last 100 years. Given this paucity of screen examples, only Trevor Nunn’s 1996, full-length, cinematic version of *Twelfth Night* fits within the guiding rubric of this study. As in Shakespeare’s original playtext – and in some cases exceeding it given the visual power of film – Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* deals candidly with male homoeroticism from the perspective of the characters Antonio and Sebastian and Count Orsino and Cesario. But despite these heady representations of male homoeroticism, Nunn (in a sense, precipitating Radford since *Twelfth Night* appeared eight years earlier) chooses to end his *Twelfth Night* on an avowedly heterosexual note. This occurs when Antonio is shown as if he has been cast out of the Countess Olivia’s home and into the dreary cold, then walking away from the estate with a grim, melancholic expression on his face. It is reinforced when, as the credits roll, Nunn interjects scenes that show Olivia and Sebastian – as well as Orsino and Viola – in the celebration following their double wedding. This montage is complete with the two happy heterosexual couples smiling, dancing, and kissing passionately. It is argued that, for gay/queer viewers who have invested any kind of time in Nunn’s *Twelfth Night*, this conclusion to the film is disturbing, especially since, as a number of textual critics have explained, there are other – homoerotic inclusive – ways of ending the play.

Chapter 5, “I Am Your Own Forever: Screening the Male Homoerotics of *Othello*,” takes as its launching point the observation that *Othello* stands as one of Shakespeare’s most celebrated – and most disturbing – tragedies. Given that it has been a hugely popular play since it appeared on the stages of Jacobean London, it should come as no surprise that no less than 25 film and television versions of *Othello* have appeared between 1908 and 2001. This study’s parameters allow for consideration of three of these productions: Orson Welles’s *Othello* (1952), Laurence Olivier’s *Othello* (1965), and Oliver Parker’s *Othello* (1995). Each of these productions represents the male homoerotic in idiosyncratic ways that culminate, in the mid-1990s, with Parker’s depiction being the most realistic as opposed to reactionary like those of Olivier and, especially, Welles.

Chapter 6, “Love Goes Toward Love as Schoolboys From Their Books: Screening the Male Homoerotics of *Romeo and Juliet*,” starts by explaining that, since this study began with a consideration of its comedic opposite, and given that it is one of Shakespeare’s most popular plays, it is fitting that its last core chapter is devoted to *Romeo and Juliet*. Counting adaptations and appropriations, *Romeo and Juliet*, like *Othello*, has made it to the small and the big screens some 25 times since the beginning of the 20th century. In keeping with the study’s overall rubric, this chapter will direct specific attention to Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), and Alan Brown’s *Private Romeo* (2011). The thesis here is that, arguably, filmmakers of *Romeo and Juliet* have produced what can be considered the most progressive cinematic versions of the play where representations of male homoeroticism are concerned in the entire history of Anglophone Shakespeare film.

In Chapter 7, “Epilogue: The Presence of the Queer in Anglophone Shakespeare Film,” it is noted that although this study covers a great deal of ground, it is hoped that it will encourage additional work to be done in the larger area of inquiry it identifies. Indeed, despite its capaciousness, it is simply not possible to cover the representations of male homoeroticism (or lack thereof) in every single Shakespearean Anglophone sound film that is available for viewing in the brave new world of DVD and, increasingly, streaming technologies. As gay/queer textual criticism of the original playtexts indicates, Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* (1989) and *As You Like It* (2006), Richard Loncraine and Ian McKellan’s *Richard III* (1995), and Ralph Fiennes’s *Coriolanus* (2011) come to mind as cinematic texts that might well be interpreted productively from the interventions modeled in “Through the Eyes of the Present.” Other areas that seem ripe for this kind of critical inquiry include: representations of male homoeroticism in the silent Shakespeare film and the vast realm of Shakespearean world cinema, and, perhaps even more importantly, representations of female homoeroticism in all of the various incarnations of the Shakespeare film. Television productions of Shakespearean drama, as well as the so-called teen Shakespeare film, also present themselves as the subjects of future inquiry within the overall context demonstrated in this study.

Even with such necessary omissions, “Through the Eyes of the Present” aims to provide gay/queer viewers, and their myriad allies, of Shakespearean cinema with another means of reclaiming a past that, all-too often, has been denied acknowledgement by the heterosexist dictates of an adamantly patriarchal and homophobic culture. Film makes the presence of the queer in Shakespeare intelligible in a way that is far more visceral than written texts can do precisely because of its visuality. Furthermore, film

viewing, because it is a highly social, as well as a deeply personal, experience, makes for a particularly powerful medium for interpretive communities, inclusive of the gay/queer (and their myriad allies) interpretive community, to engage in a sophisticated and necessary discourse that is useful as opposed to being merely esoteric. Indeed, by recognizing, acknowledging, critiquing, and celebrating the presence of the queer in the Shakespeare film, a truly humane and progressive step forward is taken.

Notes

¹ See George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), esp. 1-23.

² See Vito Russo, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1981) and Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006).

³ Good histories of the Stonewall Riots include: David Carter, *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2004) and Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton 1993).

⁴ For a good overview of the issues with Shakespeare's sexuality that his *Sonnets* brought to light, see Margreta de Grazia, "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets," in *Shakespeare's Sonnets: Critical Essays*, Ed. James Schiffer (New York and London: Garland Publishing/Taylor & Francis, 1999), pp. 89-112.

⁵ On Presentism in relation to Shakespeare, see the "Introduction," Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 1-5; Ewan Fernie, "Shakespeare and the Prospect of Presentism," *Shakespeare Survey* 58: 169-184;

“Introduction,” Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespeares* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), pp. 1-5; “The Presence of the Past,” Evelyn Gajowski, *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare*, Evelyn Gajowski, ed. (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 1-22; James O’Rourke, “Introduction: Rethorizing Shakespeare,” *Rethorizing Shakespeare through Presentist Readings* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 1-7; as well as “Introduction,” “Chapter 1,” and “Chapter 2” in, Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady, eds., *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now: Criticism and Theory in the 21st Century* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) pp. 1-59.

⁶ See Alan Bray, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England,” in *Queering the Renaissance*, Jonathan Goldberg, ed. (London and Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 40-61.

⁷ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, René Weis, ed. (London: Methuen Drama / Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

CHAPTER 2

THE COURSE OF TRUE LOVE NEVER DID RUN SMOOTH: SCREENING THE MALE HOMOEROTICS OF *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

In the invaluable filmography of his *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, Kenneth S. Rothwell reveals that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* first came to the screen just over one-hundred years ago in an eleven-minute, black-and-white, silent production of the Vitagraph Company of America that appeared in 1909 (349).¹ Rothwell goes on to document another fourteen—including adaptations and appropriations—film, television, and computer versions of *Midsummer* as having been produced between 1913 and 2001, all of which emanated from the European Continent, the United Kingdom, or the United States (349-350). Between 2001 and 2008, three additional productions of the play were presented to the viewing public, one on English national television, the other two in the American cinema. These were the 2002 youth-oriented, sex-, drugs-, and techno music-infused feature film called *A Midsummer Night's Rave*; the ninety-minute episode of *Midsummer* in 2005's edgy *Shakespeare Retold* series that aired in the fall of that year on BBC One; and the 2008 independent, theatrically-released, gay-themed, musical appropriation of *Midsummer* entitled *Were the World Mine*.

Taking into consideration all eighteen of the extant cinematic, televisual, and computer adaptations and appropriations of *Midsummer* in the present context would be impractical. Narrowing the focus to a much smaller field that includes only feature-length, Anglophone productions of *Midsummer* that were aimed at an adult general audience and were originally released in movie theaters by either a major studio or an

independent film company, results in a more manageable shortlist that includes Max Reinhardt's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1935), Peter Hall's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1968), Adrian Noble's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1996), Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), and Tom Gustafson's *Were the World Mine* (2008). As regards the treatment of male homoeroticism during the seventy-three year span in which these important motion pictures were premiered, the exploration that follows below shows that a progression from avoidance of the male homoerotic to what can be called a sophisticated representation of non-normative male eroticism emerges when they are subjected to comparative study.

It warrants noting at the outset that, despite its relentless focus on heterosexual courtship, and opposite-sex marriage as the ultimate manifestation of such romantic rituals, *Midsummer* has also received a certain amount of consideration from a queer theoretical perspective during the last thirty years. Scholars have analyzed a number of the play's elements that can be considered non-normative, such as the sodomitical,² and bestial, erotic encounter between Bottom and Titania; Oberon's troubling homoerotic desire for his wife's changeling boy as well as his servant Puck; Titania and her votaress's conception and rearing of a child sans any apparent masculine involvement; and, most especially, the possibly lesbian association between Helena and Hermia that occurred prior to their romances with, respectively, Demetrius and Lysander.³ What these studies have in common is that they all deal with *Midsummer* as a written theatrical text as well as a set of performance artifacts. None, as will be done in this chapter, directs any critical attention to representations of male homoeroticism—or lack thereof, as the case

may be—in the major cinematic productions of the play that have appeared beginning in the fourth decade of the twentieth century.

Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, in *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, provide a good starting point for this comparative analysis with their explanation that, while “more recent films occasionally feature queer characters in supporting or even leading roles, most movies made in America before the 1960s rarely acknowledged the existence of queer people” (9). This was because the so-called Hollywood Production Code “actively forbade the representation of what it called ‘sex perversion’” (9).⁴ Thus, even though it was made during a time in western history when homosexuality was a taboo subject for the cinema in the United States, as Benshoff and Griffin detail in their work, a few moments of male homoerotic content are, subjectively speaking at least, evident in Max Reinhardt’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.⁵ These occur



Figure 1 (Left): Theseus in the stylized garb of an ancient Greek warrior in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (dir. Max Reinhardt, 1935), DVD screengrab.

Figure 2 (Right): Theseus charming Hippolyta in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (dir. Peter Hall, 1968), DVD screengrab.

when the character of Theseus (Ian Hunter) appears on-screen. Theseus, in fact, does nothing but command attention from the outset of the film when he strides triumphant back into Athens with Hippolyta (Verree Teasdale) at his side and his people cheering all

around him. At this early point in the cinematic narrative, Theseus is dressed in the manner of an ancient Greek warrior (see Figure 1). His uniform includes the traditional short soldier's tunic of the period with a fan of metal strips to shield his waist, as well as a gleaming silver breastplate which accentuates his muscular chest. An armored helmet with martial feathers both crowns his head and frames his handsome face; a face that is marked by large, lively eyes, a well-shaped nose, and a neatly-trimmed beard. A short while later, Theseus presents an equally attractive figure when he is decked out in his full ducal regalia, complete with an ornately-decorated robe punctuated by artfully ruffled collars at the neck and wrists and an even more noticeable pair of tights-clad legs.

In their discussion of the concept of spectatorship as one means of denoting queer film, Benschhoff and Griffin present an interpretive model that creates the cognitive circumstances in which the Theseus described and shown above can be understood to be an object of potential erotic interest on the part of some, though not all given individual tastes, queer male audience members as Reinhardt's production of *Midsummer* unfolds. Benschhoff and Griffin posit the notion that a "queer film is one that is viewed by lesbian, gay or otherwise queer spectators" who, they argue, "experience films differently than do straight viewers" (10). Hence "all films might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position—that is to say, one that challenges dominant assumptions about gender and sexuality" (10). As far as Reinhardt's *Midsummer* is concerned, the challenge to the tyranny of heteronormativity on the part of queer male spectators comes into play with their inherent ability to respond to Theseus—and the other male actors/characters in the film—with pleasure rather than, as heterosexist assumptions would dictate, responding with pleasure only to the film's female characters like Hippolyta, Helena, Hermia, or

Titania, as, presumably, straight male audience members would be predisposed to do given their sexual preferences.

Clare Whatling makes the equally useful point that what she describes as “queer-identified cinema viewers” do not have to limit their visual “desires to identify appropriate objects,” the desires of queer film watchers have “relatively free rein within the fantasy space of the cinema” (2-3). For queer males then, an identity appropriate object of attention, or of homoerotic desire, would be another queer male, but, as Whatling explains, such conventional and arbitrary restrictions lose their force in the make-believe world of movies and movie-watching. This allows the heterosexual character of Theseus, and the equally heterosexual actor who plays him in Reinhardt’s *Midsummer*, to be an object of potential erotic interest to queer male viewers. Whether in his role as Greek warrior or as the Duke of Athens, Theseus is presented in a way that may catch the eye of some males who happen to be attracted to other males. Even when Hippolyta is by his side or any of the other characters are present on-screen with him, the camera encourages homoerotic interest in Theseus when it lingers on his handsome face or his well-built, masculine figure, as it often does, particularly when he speaks or is spoken to in the course of the film.

But aside from the potential appeal of Duke Theseus, there are, unfortunately, no other male homoerotic elements apparent in Reinhardt’s production of *Midsummer*. Furthermore, the male homoeroticism that is evident in the film cannot be anything more than an accidental occurrence. While the producers could well have been courting female audience members by casting a masculine, attractive actor like Ian Hunter in the role of Theseus, they likely never considered the idea that some men may find Theseus, as

portrayed by Hunter, desirable, too. But, in the end, this visual representation of male homoeroticism is all Reinhardt's *Midsummer* offers its twenty-first century viewers. No exhibitions of actual homoerotic desire between any two male characters find their way to the screen into this early cinematic production of the play. It will, in fact, take another sixty years for directors, actors, writers, and producers to deal openly and positively with male homoeroticism and its attendant desires in films of *Midsummer*.

It can be observed that Peter Hall took the time to cast a bevy of nice-looking actors in the roles of the male characters in his 1968 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.⁶ Though he never appears in the garb of an ancient Greek warrior or in the elaborate robes of royal privilege, Hall's Theseus (Derek Godfrey) is an enticing picture of hirsute masculinity made all the more appealing by his dark hair, eyes, and goatee, as well as his deep, rich voice (see Figure 2). Lysander (David Warner) and Demetrius (Michael Jayston), though as interchangeable as their parts suggest, are nevertheless handsome young men that are not unpleasant to look at when they are onscreen. Other male characters, such as Oberon and Puck (Ian Holm), like Titania, are always presented as seemingly nude in Hall's production, although neither is ever seen clearly from the waist down. That still leaves their bare chests often visible and transforms these two fairy-men into objects of interest for the male homoerotic gaze of those spectators in the queer viewing position. However, their numerous interactions with one another never betray any kind of actual homoerotic desire. Thus, despite being made during the 1960s, a time of significant change in the western world, particularly as regards social attitudes toward sexuality and gender, Hall's *Midsummer* proves something of a disappointment when it comes to the representation of male homoeroticism. Once again, twenty-first

century viewers of this film get little more than a group of attractive men to look at in Theseus, Lysander, Demetrius, Bottom, Oberon, and Puck, and even that is only because of the preexisting physical qualities their respective portrayers brought to their roles. As with Reinhardt's *Midsummer* some thirty years prior, the attractiveness of its male leads is never supplemented by attempts at representation of homoerotic desire among them in any form.

Moving forward twenty-eight years from 1968 takes this study into the last decade of the twentieth century and to Adrian Noble's 1996 film of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Five adjectives that can be used to describe this movie are: colorful, inventive, exuberant, witty, and provocative.⁷ It offers viewers an array of aural and visual delights, including some that, in a first for movie productions of *Midsummer*, are tastefully explicit in their evocations of male homoerotic desire. This becomes apparent with Puck's (Barry Lynch) initial appearance in the movie; most certainly a memorable one given his provocative, if not outrageous, costuming. He is dressed in baggy yellow pants with suspenders holding them up at the shoulders, while the absence of a shirt leaves his lightly hairy chest and toned arm and stomach muscles on display. A short while later, perched on the handle of a large green umbrella suspended in midair, Puck smiles with content when, after Titania has spurned Oberon and set off into the forest with her train of followers, Oberon (Alex Jennings) calls out to the sprite: "My gentle puck, come hither" (2.1.148).⁸ It is more than clear from the radiance of his smile that Puck enjoys looking at his Oberon as much as receiving actual attention from Oberon. As Oberon speaks of mermaids and dolphins in the sea, Puck descends from the umbrella and joins Oberon on the ground, curling his limber body right next to the storytelling

Fairy King. By the time Oberon brings up Cupid, Puck has moved behind Oberon, wrapped his arms around the other man, and covered his eyes with his hands to symbolize the blindness of the mischievous cherub. Puck then goes so far as to lay his head against Oberon's as Oberon talks suggestively of Cupid loosening "his love-shaft smartly from his bow / As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts," before reluctantly letting go of Oberon and moving just a few inches away from the Fairy King in order to observe him as he continues to speak with nothing less than utter devotion (2.1.159-160). It seems more than likely that one of those hundred thousand hearts Cupid's bow has pierced is the one that belongs to Puck, the one that this Puck has given to Oberon.

For the next several minutes, Noble's camera focuses on the handsome face of Puck in extreme close-up, encouraging audience members—including most especially males who like other males—to enjoy gazing at the attractive goblin. This shot of Puck is only complemented by awareness of the fact that Puck is looking at Oberon with the kind of intense, unabashed desire one man can have for another man. When Oberon proceeds to explain to Puck that the "love-in-idleness" flower, when "on sleeping eyelids laid / Will make or man or woman madly dote / Upon the next live creature that it sees," his expression as he looks at Puck indicates that he, too, dotes on Puck as Puck dotes on him (2.1.166, 170-172). The by now palpable homoerotic desire between these two male characters is soon passionately expressed when, after Oberon orders Puck to "Fetch me this herb, and be thou here again / Ere the leviathan can swim a league," Puck grabs Oberon's head in both of his hands and kisses the unresisting Fairy King full on the lips (2.1.173-174) (see Figure 3). Then, having kissed his beloved Oberon with such ardor,



Figure 3: Puck and Oberon kissing one another passionately in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (dir. Adrian Noble, 1996), DVD screengrab.

Puck says huskily, “I’ll put a girdle round about the earth / In forty minutes,” and dashes off to fulfill Oberon’s request (2.1.175-176). With Puck’s departure audiences of Noble’s *Midsummer* are left to ponder these rather extraordinary intimate moments that have just taken place between two male, rather than male and female, characters.

The embrace, the head rubbing, and the passionate kiss Puck and Oberon share are, moreover, not the only moments of explicit homoeroticism that occurs between the two supernatural entities in Noble’s film. After Puck has expressed his concern that he and Oberon must hurry in their efforts to set things to right amongst the confused quartet of heterosexual lovers because of the rapid approach of morning, Oberon reminds him in a soft voice that “we are spirits of another sort” (3.2.389). Then Oberon reaches out and Puck places his left hand in the Fairy King’s open right hand. They grip one another firmly and, hand-in-hand, walk atop the water of the enchanted sea nearby. As they do so, Oberon waxes poetic about how he can hold the sunrise in abeyance in a brief speech in

which he mentions an individual he has often made sexual sport with: “the morning’s love” (3.2.390). As *Midsummer* editor Stephen Greenblatt points out in the footnote to this line, Oberon’s reference to “the morning’s love” could, in the conventional sense, be to “Aurora, goddess of dawn,” or, in the unconventional sense, be to “Cephalus, a brave hunter, Aurora’s [male] lover” (878).⁹ The idea that Oberon could have been involved in a sexual relationship with Cephalus rather than or simultaneously with Aurora makes the notion that his relationship with Puck is a sexual one all the more plausible. They are not, as their kissing, head touching, handholding, and other affectionate gestures indicate, merely homosocial comrades united with one another in mutual, but purely platonic, interest.

In his magisterial study, *Our Moonlight Revels: A Midsummer Night’s Dream in the Theatre*, Gary Jay Williams makes the complaint that Noble’s production is an exercise in cynical insipidity. He writes: “Created to please mainstream audiences and to be exported, it tacitly but deliberately eschewed anything that, in the conservative mid-1990s and amid jeopardized funding for the arts, might be considered as politically troublesome or deconstructed Shakespeare” (257).¹⁰ This comes across as an odd assessment, especially since Williams has just finished mentioning Puck’s kiss of Oberon, an occurrence that, although it is not the result of deconstruction, would certainly qualify as the opposite of conservative and, quite possibly, problematic from a regulatory perspective, as well. To be fair, Williams’s objection has nothing to do with the same-sex kiss itself, but rather, with the fact that Noble, in his opinion, fails to explore its larger cultural, social, and political implications. But, other than this blanket pronouncement,

Williams offers no comment on exactly how he thinks Noble could have made the kiss into a matter of cultural, social, and political urgency.

Mark Thornton Burnett comes to Noble's rescue when, in response to critics like Williams, who find little good in his production of *Midsummer*, he asserts that the film "reinvents Shakespeare for the millennium, both recalling high Victorian decadence and looking ahead to the dawning of the new century" ("Impressions of a Fantasy" 89). Burnett also notes that the film is "rife with interludes of homoerotic attraction," and proceeds to touch on what he describes as the "homoerotic alliance" that exists between Demetrius and Lysander and the "same-sex combination" that manifests when Bottom attempts to free himself from Puck moments before he is turned into an ass (95). But Burnett does not discuss the kiss that Puck and Oberon share and how it might fit within his overall encomium of Noble's *Midsummer*. Since the interlude between Demetrius and Lysander seems more homosocial than homoerotic, and that between Puck and Bottom seems more like childish horseplay rather than homoerotic sex-play, Burnett's elision of the Puck and Oberon same-sex kiss is peculiar. But at least he seems to find the kind of urgency in the movie that Williams felt was lacking in it, and he adds historical urgency to the mix. It can be added that, since, where Puck and Oberon are concerned, it provides visual delights for queer male spectators via eye-catching and revealing apparel; a single, but very intense, same-sex kiss; and but one occurrence each of holding one another, head rubbing, and of joining their hands together like lovers are wont to do; Noble's depiction of the fairy king and his henchman in his *Midsummer* is, contra Williams, both a significant and a relevant accomplishment in terms of the representation of male homoerotic desire in productions of Shakespeare on film in the twentieth and

twenty-first centuries. Regardless of whether or not the cause was the limits of their respective historical moments, neither Reinhardt's nor Hall's films of *Midsummer*, as has been discussed above, present contemporary viewers with anything comparable to Noble's in terms of male homoeroticism.

Audiences are clued in from the outset of Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* that it is set in Monte Athena, a village somewhere in the Tuscany region of northern Italy rather than in Shakespeare's Athens, and in the Victorian era instead of either Antiquity or even the Renaissance.¹¹ Otherwise the film is a straightforward and faithful, though not full-text, cinematic retelling of Shakespeare's *Midsummer*. And, while there is no embracing, head-resting, hand-holding, or same-sex kissing between the male characters depicted in the film, Hoffman does present his audiences with a number of moments in which the male body is clearly on display. More significantly in the present context, he also turns the Pyramus and Thisbe story that concludes both the play and the film from being little more than a ridiculous, but funny farce into a surprisingly poignant set piece complete with unexpected male homoerotic overtones.

Hoffman, like all of the previous directors of cinematic *Midsummers* considered here so far, presents his viewers with several moments in which the attractiveness of the male body is emphasized and homoeroticism is at least suggested if not made entirely explicit. As with Noble's film, this aspect is most noticeable where the characters Puck (Stanley Tucci) and, to an even greater extent, Oberon (Rupert Everett), are concerned.¹² The Fairy King is seen first in the film, as in Shakespeare's play, when he confronts his recalcitrant Fairy Queen (Michelle Pfeiffer) and says, "Ill met by moonlight, proud

Titania,” in an intimidating authoritarian tone (2.1.60). Though he has a rather substantial sash covering his chest, Oberon is otherwise shirtless as he, literally, lords it over the fairy world from his makeshift throne. Furthermore, he is surrounded by a bevy of young male sprites in this scene, all of whom are also shirtless and posed in various states of decadent recline that only highlights their attractiveness, sensuality, and, perhaps, their availability. As the film continues, Oberon is often seen in the company of his trusted henchman, Puck, who is always shirtless, too, and who evinces a distinctly masculine, rakish kind of charm. But, despite their many interactions with one another as they plot, scheme and, eventually, set things to right in the fairy and human worlds alike, and despite their obvious physical attractiveness, the relationship between Hoffman’s Oberon and Puck, unlike that of Noble’s Oberon and Puck, never crosses the line that separates the platonic from the homoerotic.

Meanwhile, Hoffman’s innovative serious treatment of the Pyramus and Thisbe tale begins when, fairly early in the film, the amateur acting troupe gathers on the steps of a building undergoing refurbishment in the bustling village of Monte Athena. In accord with Shakespeare’s playtext of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, the company includes Nick Bottom the weaver (Kevin Kline), Peter Quince the carpenter (Roger Rees), Snug the joiner (Gregory Jbara), Francis Flute the bellows mender (Sam Rockwell), Tom Snout the tinker (Bill Irwin), and Robin Starveling the tailor (Max Wright). Having thus assembled, Bottom begs of Quince what play it is that they will endeavor to perform as part of the upcoming wedding celebration for Theseus (David Strathairn) and Hippolyta (Sophie Marceau). Quince informs the actors that their play is to be, “The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe,” to which the irrepressible Bottom proclaims:

“A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry” (1.2.11-14). Bottom is cast by Quince in the part of Pyramus, about which is learned not long thereafter is a lover that “kills himself most gallant for love” (1.2.20). The group of men respond to this description of Pyramus with a collective audible sigh of approval, indicating that playing the part of a man willing to kill himself for the love of, presumably at this point, a woman, is a wholly appropriate assignment for one of their company to take on. Indeed, the impression made here is that any male actor would and ought to gladly take on such a *natural* role.

Having cast Bottom as Pyramus, the director calls out for Flute. “Here, Peter Quince,” Flute says in unmistakably deep and masculine voice. Before responding to Flute, Quince whispers something to Snout, who dashes away quickly after hearing what Quince has to say. Clearly, viewers of Hoffman’s *Midsummer* are meant to understand that Snout and Quince are in something of a conspiracy together against Flute, who is told by Quince: “You must take Thisbe on you” (1.2.38). With a touching smile, Flute asks, “What is Thisbe? A wandering knight?” and Quince, as he steps gingerly away from Flute, informs the earnest young man, with a noticeable chuckle, that Thisbe “is the lady that Pyramus must love” (1.2.39-40). That Flute will be performing the role of Pyramus’s lady love inspires a round of guffawing on the part of all of his fellow actors, with the exception of Bottom, who is too busy trying to figure out a way to convince Quince that he should be allowed to play multiple roles in the production to be at all concerned with Flute’s immediate fate as a performer. To this group of amateur actors, there is something inordinately amusing about the idea of a man playing the part of a woman, complete with a pink dress costume, on the stage; such men are meant to be

laughed at. A truly masculine, heterosexual male, the further implication is, would never degrade or humiliate himself by agreeing to portray a female character on the stage.

Hearing the role he is to play causes the ingenuous smile to vanish from Flute's face. The ribbing of Flute by his fellows, meanwhile, becomes even more pronounced when the camera turns viewers' attention to the character of Snout. Snout, at Quince's instigation moments earlier, had hopped off the makeshift stage and retrieved the pink dress costume Flute will have to don when he portrays Thisbe. When Snout prances around below with the pink dress held up to his waist, mimicking how ridiculous he and the rest of the male actors think Flute will look wearing the dress as Thisbe, it engenders yet another round of spirited guffaws that become uproarious. Snout's juvenile actions also elicit Quince's non-verbal approval, as evidenced by the grin on his face in tandem with the "good job" hand gesture he directs to Snout. An obviously disquieted Flute pleads with Quince: "Nay, faith, let not me play a woman. I have a beard coming" (1.2.38). Bottom jumps into the conversation at this point and says, "An I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too. I'll speak in a monstrous little voice: 'Thisne, Thisne!' 'Ah, Pyramus, my lover dear! Thy Thisbe dear, and lady dear!'" (1.2.41-43). Bottom uses a falsetto voice that gets stronger and stronger as he improvises these lines to their end. Nearby stands Flute who, with each word Bottom speaks, becomes quite animated about the idea of Bottom playing Thisbe rather than taking on the role himself and, thus being ridiculed for becoming a woman in such a way. With a combination of comical eye and face gestures, Flute tries to convince Quince that Bottom would be the ideal actor for the part of Thisbe. But Quince disagrees: "No, no," he says to Bottom with evident asperity, "you must play Pyramus, and Flute, you Thisbe" (1.2.44). Quince then calls out for Snout

and together they lead Flute toward the back of the stage where Snout and Starveling begin fitting Flute into the pink dress with exaggerated coos of “Thisbe” that make them sound a bit like mother hens fussing over a reluctant child in need of mollifying, rather than the “hard-handed men” of Athens the haughty Philostrate later describes them as being (5.1.72).¹³

The next evening, just prior to the performance before the Duke and the Duchess and their guests, Flute appears for the first time as Thisbe in full drag. The wig he is wearing provides him with a head of woman’s hair that is brown and frizzy, and features tangled braids that stretch almost to the ground. His white foundation makes him look almost deathly pale yet, at the same time, it makes both the pink lipstick and rouge he is wearing stand out prominently. He does not quite seem like a clown, but the overall effect of the makeup is close. In addition, Flute’s costume consists of a gold dress, a red shawl, and a number of elaborate gold chains and other jewelry. Looking closely at Flute, however, two things threaten the illusion of femininity: the first is the cuffs of Flute’s men’s pants and the heavy, workman’s shoes that can be seen sticking out beneath the hem of his dress, while the second is the obvious fact that the wig he is wearing is not placed squarely on his head, revealing a bit of the close-cropped haircut a young man his age might be expected to wear.

As the actual production of “The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe” unfolds, Flute as Thisbe arrives on stage only to discover his/her beloved Pyramus lying motionless on the ground. ““Asleep, my love? / What, dead my dove,”” he/she says using a pronounced falsetto, much to the merriment of the Duke and the Duchess and their courtiers (5.1.304-305). The condescending laughter,

which Flute/Thisbe bears with stoic equanimity, continues as he/she gets stuck on saying the word “O,” (5.1.306). He/she says this one word several times, and each time he/she does so, he/she lowers his voice an octave. But, by the time Flute, as Thisbe, begins to speak his next lines, he speaks quite clearly and in his own natural voice; that of the young man he is underneath the exaggerated makeup and the multi-layered dress, rather than that of Thisbe, the woman he is attempting to portray. Interestingly, the lower Flute’s voice gets as he performs Thisbe, the more emotional, heartfelt, and real his words sound. As he continues with, ““Speak, speak. Quite dumb? / Dead, dead? A tomb / Must cover thy sweet eyes,”” the laughter of the audience watching the play-within-the-film fades noticeably (5.1.306-309). The camera focuses on the expressions of, first, Lysander (Dominic West) and Hermia (Anna Friel), then those of Helena (Calista Flockhart) and Demetrius (Christian Bale), and shows how they change from delight to seriousness within the space of less than a few seconds.

As the scene continues, Flute says, ““O Sisters Three, / Come, come to me, / With hands as pale as milk,”” then, in a surprising and extraordinary move, he pulls the woman’s wig off of his head and flings it aside, exposing the short brown hair of the young man he really is (5.1.316-318). Thus, in addition to dealing with the pathos of the moment, audiences of “The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe,” from within and without Hoffman’s *Midsummer*, must somehow reconcile the fact that they are now watching a young man—albeit a young man still in a woman’s dress, but a recognizable young man nonetheless—struggling with the fact that his beloved, Pyramus, another man, is dead (see Figure 4). Not long thereafter, Flute as



Figure 4: Flute as Thisbe, sans wig, preparing to die so that he/she can be with his/her beloved Pyramus in *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (dir. Michael Hoffman, 1999), DVD screengrab.

Thisbe exposed as Flute, grabs Pyramus's sword and stabs himself. "And farewell, friends," he says, "Thus Thisbe ends. / Adieu, adieu, adieu" (5.1.325-327). Flute's fingers touch Pyramus's body lightly as he says his trio of goodbyes, and when he dies, his head falls to its final rest on Pyramus's waist. At this point, it is helpful to recall that when the group of amateur actors first appeared in Hoffman's film, audiences were told that Pyramus is a lover who dies most gallantly for love. But, as his death makes clear, it is actually Flute who is the lover, in this case of another man, who dies most gallantly for that love. What makes the interaction between Flute and Bottom/Pyramus homoerotic is that viewers actually see two men, as opposed to a man and a woman, enacting their passion, the spectacle of one man making good on his willingness to kill himself for another man with whom he happens to be in love, a palpable reality on screen.

Hoffman's transformation of "The Most Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe" from farce to serious, indeed, almost tragic, drama, was an inspired choice on his part. Given the crossdressing aspect of this part of the film, which demands

a young man to don female apparel in an illusion that fools no one in the audience about the real gender of Flute/Thisbe, the sequence has homoerotic potential. This potential morphs into vivid actuality the moment Flute removes his wig and begins speaking as one recognizable man to another, of love, of mourning, and of death. Nevertheless, the homoeroticism of this portrayal seems an accidental rather than a deliberate effect on the part of the filmmakers. Although they may appear in the final shooting script, the published version of Hoffman's screenplay for his *Midsummer* evidences no stage directions that indicate either Flute's removal of the wig or the lowering of his voice from a falsetto to a normal masculine tone, the two key factors that allow for the latent homoeroticism between Flute as Thisbe and Pyramus to manifest most noticeably on screen (107-108). This suggests, of course, that these occurrences were spontaneous, in-the-moment, decisions on the part of Sam Rockwell, the actor responsible for bringing Flute/Thisbe to life. Whatever the case, it can be argued that his decisions work beautifully in the overall context of Hoffman's movie because they seem organic rather than contrived. They also serve to infuse this unique cinematic performance of the Pyramus and Thisbe play—a play-within-a-film that, as is the situation with earlier productions of *Midsummer* like Reinhardt's, Hall's, and Noble's, is presented strictly as heterosexual farce—with a quality that is all the more affecting given this subtle, sophisticated, and unexpected emphasis on its homoerotic potential.

In their respective considerations of his production of *Midsummer*, scholars have had a great deal to say about Hoffman's obvious cinematic homages to Reinhardt's 1935 *Midsummer* and Kenneth Branagh's 1994 *Much Ado About Nothing*; his shifting of the story's setting from Athens to the imaginary town of Monte Athena in Tuscany and his

altering of the time period from antiquity to the Victorian era; and, above all, his decision to provide the character of Bottom with a backstory not found, or indeed, even hinted at, in Shakespeare's original text. Drawing on his screenplay once again, Hoffman himself explains the latter development as growing out of his repeated readings of the play prior to filming it in which he began to envision Bottom

the dreamer, the actor, the pretender—Nick Bottom sitting at a café in a small Italian town dressed in a white suit, trying his best to look like a gentleman. It is only when we learn that it is the only suit he owns, that he has a lousy marriage, that he lives in a dingy flat, that we know he clings to delusions of grandeur because he has no love in his life. (viii)

In so doing, Kenneth S. Rothwell comments that Hoffman “breezily commits the academic heresy of ‘character criticism’ . . . In other words he speculates, hypothesizes, and fictionalizes a Bottom who never existed in Shakespeare’s play” (*A History of Shakespeare on Screen* 253). This Bottom, Rothwell continues, “emerges as a kind of Walter Mitty figure imagining himself a dashing man about town. In reality he is the henpecked husband of a nagging wife (Heather Parish), who of course also does not exist in Shakespeare’s play” (253). Rothwell is referring, not incidentally, to the old-fashioned and much-maligned type of character criticism as that which was practiced by A.C. Bradley and his adherents during the early part of the twentieth century and, thus, uses it as a *de facto* strike against Hoffman and his film of *Midsummer*.¹⁴ It can be said, however, that if Hoffman’s carefully considered interpolation regarding the character of Bottom and his motivations did not make any sense within the narrative structure of Bottom’s overall story arc, then Rothwell’s critique of it because of its associations with

Bradley's critical ethos might be warranted. But arguably, the backstory that Hoffman invented for Bottom is a plausible one and adds a not unwelcome facet to Shakespeare's playtext.

But what is even more curious in the context of the present study is that critics of Hoffman's *Midsummer* have had nothing whatsoever to say about the homoerotic quality of the final moments of the performance of "The Most Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe" as detailed above. Samuel Crowl provides one example of this kind of, no doubt unintentional, analytical elision when he writes about this part of Hoffman's movie:

On screen, less is always more with Shakespeare, which is nowhere made more evident than in Sam Rockwell's brilliant, moving Flute. . . .

Rockwell gives us a heartbreaking Thisby, and he makes his delivery of 'his eyes were green as leeks' as tragically moving as Juliet's 'thy lips are warm.' . . . Rockwell's Thisby genuinely grieves for her Pyramus . . .

(*Shakespeare at the Cineplex: The Kenneth Branagh Era* 186)

Crowl begins his remarks by bestowing praise on the *male* actor Sam Rockwell, whose understated performance as the *male* character of Flute he finds to be both exceptional and touching. It is, furthermore, the *male* actor Rockwell, as the *male* character Flute, who endows the female character of Thisby (*sic*) with an emotional pathos that finds its only equal in that of Shakespeare's Juliet, a female character who, as is well-known, would have been played by a *boy* actor on the stages of early modern London. And it is the *male* actor Rockwell, again as the *male* character Flute, who transforms Thisby into a figure whose mourning for the loss of her *male* lover Pyramus is gut-wrenching. Crowl's

fastidiousness with the use of masculine proper names and pronouns for Rockwell and Flute in this passage is telling; *in toto*, they never let his readers forget that the only real gender at work in the scene he praises here is male. Given the subject matter at the heart of the scene, forbidden romantic love interrupted by sudden death, and given that it involves two sets of male actors—Rockwell and Kline and Flute and Bottom—the fact that Crowl does not mention male homoeroticism, even in passing, proves to be an unusual oversight in his otherwise perceptive commentary on these important moments of Hoffman’s *Midsummer*.¹⁵

A quite different film from any of the four productions discussed above results when *Midsummer* is appropriated by and for a specifically gay male constituency, as is seen with Tom Gustafson’s *Were the World Mine*. The genesis of what was to become *Were the World Mine* dates back to 2003 when Gustafson directed a brief piece based on Shakespeare’s *Midsummer* that he called “Fairies,” and which contains many of the elements—in embryonic form—that made the transition from short film to full-length, independent feature.¹⁶ For the longer, more elaborate production of *Were the World Mine*, Gustafson appropriated the major story arcs, some of the characters, and a few of the overarching themes of *Midsummer* itself, as well as a great deal of the exuberant language of the play that, in his treatment, becomes a series of catchy, upbeat songs, in order to tell the story of two attractive young men, Timothy (Tanner Cohen) and Jonathon (Nathaniel David Becker), who fall in love with one another in no small part because of the magic of Shakespeare. Benschoff and Griffin describe musical films like *Were the World Mine* as a “queer form” of cinema in part because “the musical . . . creates a hyperreal world in which almost anything can happen” (11). Without question,

telling, showing, and singing the tale of Timothy and Jonathon becoming boyfriends because of their mutual involvement with a school production of *Midsummer* qualifies as exactly the kind of “anything can happen in a hyperreal world” scenario Benshoff and Griffin mention in regards to musical film (9). And thus it is that Gustafson succeeds at thoroughly queering *Midsummer* for contemporary audiences of Shakespeare on film for the first time in the, roughly, one-hundred-and-twenty year history of the cinema.

As noted above, *Were the World Mine* is not a traditional adaptation of *Midsummer* like the quartet of earlier productions discussed above. Though inspired by its early modern theatrical predecessor, it is an innovative work of twenty-first century American cinema in its own right. However, the influence of Shakespeare’s play is apparent in much of the dialogue spoken, in every lyric sung, and in the overall narrative thrust of the film. This being the case, briefly touching on a few of the major elements of the movie will help to contextualize the analysis of its specifically homoerotic moments. As with the earlier films of *Midsummer* considered above, Gustafson cast a bevy of talented, good-looking young men in *Were the World Mine*, all of whom are a pleasure to watch on screen. It is important to know from the outset that film’s lead characters, Timothy and Jonathon, are both senior high students at Morgan Hill Academy, an exclusive all-boys prep school situated in the fictional Midwestern town of Kingston, Illinois. Timothy is gay and everyone he deals with on a daily basis knows this about him. Jonathon, on the other hand, has a girlfriend and is, therefore, presumed to be straight. Timothy is a singer with a powerful voice, while Jonathon is an athlete and captain of the Academy’s championship rugby team who is referred to as “jockboy” among Timothy and his friends. What brings Timothy and Jonathon together is that they

are cast by their English/Drama teacher, Ms. Tebbit, in a class production of *Midsummer*, which allows them to interact in ways they never have been able to before, to get to know one another, and, ultimately, to become a couple. And the course of their true love is no more smooth than that of Hermia and Lysander, of Helena and Demetrius, of Theseus and Hippolyta, or even that of Titania and Oberon in Shakespeare's original.

In the playtext of *Midsummer*, one theme Shakespeare explores is that of society's disapproval of a person's choice of romantic interest most explicitly through the character of Hermia. Hermia's father, Egeus, is so upset by the fact that she is refusing to marry Demetrius, the man he has chosen to be her husband, that, "[f]ull of vexation," he pleads his case to Duke Theseus, the highest ranking official in Athens (1.1.20). One man to another, Theseus supports Egeus and, in accord with the law, informs Hermia that her choices for the future are: marriage to a man whom she does not love, imprisonment in a cloister to "live a barren sister" for the rest of her life, or out-and-out death (1.1.65-73). There can be no doubt that all three of these options are nothing less than punishments, each more harsh than the last. Hermia, in other words, faces the worst of retributions for her recalcitrant nonconformity to what is expected of her as a well-born female of her time. The fact that these reprisals would be meted out by a pair of representatives of the patriarchal authority in Hermia's world—her father and a noble with the power to enforce statutes—makes them all the more disturbing. In Gustafson's *Were the World Mine*, Timothy confronts a similar kind of societal disapprobation because of his refusal to act in accord with what is demanded of him in the world he inhabits. Given that he is a young gay man, Timothy's romantic interests are homoerotic as opposed to heteroerotic. He is attracted to others who are of the same sex as him and, for simply being who he is,

he suffers punishments that are at least as severe in their own way as those Hermia courts in *Midsummer*, and that are inflicted on him by the same kinds of paternalistic figures that seek to control Hermia. In this case, it is Timothy's father and his schoolmates who are the agents of the oppression he is forced to cope with.

Relatively early in *Were the World Mine*, Timothy has what quickly becomes a difficult conversation with his long-suffering mother. With the beginnings of tears in her eyes, she tells Timothy that she misses his father. Immediately on the defensive, Timothy blurts out, "Dad's an asshole." When his mother goes on to claim that they were better off when Timothy's father was around, Timothy reminds her: "He kicked me out!" She shoots back that it was Timothy who chose to leave home, not anything his father did or did not do, which leads to an uncomfortable impasse in the discussion between them. What remains unspoken on the part of both is the implication that, whether Timothy left the family of his own accord or whether his father threw him out as he insists happened, the circumstances involved Timothy's sexual identity. His father could not accept the fact of Timothy's homosexuality; he could not accept that his son's affective, emotional, and erotic desires were focused on others of the same gender, and punished him by first ostracizing him, and then abandoning him altogether. Timothy obviously still feels the pain of his father's rejection of him and, unlike his mother seems to be, is unwilling to forgive him for treating him in such a callous, uncaring manner.

Timothy must also deal with even more cruel treatment on account of the inability of his classmates to accept him because of his sexuality. They are, in fact, barely able to tolerate Timothy given that they perceive him to be so unnatural and so alien to themselves. From a dramatic perspective this is made most clear in *Were the World Mine*

when, late one afternoon, Timothy walks up to his locker at Morgan Hill Academy only to find that the word “FAGGOT” has been scrawled across the metal doors in heavy black ink. Not the stereotypical meek, defenseless gay boy of yesteryear, a very angry Timothy charges from the main school building and onto the field outside where his peers are playing rugby and demands of them: “Who did it?” In response, he is taunted with patronizing statements like, “Oh, look who just flew in from fairy land” and “Hey, bud, calm down.” Sensing nothing but trouble in the offing, Jonathon intervenes by trying to get Timothy to leave the field with him. But Timothy is not to be placated, even by the boy of his dreams. He lunges toward one of the rugby players and shoves him, which starts an all-out scuffle between the two of them that Jonathon struggles to break up. “Get out of here,” a clearly upset Jonathon yells at Timothy once he has succeeded at pulling the two young men apart and bringing the fisticuffs to an end. As Timothy walks away, Jonathon looks back at him with an expression akin to regret on his face. Based on this subtle fact, audiences ought to have the distinct sense at this point in the film that Jonathon wishes he could go with Timothy and comfort the other boy in his distress. That is, however, not to be. Jonathon elects instead to stay with his rugby pals while Timothy makes his way home—dejected and alone.

It is both unfortunate and troubling that Timothy’s experiences with his father and his peers are not atypical for gay youths like him. Fathers, Michael C. LaSala writes in *Coming Out, Coming Home: Helping Families Adjust to a Gay or Lesbian Child*, are often “mysterious, distant, intimidating figures – even more so for boys with homosexual attractions. They are the family torchbearers of manliness, and, as males young and old know, homosexuality is considered the dreaded opposite of masculinity” (36). As

evidenced by the tense discussion that takes place between Timothy and his mother in *Were the World Mine*, the implication is that Timothy's father was indeed a menacing person toward his son. He was someone who went to the extreme of ejecting Timothy from home before he was fully capable of taking care of himself, most likely because he could not handle Timothy's budding homosexuality. Taking this point a step further, it seems as though Timothy's father was unable to countenance the idea that his son finds other guys enticing in a homoerotic sense. As LaSala notes, sex "between males is seen as an act of violence and domination rather than an expression of love, affection, or mutual pleasure . . . A boy growing into a gay man will get the message loud and clear that he is weak, dirty, and, perhaps worst of all, less than a man" because of his non-normative desires from a father like Timothy's seems to have been (37). In a perfect world, cinematic or otherwise, fathers would love their sons unconditionally. The story of Timothy and his father shows that such an ideal is not always possible and that the effects such circumstances engender for both fathers and sons can be destructive. After all, Timothy no longer has a father on account of his father's discomfort with Timothy given the latter's homoerotic sexual identity, and his father no longer has a son in Timothy for the same reason.

Meanwhile, the ways which Timothy's classmates treat him because of his sexual identity exemplify institutionally- and culturally-sanctioned homophobia, or the irrational fear of homosexuals and homosexuality. A little over ten years ago, Byrne Fone noted in *Homophobia: A History* that, "in modern Western society, where racism is disapproved, anti-Semitism is condemned, and misogyny has lost its legitimacy, homophobia remains, perhaps the last acceptable prejudice" (3). In a country like America in the second decade

of the twenty-first century, a country in which individuals seeking to be nominated as presidential candidates feel justified in claiming, using vitriolic rhetoric infused with messianic zeal while doing so, that gay people do not deserve to marry those with whom they are in love because they are somehow less equal than their heterosexual counterparts and that their marital unions would not benefit society because they cannot procreate, the idea of homophobia being the last acceptable prejudice, sadly, still holds as true as ever.

Be that as it may, Fone goes on to explain that one reason for the type of homophobia that Timothy's peers' exhibit involves the "fear and dislike of the sexual *difference* that homosexual individuals allegedly embody—stereotypically, effeminacy in homosexual men, mannishness in homosexual women" (5). The words that they quite literally verbally brand Timothy with repeatedly in *Were the World Mine*—faggot and fairy—have long been used as weapons to demean gay males like him. Thus the use of such terms serves as a vicious attempt to humiliate, indeed, to emasculate Timothy by equating his romantic and sexual desires for other males with those that, from the collective, myopic point of view of his tormenters, properly belong only to females. These boys have been socialized to believe that it is their duty to police and punish others like Timothy for his nonconformity to their sexual mores, a duty they take seriously enough to act on with what amounts to impunity.

But the homophobia of Timothy's peers also operates in two other significant ways in Gustafson's film. On the one hand, they fear that they, too, will be thought to be gay by others simply by being in Timothy's presence. On the other hand, they are just as afraid that Timothy might be interested in any or all of them in a homoerotic sense; that he might, in other words, desire them as sexual partners. In his synthesis of the large

body of empirical research on these points, Ian Rivers explains that it has been found that young men like Timothy's classmates are convinced that "being in close proximity to a gay man would not only have an effect upon their own sexuality, but might also have a more sexually invasive connotation," that, in similar terms, they may well be the objects of the kind of attraction that repulses, rather than flatters, them (*Homophobic Bullying: Research and Theoretical Perspectives* 106). Whether they are able to admit to it or not, both of these possibilities terrify them, so they act in a manner that allows them to prove in dramatic, unequivocal ways to one and all that they are the most masculine of heterosexual males. The fact that this leads to behaviors like the verbal and physical assault of Timothy does not matter when heterosexist paradigms must be perpetuated at any cost, even if that involves the deliberate harm of another human being. It is in this way that, to his great credit, Gustafson shows the darker, more problematic aspects of male homoerotics in *Were the World Mine*, rather than the comparatively benign and, therefore, seemingly non-threatening, aspects of male homoerotics evident in the other four productions of *Midsummer* considered above.

Another bold directorial choice on Gustafson's part is his repeated emphasis on the powerful, dreamlike qualities of the male homoerotic fantasies that make up much of the narrative structure of *Were the World Mine*. The most representative example of the prominence—and importance—of homoerotic fantasy in *Were the World Mine* occurs not long after Timothy arrives home following the futile verbal and physical confrontation he had with his homophobic peers on the athletic fields at Morgan Hill Academy. There, Timothy retreats into the sanctuary of his bedroom where he pulls a small green book from out of his backpack. On its cover appear the words: *A Midsummer Night's Dream* /

By William Shakespeare / Foreword by Max Reinhardt.¹⁷ It so happens that this special volume was given to Timothy by Ms. Tebbit (Wendy Robie), his English/Drama teacher, when she cast him as the mischievous fairy Puck in the production of the play the senior class has been tasked with performing. Since Ms. Tebbit is a conflation of Shakespeare's Titania and Oberon in *Were the World Mine*, the significance of her gifting Timothy with this particular edition of *Midsummer* soon becomes clear as his vivid imagination goes to work while he tackles the actor's task of fully learning a role for public performance.

Timothy begins to study his lines in earnest, often struggling at times to make sense out of those he does not fully understand. In particular, he pauses at Puck's oath to Oberon, "I'll put a girdle about the earth / In forty minutes," repeating the phrases over and over again in an attempt to comprehend their lyrical rhythm (2.1.175-176). As he is doing so, the text of the play in the book begins to swim in and out of focus. Within the space of a only moment or two, a recipe for something called Remedy #3, or Cupid's Love Juice, magically appears on the page before him where Puck and Oberon's dialogue was previously. The ingredients, in the form of a sonnet, include "essence of the madly shooting stars," a "drop or two of anything wat'ry," and a "milk-white western flower," all of which are to be mixed in a "pot of purely mineral" until they are, significantly, primed to "charm your mate." Of course, this almost nonsensical poem cum recipe is not by any means a true Shakespearean work. It can be easily understood that what Gustafson has done here in *Were the World Mine* is cleverly appropriated from *Midsummer* the idea that Cupid's Love Juice is purple because it derives from the pansy which, as Oberon explains to Puck, used to have pure white petals until it suffered "love's wound" at the end of one of Cupid's ubiquitous arrows (2.1.165-167). He has also borrowed the notion

that because it is, specifically, *Cupid's*—the god of Eros and desire—love juice, the substance has the power to make human beings fall in love with each other regardless of their actual circumstances, including whether or not one of the potential lovers is gay and the other straight, as is the case with Timothy and Jonathon.

Timothy is inspired to create a batch of Cupid's Love Juice, but after having done so, the resulting concoction fails to impress him. So he turns to the magical edition of Shakespeare's play once again. As mysteriously as it first appeared there, the formula for Remedy #3 / Cupid's Love Juice slowly fades away from the page, then the word "Sing" suddenly flashes before Timothy's eyes. Taking a cue from this unexpected supernatural imperative, he does indeed begin to sing to himself. The lyrics Timothy first executes are, in actuality, lines that belong to *Midsummer's* Bottom who speaks them after having been "translated" into a donkey by Puck and subsequently abandoned by his fellow actors in the forest outside Athens (3.1.89-105). "I see their knavery. This is to make an ass of me, to fright me, if they could," Timothy sings in a rich, melodious baritone (3.1.106-107). When he turns his head, it is revealed that a flourish of glittering, stylized makeup now surrounds his right eye and cheek. So adorned, he continues singing Bottom's speech: "But I will not stir from this place, do what they can. I will work up and down here," and as he does so, his bedroom is transformed into a theatre stage depicting a forest setting where a group of young men, all dressed in Morgan Hill Academy rugby uniforms, is artfully posed and waiting on his arrival (3.1.107-108). Given that these boys are none other than Timothy's homophobic classmates, there is a deeply satisfying irony to their appearance at this moment in the film and in the context of a homoerotic fantasy of Timothy's. Upon joining the group of boys on the stage, Timothy sings the final lines of

the pep talk Bottom gives to himself to stave off panic: “And I will sing, that they shall hear, that I am not afraid, I am not afraid” (3.1.108-109). A check of *Were the World Mine*’s accompanying soundtrack reveals that this lyric sequence is the opening verse of the film’s theme song, which is entitled, appropriately enough, “Were the World Mine.” In *Midsummer*, of course, the outcome of Bottom’s speech and subsequent performance of his ditty about the “ousel cock,” the “throstle,” and the “wren,” is the awakening of the Titania which, in turn, is followed by her and Bottom’s heteroerotic, albeit bestial, romp in her bower (3.1.110-113). In contrast, the outcome of Timothy’s singing in *Were the World Mine* is unabashedly homoerotic.

The verses of “Were the World Mine” that follow are a curious amalgamation of lines from the characters of Hermia, Helena, Demetrius, Puck, Oberon, and Titania in the playtext of *Midsummer* that work beautifully in combination within the overall narrative structure of Gustafson’s film. As such, the song continues with the lyrics, “I know not by what power I am made bold,” “But still you flout my insufficiency,” and “The more my prayer, the lesser is my grace,” with the first set being a line of dialogue that belongs to Hermia in *Midsummer*, and the second and third sets being lines of dialogue that belong to the play’s hapless Helena (1.1.59, 2.2.134, and 2.2.95). Hermia, of course, comments on her boldness while she is being made to account for herself to Theseus in the first scene of *Midsummer*. For her, this demonstration of nerve in the face of the implacable patriarchal obstacles she faces operates in two ways; she is bold because she dares to love Lysander enough to want to spend the rest of her life with him instead of with Demetrius, the man her father wants her to marry, and she is bold because she also dares to speak in her own defense to the very authority figures who are seeking to control her. Even if only

in an elaborate homoerotic fantasy, Timothy is exhibiting the same kind of boldness as Hermia; he is bold because he is allowing himself to be attracted to someone of his own choosing who happens to be another boy, and he is bold because he is allowing himself to dream of being in a romantic relationship with that other boy. Helena's remark on her insufficiency is a rebuke of Lysander and his false words about how he has just realized how deeply in love with her he is. For Timothy, the line can only be a reference to the fact that nearly every male person in his life, from his father to his school peers, consider him to be insufficient, to be less than a man, simply because he is gay. Finally, Helena's statement on prayers and grace reflects her rational understanding that her pursuit of Demetrius's love may be for naught when all is said and done; given their respective sexual identities, one of them being gay the other straight, Timothy cannot but know that the same outcome is likely as regards his unrequited love for Jonathon.

The next lyrics Timothy sings are derived from another speech of Helena's and include the plaintive lines: "My ear should catch your voice, my eye your eye," "My tongue should catch your tongue, sweet melody," "My tongue your tongue, were the world mine" (1.1.188-190). What Helena is doing here is bemoaning the fact that Demetrius, the man she desires, instead desires Hermia. In a very real sense, Helena longs to become, to be "translated" into, Hermia, so that Demetrius will desire her in return (1.1.191). Since she knows that such a metamorphosis is impossible, Helena longs instead to be able to speak like Hermia does and to be able to use her eyes like Hermia does in order to make Demetrius desire her. A similar significance accompanies Timothy's use of Helena's lines in this elaborate musical fantasy about Jonathon, the boy

whom he has a profound unrequited desire for. And, just like Helena, Timothy longs to know what he could do to make Jonathon able to desire him in return.

As Timothy continues to sing the lyrics of “Were the World Mine,” the camera focuses its, and therefore the audience’s, attention on Jonathon, who just happens to be stretched out and asleep in a flowery bed nearby, dressed in a tight muscle t-shirt and a



Figure 5: Timothy and Jonathon together in the flowery bed in Timothy’s homoerotic fantasy about Jonathon in *Were the World Mine* (dir. Tom Gustafson, 2008), DVD screengrab.

pair of silver, silky shorts. He joins Jonathon in the bed of flowers and wraps his arm across Jonathan’s chest in a gesture that is at simultaneously protective, affectionate, and homoerotic (see Figure 5). Timothy’s voice grows even more powerful as he sings the chorus of “Were the World Mine,” which includes lyrics that seamlessly merge Titania’s, Oberon’s, and Puck’s lines such as, “Fairies, away,” “Fetch me that flower,” and “I will lead them up and down” from the text of *Midsummer*, and converts them into a soaring melody (2.1.144, 2.1.169, and 3.2.398). And, as is the case with Oberon and Puck in Shakespeare’s playtext, Timothy is sending his henchmen—who are, it should be recalled, his obnoxious classmates, now shirtless and dressed in the same kind of silvery shorts Jonathon is clad in instead of their rugby uniforms—on a quest to find the magical

flower that contains the juice he can use to make Jonathon desire him. The striking sense of irony touched on earlier only increases with recognition of the fact that Timothy's peers, who have done little more than torment him verbally and physically just for being gay in real life, have been transformed from athletes into actual fairies that must do his bidding in this part of Timothy's elaborate fantasy. This, it warrants pointing out, is poetic justice at its homoerotic best.

Before long, Jonathon's eyes snap open and he, too, begins to sing his part of "Were the World Mine." His lyrics, "What angel wakes me from my flowery bed" and "I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again," are a pair of lines that belong to *Midsummer's* Titania (3.1.114 and 3.1.121), whose slumber has been disturbed by Bottom's singing in the play. In Timothy's fantasy about what he would do if the world were his, Timothy has managed to make himself into both the angel who has awakened Jonathon from his sleep, and the gentle mortal Jonathon longs to hear sing again. Appropriating a couple more of Titania's lines into song, Jonathon conveys to Timothy that, "Mine ear is much enamored of thy note," and that, "So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape" (3.1.122 and 123). Since this is Timothy's homoerotic fantasy about Jonathon, it should not be surprising that he imagines Jonathon complimenting his singing ability and confessing that he finds him attractive. Few young gay men like Timothy would want to hear anything less from those they think they desire. Indeed, that Jonathon desires Timothy too, at least in this richly imagined time and space, is made clear when, again in song, Jonathon twice proclaims to Timothy, with the brightest of smiles on his handsome face, "I'll follow thee, I'll follow thee, and make a heaven of hell" (2.1.243). These lyrics, of course, are part of the oath Helena swears to pursue Demetrius after he has cruelly left her to fend for herself in the

dark wood outside Athens, and they are just as indicative of Jonathon's desire for Timothy as they are of Helena's desire for Demetrius. The fantastical implication is that for Jonathon to be with Timothy would be nothing less than a heaven; to be without him, a living hell. What kind of person—gay, straight, or even bisexual for that matter—would not want to hear such a passionate declaration of interest from the one that they desire, even if only in an elaborate, homoerotic fantasy like Timothy's?

At this point in the fantasy sequence, Timothy and Jonathon appear standing very close to one another, face-to-face with mere inches separating them. In duet they perform a reprise of the chorus of "Were the World Mine." So situated, they sing to each other the lyrics, "My ear should catch your voice, my eye should catch your eye, / My tongue your tongue, were the world mine," indicating that both boys long to know what it would take for the other to fall in love with him. Their voices soar, and then fade away in perfect harmony on the final word of the refrain. Jonathon hands Timothy a purple pansy with a long green stem before unseen, but inexorable forces pull him away from Timothy and he disappears into darkness. Thus Timothy's homoerotic fantasy about Jonathon comes to its conclusion, and Timothy finds himself alone in his bedroom once again. Alone but, it must be noted, still holding the purple pansy flower that Jonathon gave to him in the fantasy and thus, although he does not know it yet, empowered in a way that he never has been before, thanks in large measure to the magic of Shakespeare.

Like the one detailed here, all of Timothy's homoerotic fantasies in *Were the World Mine* are extravaganzas of music, song, and dance—but with a particular narrative point. In an interview with Andre Soares, Gustafson explains that the immediate purpose of these "numbers," as he characterizes them, was to "first and foremost tell a story, not

just be a complete escape from reality. They each needed to help move the story forward” (“*Were the World Mine*: Tom Gustafson Interview”). To accomplish this goal, he and his team “treated the musical moments as a part of the script and storyboarded the story elements we wanted to tell” (“*Were the World Mine*: Tom Gustafson Interview”). So grounded, they “worked together on the best way to give them the most visual punch to add excitement and to take the story in those moments to a different level visually” (“*Were the World Mine*: Tom Gustafson Interview”). Their success at these tasks could not be more apparent. Timothy’s “*Were the World Mine*” homoerotic fantasy is a feast for the eyes and the ears; it is also a feel-good, same-sex, romantic confection of the highest order; and, it propels the overall story forward by bringing about the manifestation of the purple pansy flower, the necessary magical instrument Timothy will use later to make Jonathon desire him in real life, in a totally plausible way.

But Timothy’s homoerotic fantasies, the “*Were the World Mine*” example in particular, are more than just pleasurable visual and aural spectacles, and they are more than just narrative devices serving the ends of plot. Insofar as human beings are capable of interacting with film through its images, characters, and stories on an emotional level, the depiction of Timothy’s fantasies also serve important psychological needs for gay viewers. If they have faith in what Robert Lang describes himself as having in “the power and value of fantasy, in the productive sense in which the spectator constructs and is constituted by fantasy as the *mise-en-scène* of desire” when it comes to queer films like *Were the World Mine*, then they just might feel, like Timothy, entitled to find some measure of happiness, and on their own terms, terms that are informed by their sexual identity (*Masculine Interests: Homoerotics in Hollywood Film* 5). More explicitly,

Timothy's fantasies show not just young, but all gay men who screen Gustafson's movie and are receptive to its message, that it is perfectly alright to fantasize about other males; that, if it is something they desire in their heart of hearts, it is normal, liberating even, to envision a romantic love story for themselves with someone who happens to be of the same sex.

Following his return from fantasy to reality, Timothy soon realizes that, when he squeezes the purple pansy flower, it will spray the Cupid's Love Juice he made into the eyes the person standing in front of him. Since, as in *Midsummer*, this juice has the power to "make or man or woman madly dote / Upon the next live creature that it sees," the individual so affected will desire the one who wields the flower (2.1.171-172). Timothy wastes no time in using the flower on Jonathon who, after wiping the Cupid's Love Juice out of his eyes and then seeing Timothy, immediately declares his love for Timothy and they quickly become the committed boyfriends Timothy has always wanted them to be. At this point in *Were the World Mine*, the stage is set for havoc to reign supreme, only in this instance the havoc is entirely homoerotic in nature rather than heteroerotic as in Shakespeare's *Midsummer*. Over the course of a single night, Timothy, in true Puck-like form, races around the town of Kingston on his bicycle, spraying his Cupid's Love Juice into the eyes of everyone he comes across, causing them to madly desire the next person they see; in all cases, this individual happens to be someone of the same gender. In the end, it is Ms. Tebbit, like Oberon in Shakespeare's play, who steps in and brings a halt to all of the excessive romantic madness that Timothy has caused with his indiscriminate use of the purple pansy flower and the potent Cupid's Love Juice it conceals.

During the latter part of the senior class performance of *Midsummer* at Morgan Hill Academy, Ms. Tebbit hands him the source of all the trouble and tells him, “Free will must be restored,” meaning, of course, that people have to be allowed to act of their own accord when it comes love; they are not meant to be the subjects of a supernatural force that is beyond their control or their consent. Timothy takes the flower from his teacher reluctantly, realizing he has no other choice, then, as Puck, he turns his attention to his beloved Jonathon who, as Lysander, is asleep on the “dank and dirty ground” of the stage-forest nearby (2.2.81). While running his fingers through Jonathon/Lysander’s hair, Timothy, in song, tells his “gentle lover” that he will apply the needed antidote to Jonathon/Lysander’s eyes. In accord with the narrative of this play-within-a-film, doing so means not only that Lysander will once again desire Hermia instead of Helena, but that Jonathon, too, can go back to being the heterosexual young man he was until Timothy used the Cupid’s Love Juice on him (3.2.448-452). All of a sudden, the thunderstorm raging outside the auditorium at Morgan Hill Academy surges in intensity and, through chinks in the roof, the pouring rain finds its way inside and starts to fall on the actors and the audience alike. As they wipe the wetness from their faces, all are restored to their former, heterosexual selves. The world, in other words, has been set back on its natural course. For one last time, Timothy, still in character as Puck, kneels next to his beloved Jonathon/Lysander. “Goodbye,” he says sadly as he gazes into his mystified former boyfriend’s eyes. Then he retreats backstage and into Ms. Tebbit’s open arms.

With their capacity for identification and empathy, individual audience members may well be as brokenhearted as Timothy is at having to give Jonathon up by returning his full agency to him. And, like Timothy, viewers of Gustafson’s film are, at this

junction, left to believe that the love Timothy and Jonathon shared really was no more than an extended midsummer night's dream for Timothy that has now ended. Philosopher Colin McGinn, in *The Power of Movies: How Screen and Mind Interact*, describes the familiarity that many have acquired well into the second century of the existence of the cinema "with that sense of entrancement that accompanies sitting quietly in the pierced darkness of the movie theatre. The mind seems to step into another sphere of engagement as the images on the screen flood our receptive consciousness. We are *gripped*" (4). So entranced, so gripped, so taken by his story, viewers want Timothy to find love, and they want him to find that love with Jonathon.

But, at its heart, *Were the World Mine*, like Shakespeare's *Midsummer*, is a story about romantic wish fulfillment of the highest order. So the thought that the boys' relationship is over lasts only until Jonathon joins Timothy in his dressing room, grabs him by the shoulders and turns him around, then kisses him full on the lips. "You were unbelievable tonight," Jonathon tells Timothy when he is finished kissing him. An incredulous Timothy looks at Jonathon and stammers, "Uh, don't you, don't you feel," but Jonathon quickly reassures him, "I feel like myself." After receiving a round of exuberant accolades from their friends for their performances as Puck and Lysander, Timothy and Jonathon are left alone and gazing into one another's eyes until a smiling, joyful Timothy leans over and kisses Jonathon, *his* boyfriend, still. In that glorious moment, it can be understood that *Were the World Mine* has given audiences a story not of a Jack having his Jill, but a story of a Jack having his Jack; a story that has, for far too long, been waiting to be told. The fact that *Midsummer* is the locus around which this happens is extraordinary, and it can be hoped that *Were the World Mine* is a sign of

things to come as regards future representations of male homoeroticism in Shakespearean drama onscreen.

Notes

¹ For invaluable insight on the Vitagraph Company of America, see Judith Buchanan, *Shakespeare on Silent Film: An Excellent Dumb Discourse*, 105-146. Buchanan discusses the 1909 black-and-white silent film of *Midsummer* specifically on pages 130-137.

² The term sodomitical is used here in the manner Alan Bray uses it in his illuminating work to describe a concept that had multiple competing meanings, including buggery, debauchery, rape, incest, bestiality, drunkenness, and traitor against king and country. See Chapter One of Bray's *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*, 13-32, and his article "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," in *Queering the Renaissance*, 40-61; esp. 40-42.

³ See Garner 47-63; Crewe 148-151; Smith 199-200; Traub, *Desire and Anxiety* 107; Goldberg 110, 149, and 275n8; Traub, "The (In)Significance of 'Lesbian' Desire" 62-83; Miller and Román 169-188; Green 369-397; Traub, *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* 36-76; Sinfield, 68-85; Little, Jr., 207-236; and Rambuss, 234-244.

⁴ The Hollywood Production Code is also known as the Hays Code, named after the Catholic Will H. Hays, the motion picture industry's chief censor at the time. The code was implemented in 1930 and remained in force until 1968. It was replaced by the rating system of G, PG, PG-13, R, and X still current today.

⁵ Max Reinhardt, dir., *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. DVD. All references to Reinhardt's *Midsummer* are to this production. It is also important to note that Reinhardt was assisted in his directorial duties on the film by William Dieterle, whose name is largely overshadowed by that of Reinhardt. For an outstanding, comprehensive history of Reinhardt's *Midsummer*, see Chapter 1 of Jackson, 12-69. See also MacQueen's lengthy, but remarkably revealing, article on the evolution of the film.

⁶ Peter Hall, dir., *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. DVD. All references to Hall's *Midsummer* are to this production.

⁷ Adrian Noble, dir., *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. DVD. All references to Noble's *Midsummer* are to this production.

⁸ This and all subsequent citations of the text of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, are from the play as it appears in *The Norton Shakespeare, Based on the Oxford Edition*, Second Edition, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, et. al., 839-896.

⁹ See Greenblatt, et. al., *The Norton Shakespeare*, n9.

¹⁰ Williams, 257. It is important to note that Williams's comments are about Noble's stage production of *Midsummer* rather than the film. But given that the film mimics the stage version in nearly every way, it is reasonable to suppose Williams's remarks would apply to both.

¹¹ Michael Hoffman, dir., *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Kevin Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer, Rupert Everett, Stanley Tucci, Calista Flockhart, and Christian Bale, perfs., Fox Searchlight Pictures, 1999. All references to Hoffman's *Midsummer* are to this production.

¹² Everett, it should be noted in the present context, is himself an openly gay actor who came out of the closet well over twenty years ago.

¹³ In a minor continuity lapse, Hoffman and his team do not change Philostrate's line so that it references Monte Athena where the film is set rather than Athens where Shakespeare's play takes place.

¹⁴ See A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. Perhaps the most (in)famous critique of the Bradleyan method of character criticism Rothwell accuses Hoffman of engaging in is L.C. Knights' *How Many Children had Lady Macbeth?: An Essay in the Theory and Practice of Shakespeare Criticism*. Kenneth Burke, the noted American literary theorist and rhetorician, also took issue with Bradleyan character criticism. See his "Othello: An Essay to Illustrate a Method" in the volume *Kenneth Burke on Shakespeare* edited by Scott L. Newstok, 65-100.

¹⁵ Other scholars who have commented on Hoffman's *Midsummer* without mentioning anything about the male homoeroticism that is documented in the present study include: Rothwell 251-253, Buchanan 138-145, Hindle 130-135, Greer and Widdicombe 50-54, and Lanier 154-172.

¹⁶ Tom Gustafson, dir., *Were the World Mine*, Tanner Cohen, Wendy Robie, Judy McLane, Jill Larson, Zelda Williams, Ricky Goldman, and Nathaniel David Becker, perfs., Speak Productions and Wolfe Video, 2008, DVD. All references to Gustafson's *Were the World Mine* are to this production.

¹⁷ This is an actual edition of the play, complete with a foreword by Reinhardt, published in 1935 by Grosset & Dunlap Publishers (famous for bringing out books in the *Hardy Boys*, the *Nancy Drew*, and the *Bobbsey Twins* series) to coincide with The Warner

Brothers production of *Midsummer*. At the Antiquarian Booksellers' Association of America website, a "near fine" copy of this now rare book is listed for sale at the price of \$350.00. <<http://www.abaa.org/books/252926330.html>>, accessed 20 November 2011. The specificity of this particular volume and its inclusion in *Were the World Mine* makes for a fascinating intertextual reference on Gustafson's part to Reinhardt's film.

CHAPTER 3

SAY HOW I LOVED YOU: SCREENING THE MALE HOMOEROTICS OF *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

Tempestuous relations between Christians and Jews. The problematics of usury in a Christian and emergent capitalist society. Female agency, and the lack thereof, in a patriarchal world. Love, money, and family as influences on, as well as the determiners of, marriage choices. Contractual, moral, and ethical obligations. True justice versus self-righteousness. The state in opposition to the individual, the individual in opposition to the state. The conflicts that propel *The Merchant of Venice* derive from a potent mixture of all of the dramatic motifs, elements, and themes noted here. Furthermore, what with the prominence Shakespeare gives to the relationship between the characters of Antonio and Bassanio, male homoeroticism demands addition to the foregoing list. Considering such aspects, it is little wonder that this play has enjoyed popular and critical success since it was first performed on the public and private stages of early modern London in the late sixteenth century.

Merchant has experienced a comparable popularity in its cinematic and televisual incarnations. Kenneth S. Rothwell lists a total of twelve productions of the play having been shown in movie theaters or broadcast on television during the twentieth century and the first years of the new millennium, ranging from a ten-minute, silent, black-and-white film made in 1908 by the Vitagraph Studios Film Company to 2004's sumptuous, full-length feature, *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice*, written and directed by Michael Radford (*Il Postino*, 1994), and starring an impressive roster of accomplished, well-established, and up-and-coming stars like Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons, Joseph Fiennes,

and Lynn Collins (351).¹ A number of foreign films of the play, including those from Italy, France, Germany, and New Zealand, as well as a substantial quantity of British television adaptations of it, have also appeared in due course.

Despite the wealth of stage, cinematic, and television productions of *Merchant*, only one, Radford's faithful and lavish big-screen effort, fits within the parameters of the present study.² Having been created in the twenty-first century, Radford's *Merchant* is quite sympathetic to the male homoerotic potentialities inherent in its source text where the characters of Antonio and Bassanio are concerned. Indeed, the movie is demonstrably aware of the insights queer scholarship and its practitioners have contributed to the study of Shakespearean drama since its advent some twenty-five years ago.³ And, although this facet of Radford's *Merchant* has been touched on already in two critical pieces as of this writing, the purpose of this chapter is to explore in more depth the visual representation of male homoeroticism in the director's truly outstanding production of one of the Bard's more problematic romantic comedies.⁴ The guiding argument here is that Radford, as with Shakespeare before him, fully invested his *Merchant* with a rich and believable male homoerotic ethos that operates throughout all but the very last moments of this vital and important film.

Immediately following the brilliant, informational collage of scenes that make plain the anti-Semitism of fanatical Christians which marks the opening of Radford's *Merchant*, Antonio is seen as he is in attendance at an evening celebration of Mass at an open-air church somewhere in Venice. As the priest, bearing an incense burner, steps away from him, Antonio raises his black cap, which he is holding respectfully in his gloved hands, to the level of his lips in a gesture of obedience and devotion to the

Christian faith, its God, and His representatives on Earth who are officiating at the service.⁵ This Antonio is a middle-aged man, and all the more handsome for that fact. Gray hair, mixed in generous amounts with brown, covers his head and beard, while deep lines are etched into his face, particularly around his eyes. The overall impression Antonio gives off is one of almost overwhelming care; it is as if the cliché “he has the weight of the world on his shoulders” is all-too true for him. It is difficult not to feel compassion for him, not to feel the desire to comfort him in some way. From this perspective his “to-be-looked-at-ness” is not of an overtly sexual nature, but it is no less compelling or, indeed, erotic.⁶ He is without doubt a very appealing, father-figure type of man, at least where looks, no matter how superficial a barometer of the true nature of a person, or their screen equivalents, are concerned.

Radford intercuts scenes of the performance of the Mass, at which Antonio’s business acquaintances, Salerio (John Sessions) and Solanio (Gregor Fisher), among a number of others, are also in attendance, with those featuring three carnival-masked men who are obviously elsewhere out-and-about for the purpose of enjoying the sensual delights the city of Venice has to offer, including its famed courtesans, climbing into a gondola that begins to make its way along the darkened canal. In due course this boat passes by the open-air church where Antonio sees it skirting through the water nearby. He peers closely at the occupants of the swiftly-moving ship, and only then does the expression of care on Antonio’s face soften. It is quite evident that Antonio is happy to see at least one of the people in the gondola. That person lifts his carnival mask and then greets the merchant by saying, “Antonio?” It is almost as if this obviously younger man is surprised, but not at all unhappy, to have come across Antonio in this accidental way.

Even so, the younger man looks something like a child having been caught doing something naughty by an elder. But if this young man has indeed been caught, so to speak, red-handed, doing something he is not supposed to be doing or going somewhere he is not supposed to be going, Antonio hardly seems bothered by the offense. In fact, Antonio greets the younger man by speaking the name “Bassanio” (Joseph Fiennes), and then he smiles in a way that indicates his genuine happiness at their seeing one another so unexpectedly.

It is clear at this point in the film that these two men, Antonio and Bassanio, know and hold each other in high regard. It is even more significant that it is Bassanio—another male—who allows Antonio, if only for a moment or two, to forget his cares long enough to smile at the younger man. Bassanio makes Antonio feel happy, and perhaps Bassanio also reminds Antonio of his own youthful exploits. He may understand all too well that Bassanio must soon give up the excessive joys of the young in exchange for taking on the responsibilities of adulthood, as he himself once did. That might explain why Antonio’s expression turns rueful as Bassanio drinks deeply from a goblet of wine and offers a silent toast to Antonio before the gondola glides away into the night. The growling thunder of an approaching storm is heard, Antonio glances up at the lowering sky, and only then does he reluctantly turn his attention back to the ongoing Mass.

Antonio’s next appearance finds the merchant pacing around his Venetian palazzo with a brooding look on his face while Salerio and Solanio eat a meal at the dining table set at the center of the room, a meal that Antonio is unable to touch in his distracted state of mind. “In sooth, I know not why I am so sad,” Antonio confides to his companions (1.1.1).⁷ “It wearies me,” Antonio continues as Salerio and Solanio exchange glances,

“you say it wearies you, / . . . And such a want-wit sadness makes of me / That I have much ado to know myself” (1.1.2 and 6-7).⁸ Arthur L. Little describes this speech, one that opens the play but not, as has been detailed above, Radford’s film, as part of what he terms Shakespeare’s “broader challenge to heteronormativity,” a challenge that he finds evident in *Merchant* (“Rites” 217). He goes on to make the point that Antonio is not merely sad; he is in mourning. The way Irons plays Antonio finds accord with Little’s insights; he does indeed seem like a man given over entirely to grieving the loss of something he held particularly dear. Antonio, according to Little, “mourns the impending loss of Bassanio,” and he

mourns how his own culturally unsanctioned desires [for Bassanio], those of same-sex intimate friendship, push him outside the presumptions of what increasingly in the early modern culture becomes *the* civil institution, *the* institution of valuation and belonging; he mourns because he sees the institution of heterosexual marriage working not only to displace but to replace same-sex communing. (“Rites” 216)

Unquestionably, the important, psychoanalytically-oriented work of both Janet Adelman and Coppélia Kahn supports the assertions Little makes here. Adelman makes the case that “Shakespeare explores male identity and friendship felt as necessarily prior to marriage,” hence we, represented by characters like Bassanio in *Merchant*, “do not move directly from family bonds to marriage without an intervening period in which [their] friendships with same-sex friends help us to establish our independent identities” (75). Put in other words, same-sex friendship proves a, if not the, crucial factor in the early psychological and emotional development of human beings, a development that does

not—indeed, cannot—reach its ultimate manifestation absent a heterosexual marital union. Along similar lines, Coppélia Kahn writes that in “Shakespeare’s psychology, men first seek to mirror themselves in a homoerotic attachment . . . and then to confirm themselves through difference, in a bond with the opposite sex—the marital bond” (106). The larger point of the insights Little, Adelman, and Kahn offer here is that, while homoerotic relationships like that Antonio and Bassanio share with one another are acceptable, they must be set aside in order for either man to reach his full potential. That means, however, as Little explains so poignantly, that Antonio’s entire world, complete and fulfilling with same-sex intimate friendship at its center, is falling apart around him because of this unstoppable institutionalization of heterosexual marriage as the cornerstone of human existence. But it warrants pointing out that, in both Shakespeare’s and Radford’s *Merchants*, Antonio does not give Bassanio up without the proverbial fight. And it is arguable whether or not Antonio really gives Bassanio up at all by the time the last line of Shakespeare’s play is uttered and the end credits of Radford’s film roll.

Meanwhile, Antonio’s two business acquaintances speculate that Antonio’s sadness is caused by the uncertain status of Antonio’s various commercial ventures, all of which are dependent on trading ships still at sea and, thus, are subject to the whims of nature and fate. While Salerio and Solanio are discussing this possibility, they are oblivious to the fact that Antonio ignores them and stops pacing long enough to look through the large, multi-paned, picture-windows of the house. Doing so, he spies a gondola with three young men plus the pilot in it making its way through the canal outside. Disdainfully glancing back at Salerio and Solanio, Antonio shakes his head and

says, “Believe me, no,” and thus denies with some asperity that his cares have anything to do with his ventures in trade (1.1.41). Undeterred, Solanio suggests that Antonio is in love and then both he and Salerio erupt into raucous laughter over such a prospect. A now obviously irritated Antonio’s response to his friends’ intimation is a vehement, “Fie, fie, fie” (1.1.46). This retort comes quickly from Antonio, perhaps a little too quickly, indicating that Salerio and Solanio may be closer to the truth with their supposition than Antonio wants to admit, at least not to them.

The question becomes, then, with whom is Antonio in love? Radford soon makes it clear that it is Bassanio whom Antonio loves. Ironically, immediately after denying being in love with anyone, Antonio turns to look out through the glass again, only to fix his gaze on the young, dashing, and presently unmasked, Bassanio who, at that moment, happens be standing with his friends Graziano (Kris Marshall) and Lorenzo (Charlie Cox) in a gondola that is approaching Antonio’s residence through one of Venice’s ubiquitous canals. Though certainly a logical cinematic move given both the text and the subtext of Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, Laury Magnus considers this part of the overall scene to be the result of what she terms a questionable “visual oversimplification” on the part of director and screenwriter Radford (111). For her, the manner in which the film presents Antonio’s “glimpse from the casement window of his beloved Bassanio” reveals one of the play’s key mysteries—the exact nature of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio—too early because, for viewers still trying to figure things out for themselves, it explicitly links Antonio’s “sadness and its most likely cause; we see it emanating from what his eyes have lit upon and cannot have,” which is, of course, Bassanio himself (111). It seems that Magnus would prefer audiences to be convinced that Antonio’s sadness

emanates from nothing more than the everyday travails of the “Renaissance venture capitalist” she characterizes Antonio as being for a longer period of time than Radford allows with what she basically, thinks of as Radford’s “dumbing down” of the original Shakespearean narrative logic (111).

Setting aside her quibble over Radford’s timing, Magnus’s point is marred in the end by its heterosexist assumption that Antonio “cannot have” Bassanio in any sense other than sexless, platonic friendship; Shakespearean criticism informed by queer theory as the present work is disputes such a conclusion. In fact, the rightness of what can be considered the unabashedly homoerotic and desire-filled representation of Antonio and Bassanio’s relationship Radford divulges visually in these moments of his film is only confirmed by the fact that Antonio’s eyes never waver from Bassanio who, with his fashionable cape, his left leg crooked at the knee, and his left foot perched confidently on the rim of the boat as if he owns it, makes a strikingly virile and sexy figure astride the swiftly-moving craft. Posed so, it is no wonder that Antonio does not want to look away from Bassanio. The way Radford’s camera lens focuses on Antonio drinking Bassanio in with his eyes suggests that Antonio’s yearning for Bassanio extends well beyond business or friendship and into the realm of the romantic and the sexual.

Surrounded as they are by attendants in the house after his arrival there, Antonio soon leads Bassanio from the dining area and into a large bedroom nearby filled with ornate furnishings where they can, presumably, have the privacy they need to speak to candidly with one another. Each moves to opposite sides of the room of their own accord; an elaborately-carved four-poster bed separates them. Situated as such, Antonio coaxes Bassanio to unfold himself with the words, “tell me now . . . / That which today you

promised to tell me of” (1.1.119 and 121). At first, Bassanio seems reluctant to reveal to Antonio whatever it is he has already agreed to divulge to the merchant prior to this meeting. Bassanio opens his mouth to speak, but no sound escapes from him. Restlessly, he takes his gloves off and tosses them onto the bed, still without saying a word. Then Bassanio gives Antonio a brief, rather impish smile. In time, he spreads his arms out with his palms up in a gesture of surrender and begins to confess: “’Tis not unknown to you, Antonio, / How much I have disabled mine estate,” he admits (1.1.122-123). He goes on to say that his only concern at the moment is “to come fairly off from the great debts / Wherein my youth, something too prodigal, / Hath left me gaged” (1.1.127-130). Here, Bassanio has, as he makes plain to Antonio, spent the bulk of his money and is trying to figure out how he can pay back his obligations to his creditors. Bassanio attributes the profligate waste of his fortune to a lack of maturity, wisdom, and foresight. Nevertheless, he is determined to make things right once and for all. In these moments, Bassanio comes across as an errant child who has, no doubt, been down the road of excess more than once, yet still hopes for forgiveness—and possible further assistance—from Antonio.

Beyond his words, Bassanio’s actions as he speaks the lines cited above are just as important in the present context. While unburdening himself of his transgressions with Antonio, Bassanio removes his cape, tosses it aside, then lies down and stretches his legs out along the length of Antonio’s bed as if the bed belongs to him, too, and he has every right to make himself at comfortable in it. And Bassanio certainly makes a fetching sight sprawled across Antonio’s bed the way he is; many a gay man would not turn down an invitation to join him if it were offered by Bassanio. Antonio, meanwhile, raises no objections whatsoever to Bassanio being in his bed. It is almost as if Bassanio’s presence

there is a common enough occurrence that it warrants no special comment from either of them. Setting aside the fact that Shakespeare's playtexts are notorious for their lack of stage directions, it must not be overlooked that Radford places this important scene in, specifically, Antonio's bedroom. This is, furthermore, a location that is not even indicated in the actual words that form the conversation that Antonio and Bassanio have in these moments in the film, so it can only be a deliberate choice on the part of Radford and his colleagues. Regardless, the bedroom setting suggests the physically and emotionally intimate nature of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. Bedrooms have, after all, long been understood as places where couples retire to in order to have the privacy in which to engage in sexual congress with one another.⁹ Just because they are two men does not mean that Antonio and Bassanio would never do the same as their heterosexual counterparts. Erotic encounters in Antonio's bedroom are very nearly a surety for them given their seemingly mutual love and desire for each other that is evidenced not just in this scene but, except for the very end, throughout the majority of Radford's *Merchant*.

Situated as they are in the privacy of Antonio's bedroom, the merchant smiles at Bassanio with obvious, knowing affection when Bassanio castigates himself for the spendthrift ways that have put him in serious financial difficulty. Antonio seems not in the least disturbed by all that Bassanio is revealing. Perhaps Antonio, in his long-ago younger days, struggled through difficult monetary circumstances because of his own bad judgment; perhaps, too, Antonio was lucky enough to have an older male mentor who loved him and helped him through that rough patch of his life, and now it is his turn to do the same for someone who finds himself in similar circumstances. Or perhaps there was a

time when Antonio was forced to be completely self-reliant and had to figure out how to make manifest his own economic security and thus knows exactly how difficult doing so can be for a young man like Bassanio. Regardless of Antonio's motivations for the unconditional acceptance he offers the younger man, Bassanio has definitely turned to the right person for assistance.

Bassanio continues to entreat Antonio with:

. . . To you, Antonio,
I owe the most in money and love,
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburden all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe. (1.1.130-134)

Bassanio, as these lines make clear, is indebted to Antonio for at least two reasons. The first of these is because Antonio has, apparently, provided Bassanio with financing for Bassanio's endeavors in the past, and Bassanio has not yet been able to repay that money in its entirety. The second is because of the fact that Antonio loves him and, that being the case, Bassanio owes Antonio his love in return. Following such a preamble, Antonio calmly says, "I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it," meaning he wants to know how Bassanio intends to achieve solvency (1.1.135). Having said this, Antonio walks to the head of his bed, fiddles for a moment or two with the door of a tall cabinet situated next to it, turns to Bassanio and adds, ". . . if it stand as you yourself still do," then he reaches out and cups Bassanio's chin in the palm of his hand before continuing with, "Within the eye of honour, be assured / My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions" (1.1.136-139). From Antonio's perspective, Bassanio has not shamed

himself in the least because of his carelessness with money. In fact, Antonio may well enjoy Bassanio's dependence on him. The larger point is that Antonio remains supportive of Bassanio regardless.

But it warrants noting that Antonio's response to Bassanio and the predicament Bassanio has managed to get himself into goes beyond the casual acceptance of this reality. Antonio is willing to offer to Bassanio all the wealth he has access to via his own assets or his credit, his non-material assistance if it is required, and, above all, his very *self* so that Bassanio can put himself into a better position in life. Borrowing an apropos phrase from elsewhere within both Shakespeare's and Radford's *Merchants*, Antonio is prepared to "give and hazard all he hath" for Bassanio (2.7.9). Even so, this is an extraordinary kind of commitment for Antonio to make to Bassanio, particularly if their relationship is only a platonic one. If, however, their relationship is a romantic and an intimate one, if they are, indeed, lovers, then what Antonio is willing to sacrifice for Bassanio makes more sense.

Encouraged by Antonio's response so far, Bassanio rises to his knees in the bed and begins to tell Antonio about the rich heiress, Portia. Antonio peers up at and intently watches Bassanio as he speaks. After mentioning the array of suitors who have already traveled to Belmont in order to court Portia, and those who are sure to do so in the future, suitors he could never hope to compete with, given his squandered fortune, Bassanio declares: "O my Antonio, had I but means / To hold a rival place with one of them, / . . . / That I should questionless be fortunate" (1.2.173-174, and 176). The first three words of this pronouncement, "O my Antonio," deserve comment since, by using them, Bassanio lets it be known that, in some vital, tangible way, Antonio belongs to him and him alone.

The strong note of possession in this phrase is unmistakable. Furthermore, Antonio registers no problem with being so claimed by Bassanio; he seems, in fact, totally content to be Bassanio's Antonio. The dynamic at work here in the interaction between Antonio and Bassanio in the early part of Radford's *Merchant* can be more fully understood by taking into account the groundbreaking work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Alan Bray and, finally, David Bergeron. Sedgwick was, of course, the first scholar to bring the term homosocial out of its disciplinary closet when she explained that homosocial

is a word occasionally used in history and the social sciences, where it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with "homosexual," and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from "homosexual." In fact, it is applied to such activities as "male bonding," which may, as in our society, be characterized by intense homophobia, fear and hatred of homosexuality.

(1)

Sedgwick adds that to link homosociality with erotic desire, then, "is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual—a continuum whose visibility, for men, in our society, is radically disrupted" because of homophobia, or the irrational fears associated with homosexuals and homosexuality (1-2). What Sedgwick means with these statements is that relationships between men in the present historical period function on a plane that *can* encompass both the social and the sexual—as opposed to one necessarily without the other—despite the disruption of the homophobia that has been such a prevalent aspect of culture since the mid-nineteenth century. Almost the exact same kind of homosociality informed relationships between

men during the early modern period in which Shakespeare lived and worked; the major difference was the absence of homophobia, at least as that concept, in its specificity, operates in the world today as the major impediment to the open acceptance and manifestation of male homoeroticism, let alone male homosexuality, in their fullest forms.

Meanwhile, as Alan Bray details, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century distinction between the homosocial and the homosexual finds a striking correlate in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century distinction between the male friend and the sodomite. According to Bray, the idea of sodomy in early modern England

covered more hazily a whole range of sexual acts, of which sexual acts between people of the same sex were only a part. It was closer, rather, to an idea like debauchery. But it differed more fundamentally also in that it was not only a sexual crime. It was also a political and a religious crime and it was this that explains most clearly why it was regarded with such dread . . . (41)

The dread Bray references here is, in the present historical moment, associated with male homosexuality as opposed to sodomy per se; furthermore, contemporary homosexuality, unlike sodomy in Renaissance England, is no longer, in the main, considered a political or a religious crime, although it certainly remains a grievous sin in many faith traditions. On the other hand, the concept of male friendship in Shakespeare's age encompassed "an image of intimacy between men in [that was in] stark contrast to the forbidden intimacy of homosexuality" or sodomy (42). Male friendship, like that shared by Antonio and Bassanio in both Shakespeare's playtext and Radford's film of *Merchant*, "points to that

network of subtle bonds amongst influential patrons and their clients, suitors, and friends at court” (42). As Bray explains, these kinds of male friendships allowed for—indeed, demanded even—a range of physical intimacies between the two parties that included embraces, kisses, and, most significantly perhaps, the sharing of a bed (42-43). This kind of closeness between two men “was expected to be matched by an equivalent emotional bond” that kept the couple together, as it were (44). Antonio and Bassanio, in other words, are Shakespeare’s dramatic representation of the kind of intimate male friends Bray takes such pains to describe in his work. But, since the markers of male friendship during the early modern period could be the same as those associated with the heinous crime of sodomy, distinguishing between the two with anything approaching historical accuracy has proven to be problematic for scholars in all disciplines. The larger point is that men of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras were able to behave toward one another in ways that, unlike the today, were socially and culturally acceptable, encouraged even, whether that meant hugging or kissing one another, sleeping in the same bed together, or expressing their love for one another—no matter how platonic—in the most passionate of terms.

It warrants noting that a number of actual historical examples of the use of ardent language between males in early modern England present themselves as analogues to Bassanio’s enunciation of the phrase, “O my Antonio” in Shakespeare’s and Radford’s *Merchants*. One of these examples is also Shakespearean and it appears in the first line of Sonnet 126, which reads: “O thou my lovely boy” (*The Norton Shakespeare* 1989, 1). Of course, in this instance, either a homosocial or a homoerotic interpretation of this initial phrase depends on acceptance of the related ideas that the speaker of the *Sonnets* is

Shakespeare himself and that he wrote the majority of the poems to a young man who has yet to be conclusively identified. However, an entire well-documented cache of further examples involving two prominent men who lived in Shakespeare's time is to be found in the letters of no less a figure than King James I. Scholars have conjectured for some time that James had emotional and sexual relationships with a number of his male favorites, one of whom was George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham. In fact, according to David Bergeron, by 1615, "Buckingham became James's last and greatest lover" (98). One of James's letters to Buckingham begins with the following sentence: "Alas, sweet heart, thy letter yesternight made my heart to bleed" which, if nothing else, testifies to the strong romantic feelings James had for Buckingham (175). Most of Buckingham's letters to James begin with the affectionate salutation, "My dear Dad and Gossip" (179ff), which more than suggests that Buckingham reciprocated James's feelings for him. Thus, in a manner similar to Antonio's seeming contentment with being Bassanio's Antonio, it can be surmised that the speaker of Shakespeare's *Sonnets* is quite content "having" a lovely boy to immortalize in poetry, while James is content to be Buckingham's "Dad and Gossip," and Buckingham is content to be James's "sweet heart." These relationships exemplify the continuum between the homosocial, the homoerotic, and the homosexual that Sedgwick hypothesized nearly thirty years ago and that Shakespeare and Radford dramatize in their respective *Merchants*.

It is also crucial to note here, too, that Antonio does not seem to be perturbed or jealous about Bassanio's newfound interest in Portia. Antonio takes this development in stride and without any undo angst. Seymour Kleinberg offers pertinent insight here with his explanation that, during the early modern period, all "upper-class men married. Their

duties to property, propriety, and posterity demanded an heir. After that, their romantic predilections were less important socially as long as they were reasonably discreet” (116). There can be no question that Antonio understands the pragmatics of these circumstances and, since Bassanio’s marriage to a woman does not necessarily mean that Bassanio will renounce Antonio and their relationship once he has met, or while he is in the process of meeting, his marital, familial, and societal obligations, Antonio has no reason to feel threatened. He and Bassanio remain, after all, part of a homosocial world in which bonds between men are paramount. But the plain fact is made obvious because of the prominence of Antonio’s sadness; he does feel threatened by Bassanio’s desire to court and marry Portia. Antonio is, in Little’s words, mourning the imminent loss of Bassanio. Beyond mourning, however, Antonio, like a master tactician, is plotting his next move, and it is a move that he hopes will lead to his ultimate triumph over the forces of hegemonic heterosexism that have ensnared his Bassanio.

With a noteworthy intensity of thought, Antonio starts to seriously consider what options are available to him as far as how he may best help Bassanio and, in so doing, to keep Bassanio close to him emotionally in a tangible way. He swallows deeply before saying, with more than a hint of regret in his voice, “Thou knowst that all my fortunes are at sea,” then he swings his legs over the edge of the bed, stands, and slowly begins to walk to the other side of the room (1.1.177). While he is doing so, he adds more detail to his initial statement: “Neither have I money, nor commodity / To raise a present sum” (1.1.178-179). Hearing this, Bassanio, still in Antonio’s bed, looks both guilty and dejected at the same time; guilty for having brought up the subject of his interest in pursuing Portia while being unable to sustain such an enterprise by his own means, thus

placing Antonio into a difficult position, and dejected because Antonio, Bassanio's last resort, cannot help him on account of Antonio's own trading ventures. But then Antonio, while writing a brief communication of some kind on a piece of parchment, unexpectedly gives Bassanio new hope when he tells him to go out and "Try what my credit can in Venice do; / That shall be racked even to the uttermost / To furnish thee to Belmont, to fair Portia (1.2.180-182). Given Antonio's current financial situation, the fact that he is willing to go into a significant amount of debt in order to assist Bassanio in Bassanio's hour of need is extraordinary, but only if Antonio and Bassanio's relationship is purely platonic. Few would be comfortable risking so much, particularly when money is involved, for a mere friend. A lover, however, might well do for his beloved what Antonio decides to do for Bassanio in this scene.

Turning to Joseph Pequigney helps to flesh out the assertions made immediately above. Pequigney explains that "Antonio expresses his love [for Bassanio] primarily through deeds," which include, of course, Antonio's willingness to secure financing on the credit of his name and his reputation that will allow Antonio to fund Bassanio's latest scheme to marry the heiress Portia and, thereby, create a stable monetary future for himself (186). But Pequigney also rather stubbornly insists that Antonio's "love for his friend [Bassanio] is philia instead of eros;" it is, in other words, platonic or affectionate love rather than romantic or sexual love (187). Not unexpectedly, Pequigney bases his argument about the lack of eros in the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio in *Merchant* on his comparison with the very similar relationship the characters of Antonio and Sebastian have with each other in *Twelfth Night*. To that end he points out that, unlike Antonio and Sebastian in the latter play, "[n]either of the Venetian friends ever

makes reference to physical beauty in the other, or even speaks in amorous terms to or about the other . . . Neither do they ever lodge together, let alone keeping exclusively to themselves for months on end without let-up” (187). However, as Pequigney himself points out, the problem here is one of interpreting language in such a way as to be able to accurately differentiate between homosexuality and homosociality. While it is true that neither Antonio nor Bassanio comments on the other’s looks in *Merchant*, nor does it seem as if they have spent an extended amount of time in each other’s exclusive company like Antonio and Sebastian do in *Twelfth Night*, to claim that Antonio and Bassanio’s relationship has never transcended mere friendship is short-sighted. Antonio’s deeds in *Merchant* are just as indicative—if not more so than the words the Antonio of *Twelfth Night* uses in reference to Sebastian—of his erotic passion for Bassanio, and the same can be said for Bassanio as regards his deeds toward Antonio—particularly when, for example, as will be seen below, he leaves his new wife Portia to be at Antonio’s side during the trial over the bond Shylock forces the Venetians to hold.

The insights provided by Sedgwick once again prove useful at this juncture, as well. Recalling that the homosocial ethos of men’s relationships with other men—the fact that whether their association was platonic or romantic, men looked out for the interests of other men—that informed so much of the functioning of early modern English society and that this dynamic is reflected throughout the Shakespearean canon in general and *Merchant* in particular, allows for the understanding that Antonio and Bassanio’s relationship could be as homoerotic as that evidenced between Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* is a real possibility that Pequigney dismisses somewhat too easily in his analysis of the two plays. Furthermore, the language that Antonio and Bassanio speak to

one another includes declarations of possession (“Oh my Antonio”) and love (“... To you, Antonio, / I owe the most in money and love”) that echo those seen in the “real-world” letters of King James I and the Duke of Buckingham discussed above. James and Buckingham, in other words, serve as men who are historical analogues to Shakespeare’s fictional creations Antonio and Bassanio; both exemplify the continuum of erotic possibility in homosocial relationships between men that Sedgwick explicates so brilliantly in her work.

Regardless, Bassanio is completely taken aback by Antonio’s decision to help him. He walks open-mouthed from Antonio’s bed to stand before Antonio. Without saying a word, Bassanio grabs Antonio’s right hand, lifts it to his mouth, and kisses it with his lips. Bassanio then places his own right hand on Antonio’s bearded face so that Antonio’s chin lies between Bassanio’s thumb and forefinger, while his other four fingers rest on the better part of Antonio’s left cheek. Bassanio looks into Antonio’s eyes and proceeds to lean toward the other man; Bassanio is soon kissing Antonio full on the lips. As the kiss occurs, the eyes of both men close while each enjoys the pleasure of their mouths coming together (see Figure 6). Magnus complains that Bassanio bestows the kiss



Figure 6: Bassanio kissing Antonio in Antonio’s bedroom in *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice* (dir. Michael Radford, 2004), DVD screengrab.

“somewhat too knowingly upon Antonio” (114). Perhaps, but, since it was Bassanio who spontaneously initiated the contact, it is clear that he wanted to kiss Antonio and wanted Antonio to kiss him in return. Antonio, furthermore, does not pull away from Bassanio; he appears to welcome Bassanio’s kiss. What makes this moment so extraordinary in the present context is that, in the early twenty-first century West, at least, men do not normally go around kissing members of their own gender on the lips in the way that Bassanio kisses Antonio here unless such men are capable of and interested in engaging in relationships with other men that transcend mere friendship to encompass the romantic, the erotic, and the sexual. In Radford’s *Merchant*, both Antonio and Bassanio fall into this latter category as evidenced by the palpable display of intimacy and affection this kiss represents. Given the homophobia—the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals and the behaviors their sexuality enables them to engage in—that is such a pervasive aspect of society today, men who kiss other men like Bassanio kisses Antonio does risk being branded as deviants, with all the negativity that term implies, from the expected heterosexual norm. However, as the work of Bray shows, such physicality between two male friends like Antonio and Bassanio was not only socially acceptable, but also encouraged by Elizabethan culture at large. Indeed, on this point, Bray writes, “[w]hen two men kissed or embraced, the gesture had the same meaning” as that indicated by their sleeping together; being “someone’s ‘bedfellow’ suggested that one had influence” over another (43, 42). There can be no question but that Antonio has such influence over Bassanio and vice versa.

Indeed, the problem with Radford’s treatment of Antonio and Bassanio in his *Merchant* is, as Bray cautions against doing, one of differentiating accurately between

passionate male friendship and bona fide homosexuality. That being the case, rather than merely showing them kissing one another, would that the director had extended this scene and included images of Antonio and Bassanio actually making love in Antonio's four-poster bed in a manner similar to those Kenneth Branagh made a part of his monumental, full-text, 1996 production, *William Shakespeare's Hamlet*.¹⁰ That film presents a number of brief shots in which Hamlet (Branagh) and Ophelia (Kate Winslet) are clearly seen enjoying each other sexually in a bed almost as large, ornate, and inviting as Antonio's in Radford's *Merchant*.¹¹ There is no more, or less, textual evidence for Hamlet and Ophelia having a physical relationship with one another than there is for Antonio and Bassanio having a similar association in the earlier play, yet Branagh apparently had no qualms as far as interpolating such a relationship from the available information and creating scenes of Hamlet and Ophelia making love in accord with the supposition. Perhaps the next director of *Merchant* will take a similar risk where Antonio and Bassanio are concerned.

As Radford's *Merchant* continues, Antonio, Bassanio, and Shylock are shown as they attempt to come to an equitable agreement about a loan in the privacy of the moneylender's office in the heart of Venice's Jewish ghetto. The negotiations are protracted, and the conversation takes a rather sinister turn when Shylock, in the spirit of "merry sport," puts forth the startling "pound / Of your fair flesh" proposal (1.3.140 and 144-145). Throughout the majority of this speech by Shylock, Bassanio stares longingly at Antonio. But by the time Shylock finishes speaking, Bassanio's face registers nothing but grim horror. He does not want Antonio to be harmed, or worse, killed, because of the absurd scheme Shylock has given voice to. After taking Shylock's measure for several intense moments, Antonio bursts into laughter then announces, "Content, in faith. I'll seal

to such a bond, / And say there is much kindness in the Jew” (1.3.148-149). Hearing Antonio’s acceptance of Shylock’s terms causes Bassanio to erupt in outrage: “You shall not seal to such a bond for me! / I’ll rather dwell in my necessity,” he exclaims (1.3.149-150). The vehemence of Bassanio’s objection brings once more to the fore the depth of Bassanio’s feelings for Antonio. While a friend would not want someone he cares about to place himself in the kind of jeopardy Shylock has proposed Antonio do, a lover could be expected to oppose such a scenario far more vociferously—as Bassanio does indeed do in this case.

If he is moved at all by Bassanio’s protestations, a stoic Antonio does not show it, perhaps wisely considering that Shylock is there observing him and Bassanio. Instead, he tells Bassanio to “fear not man” since, in the course of the next two months, “that’s a month before / The bond expires, I do expect return / Of thrice three times the value of this bond” (1.3.152-155). Thus Antonio, the older and more experienced of the two men, attempts to convince his beloved Bassanio that there is no reason for Bassanio to be at all concerned. Antonio’s business interests, he insists, will resolve themselves in a financially beneficial way long before the loan of three-thousand ducats would need to be paid back to Shylock. Since there is, therefore, no real potential for danger to his person, Antonio does not want Bassanio to worry about him. Bassanio, however, is not so easily convinced by Antonio that all will be well in light of Antonio’s agreeing to Shylock’s terms. In their own way, both Antonio and Bassanio care about and love one another, as the narrative and visual subtext of this interaction between them reveals. All Bassanio can do is watch and listen with growing incredulity as Shylock explains that a pound of flesh taken from Antonio would obtain Shylock little or no good whatsoever. The moneylender

claims, in addition, that such a part of man is “not so estimable, profitable neither, / As flesh of muttuns, beeves, or goats;” thus the pound of flesh proviso is, in truth, no more than a merry sport to him (1.3.161-163). With such a seemingly reasonable explanation, Shylock, like Antonio moments before, tries to convince Bassanio that Antonio cannot possibly come to any real harm because of the odd condition Shylock has attached to the lending of the money Antonio and Bassanio need. But when Antonio tells Shylock that he “will seal unto this bond,” the only thing Bassanio can do is look away from both Shylock and Antonio and stare into blank space (1.3.167). His thoughts can only be spinning around the ramifications, terrible and otherwise, of what has just happened with Antonio’s acceptance of Shylock’s terms.

Clearly Bassanio is feeling torn, guilty, and responsible for what Antonio has just done on his behalf. Someone who does not care for or love another like Bassanio does Antonio, arguably, would not feel much concern once that individual’s immediate selfish aims have been achieved, or are at least one major step closer to being achieved. If he did not realize it before this moment, Bassanio knows now the lengths Antonio will go to because of how deeply Antonio cares for and loves Bassanio in return. In this regard, their relationship is one of reciprocity, if not necessarily one of equal reciprocity, given that Antonio, at this point in their story at least, is risking a great deal more for Bassanio than Bassanio is risking for Antonio.

Later that same night, amid ominous peals of thunder, flashes of lightning, and torrents of rain falling from the darkened sky overhead, Antonio and Bassanio share a hurried embrace on one of the myriad quays of Venice when Bassanio finally arrives and joins Antonio there. Alongside the dock lies the ship filled with richly-liveried sailors

waiting to take Bassanio on board and toward what will become his future if all goes as planned. Bassanio pledges to Antonio that he will “make some speed” on his journey to Belmont and fair Portia. Bassanio does not wish to be parted from Antonio for too long a time. Antonio, however, counsels Bassanio to “stay the very riping of the time; / And for the Jew’s bond, which he hath of me, / Let it not enter in your mind of love (2.8.38-42). Antonio then grasps Bassanio’s left arm with both of his hands in order to keep Bassanio steady as he steps aboard the boat. From these words, it can be understood yet again that Antonio is not troubled at all by Bassanio’s setting off to seek Portia’s hand in marriage; he wants Bassanio to be successful in this enterprise. Antonio could be viewed in the same way that Alan Sinfield describes his character’s namesake at the end of *Twelfth Night*—the Antonio who has learned of his beloved Sebastian’s marriage to the Countess Olivia—as being “delighted with his boyfriend’s lucky break” (66). As such, *Merchant*’s Antonio does not want Bassanio to rush things on account of him and thereby jeopardize his future financial security. It is even more telling that Antonio also insists that Bassanio not worry one bit about the potentially life-threatening agreement Antonio has entered into with Shylock. His exact words on this point are for Bassanio to not let such thoughts enter his “mind of love.”

The question then becomes, what object is Bassanio’s “mind of love” focused on? From a heterosexist perspective, of course, the answer would be Portia, since love relationships between two persons of the same gender are disallowed according to the logic of its paradigms. But it can also be argued that Bassanio’s love is with none other than Antonio and will remain so even in Belmont. Unfortunately, that places Portia in the position of being little more than the means by which Bassanio will attempt to reverse his

squandered fortunes; he may never be able to love Portia in the same way that he loves Antonio. Nevertheless, Antonio tells Bassanio, “Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts / To courtship, and such fair ostents of love / As shall conveniently become you there” (2.8.43-45). Both men must know that, no matter how much attention Bassanio bestows on Portia while he is with her, Bassanio will never be able to keep Antonio, and Antonio’s pound-of-flesh-predicament with all of its attendant danger, very far from his chief thoughts. People, and their dramatic and cinematic representations, like Antonio and Bassanio, tend not to forget about those with whom they are truly in love; especially when that person is in some kind of jeopardy.

Underscoring this idea is the manner in which Bassanio parts from Antonio. As the ship is slowly pulling away from the quay, Bassanio places his gloved left hand to his mouth, kisses his leather-covered fingers, and with a flick of his wrist, he sends the kiss to Antonio. In turn, Antonio catches Bassanio’s air-kiss between both of his own gloved hands, clasps them together tightly, then presses them to his lips. He also closes his eyes as if he and Bassanio are back in Antonio’s bedroom at the palazzo, kissing one another from within the close, warm, and intimate space of their joined bosoms. Antonio is ecstatic to have this singular remembrance of Bassanio before Bassanio departs for Belmont. Bassanio has once again succeeded in making Antonio content and as happy as it is possible for Antonio to be. Thus satiated, Antonio lifts his hand and waves goodbye to Bassanio while the driving rain continues to pour down upon the world and Antonio.

Bassanio’s successful choosing of the right casket, thereby securing Portia—and her fortune—to him, along with Graziano’s declaration that he wishes to be married to Portia’s maid Nerissa at the same time Bassanio is married to Portia, is followed by much

feasting and rejoicing. But these festivities are interrupted by the arrival of an envoy from Venice consisting of Lorenzo, Jessica, and Salerio, bearing the bad news about Antonio's misfortunes. Not long thereafter Bassanio, having read the troubling communication from his beloved Antonio about the merchant's spate of ill luck, remains pacing in circles around one of the many rooms of Portia's mansion with a distressed look on his face. He is upset about what is befallen Antonio; indeed, this development has robbed Bassanio of any and all joy he might have in his betrothal to Portia. Put in different terms, Bassanio's relationship with Antonio is more important at this moment than that he has with his fiancé. When Portia arrives in the room she immediately notes Bassanio's paleness and speculates that Bassanio's distress can only be caused by the death of a "dear friend . . . else nothing in the world / Could turn so much the constitution / Of any constant man" (3.2.244-246). By instinct, Portia knows that whatever it is that has so struck Bassanio with care, it has something to do with someone he deeply loves. Even so, her concern lies with Bassanio and his overall welfare.

A stricken Bassanio begins to explain the nature of his distress with a confession to Portia about how he was in fact enabled to come to Belmont in order to woo her:

I have engaged myself to a dear friend,
Engaged my friend to his mere enemy,
To feed my means. Here is a letter, lady,
The paper as the body of my friend,
And every word in it a gaping wound
Issuing life-blood. (3.2.260-265)

Bassanio's use of the term engaged in this passage proves intriguing. The word can, of course, refer to a bond—legal or otherwise—agreed to by two, or more, parties. It can also signify a betrothal in the marital sense. Invoking this meaning in the present context suggests that Bassanio is as betrothed to Antonio as he now is to Portia. The letter from Antonio may as well be Antonio himself. In its papery form, furthermore, it is not unlike a marriage certificate that symbolizes, as well as validates, the relationship that exists between Antonio and Bassanio. No wonder that all Bassanio wants to do is to staunch the flow of Antonio's precious blood. With the lines above Bassanio also proves to be just as candid with Portia about the actual state of his financial situation as he was with Antonio in the earlier part of the film. Interestingly, like Antonio before, Portia does not chide Bassanio for the profligacy that has left him a destitute gentleman. She, in turn listens to Bassanio speak of his dear friend Antonio with just as much equanimity as Antonio listened to Bassanio speak of Portia when Bassanio talked to Antonio in Venice on the subject of his desire to court the rich heiress.

Once Jessica explains her take on what Antonio's ultimate fate is likely to be based on her understanding of the implacable nature of her father, Shylock, Portia asks Bassanio: "Is it your dear friend that is thus in trouble?," and Bassanio responds with, "The dearest friend to me," in a soft, but steady voice (3.2.290-291). Portia is untroubled by Bassanio's confirmation of what Antonio means to him. In fact, when she hears how comparatively little Antonio actually owes Shylock because of Bassanio, she acts as decisively as Antonio did when Bassanio came to Antonio when he was in need of the funding to pursue Portia. "Pay him [Shylock] six thousand and deface the bond," she declares with a small chuckle; she adds, "Double six thousand, and then treble that, /

Before a friend of this description / Shall lose a hair through Bassanio's fault" (3.2.298-301). Portia is, in fact, practically giddy about the fact that her wealth, which will soon come into Bassanio's possession and management once they are married, is available to be used to dispense with the matter of Shylock's bond and set the world to rights once more.

Turning serious again, Portia asks to hear what Antonio has written in his letter to Bassanio. Antonio's words are as poignant as they are affecting, and Bassanio reads them out loud to Portia, and to Graziano, Lorenzo, Jessica, and Salerio, with no hint of either reluctance or embarrassment. "Sweet Bassanio," Bassanio begins,

my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew forfeit, and, since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure; if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter. (3.2.314-320)

Though not erotic in an overtly sexual sense, Antonio's words are nevertheless intended to seduce Bassanio into leaving Belmont and Portia in order to return to Venice to be with Antonio during what may well be Antonio's final hours on Earth. Indeed, Antonio's emotional manipulation of Bassanio with his choice of words in this letter echoes the speaker's emotional manipulation of the young man in Sonnet 72, "O, lest the world should task you to recite." The third line of this poem presents the following entreaty: "After my death, dear love, forget me quite" (1970, 3). The last thing the speaker wants is to be forgotten by the young man, and by saying the exact opposite, remembrance on the young man's part is what the speaker hopes to effect. Antonio uses the same rhetorical

tactic; if Bassanio's love for Antonio alone does not persuade him to come to Antonio's aid in Venice, may his written communication go unheeded. But, again, the last thing Antonio wants is for Bassanio to leave Antonio to suffer his fate without him. From a visual as opposed to a textual or narrative perspective, it is just as crucial to understand here that, all throughout Bassanio's somber, heartfelt recitation of Antonio's letter, it is never less than clear that Bassanio feels responsible for the terrible predicament in which Antonio now finds himself. The strength of their relationship remains unbroken despite the physical distance between them. And when Bassanio finishes reading Antonio's entreaty, Portia's initial response consists of a mere two words: "O, love" (3.2.321). At one level, this reaction indicates that Portia recognizes the genuine nature of Bassanio's distress and empathizes with him enough to want to comfort him in whatever way she can. Love, Portia seems to feel, ought not to put people through such terrible difficulties, difficulties that are now affecting her, too, via Bassanio. She may also be able to see Bassanio's admirable ability to love other human beings in general given his reaction to Antonio's situation. And she must also know that her relationship with Bassanio will be subject to continued instability for as long as Antonio remains in jeopardy.

With a spirit of generosity that parallels Antonio's generosity to Bassanio earlier in Radford's cinematic narrative of *Merchant*, Portia outright tells Bassanio to, "Dispatch all business and be gone" (3.2.321). Portia wants, as this instruction makes very clear, Bassanio to leave her and return to Venice with all due haste so that he can attempt to rescue his beloved Antonio from the unyielding Shylock. Then Portia makes Bassanio's departure from Belmont and herself dependent on his going to church with her at that very moment and becoming her husband, after which, she insists, he shall "away to

Venice to your friend, / For never shall you lie by Portia's side / With an unquiet soul" (3.2.302-305). In these lines Portia seems to understand that her own happiness rests, in large part, on Bassanio's peace of mind. And unless Bassanio does everything within his power to save Antonio from the fate to which Shylock intends to hold him, Bassanio will never be able to be truly close to Portia given his "unquiet soul." Portia, furthermore, cannot be other than aware of how crucial relationships between men, including, most especially in this instance, that between Bassanio and Antonio, are to her personal circumstances. In point of fact, Lars Engle argues that what Portia actually discerns here is "the potentially homosocial aspect of her marriage to Bassanio," thus she turns "immediately to money, to male disguise, and to the law to protect her status as a principal and to avoid becoming an object of homosocial exchange" (34). To make his case, Engle draws on Sedgwick's paradigm of homosociality, which, in part, is a triangular schema that privileges men's relationships with other men over their corresponding relationships with women and, simultaneously, values women only insofar as what women can do for, or supply to, men; as commodities, to put it more bluntly. Portia uses her vast fortune, usurped masculine attire, and a shrewd understanding of early modern Venetian statute to avoid becoming just such a commodity.

While Portia speaks of the conditions she will impose on Bassanio before he sets off for Venice and his beloved Antonio, Radford and his team supply her words with a corresponding set of complementary images. These include: Portia and Nerissa in full bridal dress walking down the aisle of a church side by side; a priest enfolding the joined hands of Portia and Bassanio within his own; Portia and Bassanio standing next to one another as they are joined in holy matrimony; and, finally, Bassanio and Graziano waving

goodbye to Portia and Nerissa while their boat moves off as it begins the journey to Venice. Of particular interest in this sequence of scenes is the expression on Bassanio's face as he and Portia are being married to one another by the priest. Distracted, Bassanio does not seem to be in the moment of his marriage. Bassanio's thoughts are undoubtedly with Antonio rather than with Portia, suggesting that—and despite the fact that Portia has just become his wife—Antonio is, and will always be, more important to Bassanio. On this point, Sinfield, drawing on the work of Bray, explains that even though “marriage was involved in alliances of property and influence, male friendship informed, through complex obligations, networks of extended family, companions, clients, suitors and those influential in high places” (62). The effects of a male friendship, like that the characters of Antonio and Bassanio share, were, in other words, pervasive and more powerful than the marital bond between a man and a woman. Antonio and Bassanio are obligated to one another through, among other things, Shylock's bond; arguably, they also form an extended familial unit; they are companions, clients, and suitors to each other; and in the respective social, cultural, and economic arenas they inhabit, they are highly influential. It proves only a small wonder then that Bassanio is not focused on his marriage to Portia at this moment in Radford's *Merchant*. Indeed, Radford's cinematic treatment of the late 16th and early 17th century English exaltation of male friendships like that between Antonio and Bassanio highlights the supremacy of such relationships in the intensely homosocial world of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Through Antonio and Bassanio, both Shakespeare and Radford offer audiences a highly visceral dramatic representation of one way that this historical practice of homosocially inflected male friendship may have manifested itself in the early modern world. Antonio and Bassanio appear as

concerned about each other as two very good friends – or lovers – would be; their relationship operates in a way that is completely understandable as opposed to a way that seems alien or abstract because, even four hundred years later, men still act in a similar manner when it comes to other men. What makes their relationship (homo)erotic as opposed to merely homosocial is its intimacy, physicality, and affective intensity – all of which Radford does not shy away from in his cinematic text.

In Venice itself, Antonio's immediate future appears to be bleak indeed after Shylock refuses, once again, to acquiesce to the merchant's pleas for clemency. Seeing how there is no lawful remedy in the present circumstances, Antonio wishes to be left alone and, by extension, to the terrible fate that awaits him because of the bond he signed with Shylock on Bassanio's behalf. In another burst of fatalism, Antonio states, more to himself than anyone else, that these "griefs and losses have so bated me / That I shall hardly spare a pound of flesh / Tomorrow to my bloody creditor" (3.3.32-34). Moments later, he reveals what he most wants to happen before he meets what may very well be his end: "Pray God Bassanio come / To see me pay his debt, and then I care not" (3.3.35-36). As has been shown throughout Radford's *Merchant*, Antonio will settle for nothing less than Bassanio's presence nearby at Antonio's trial, conviction, and likely demise at the end of Shylock's knife. It warrants pointing out again that, for Antonio, Bassanio is the only one who can give him some measure of comfort and happiness; the words he speaks at this point only testify to the veracity of such an insight.

As the hearing before the duke and the magnificoes of the city is about to begin, Antonio looks as sad and melancholic as he did at the start of Radford's *Merchant* prior to his spotting his beloved Bassanio. When Antonio at last sees Bassanio pushing his way

amongst the rowdy crowd packed into the Venetian Senate chambers where the legal confrontation between Shylock and Antonio will take place, the look of relief on his face is palpable. It is, furthermore, punctuated by a brief smile that Antonio allows himself now that Bassanio has arrived to support him in his hour of need. For Antonio, Bassanio is the only one who can give him the kind of comfort and love he needs in the world both of them inhabit.

Not long after his appearance in the crowded chambers, Bassanio comes to Antonio's defense after Shylock tells the court that the reason for his prosecution of the bond involves no more than the "lodged hate" and "certain loathing" he has for Antonio (4.1.59). In response to this declaration, Bassanio tells Shylock, "This is no answer, thou unfeeling man, / To excuse the current of thy cruelty" (4.1.62-63). Bassanio then goes on to debate the moneylender on the concepts of love and hate and what each would, or would not, compel a rational man in thrall to either to do. Antonio, though obviously grateful for Bassanio's intervention, remains the epitome of fatalism; he tells Bassanio, and the court as a whole, not to bother arguing with Shylock. Antonio wants to bring this unpleasant matter to an end since the conclusion is foregone. To him, there is no point in prolonging the inevitable. But Bassanio, determined to not give up on the fight for the man he loves, has a pair of men carry a large, heavy chest into the center of the chambers and place it on the floor directly in front of Shylock. "For thy three thousand ducats," Bassanio spits at Shylock, "here is six" (4.1.83). The lid of the trunk is then thrown open, revealing an enormous pile of coins that causes one and all to gasp.

With the six thousand ducats he is offering to give to Shylock on Antonio's behalf, Bassanio is also making it clear that, to him, Antonio is worth at least twice what

Antonio originally secured for Bassanio on credit in the spirit of willingly sacrificing his purse, person, and his most extreme means for Bassanio. Hence, in a very real sense, Bassanio's putting up the six-thousand ducats for Antonio proves that he, too, is just as willing to risk as much as Antonio was for him prior to Bassanio going off to Belmont. That being the case, the look of astonished anger on Bassanio's face when Shylock refuses to accept the money Bassanio has pledged to give him in order to settle Antonio's bond would wither any other character but Shylock to the bone. Yet Bassanio's protective instincts reach beyond the verbal when Shylock pulls out a long and lethal carving knife from its sheath after insisting that the duke pronounce his judgment on the case at hand; Bassanio pushes, jostles, pleads and otherwise does everything he can to get past the court guards so that he can defend his Antonio, but they do not let him pass. In the aftermath of this happening, the business with the lawyer from Padua the duke sent for is disposed of, bringing Portia and Nerissa, both disguised as young men, into the already tense scene.

Following the justly famous quality of mercy speech by a Portia dressed in the severe black robes of the young lawyer called Balthazar, Portia/Balthazar questions whether or not Antonio is able to discharge Shylock's bond, Bassanio once more jumps into the fray and shouts:

Yes, here I tender it for him in court,

Yea, twice the sum. If that will not suffice,

I will be bound to pay it ten times o'er,

On forfeit of my hands, my head, my heart. (4.1.204-207)

Having made this pronouncement, Bassanio finally breaks free of the court guards, races past Antonio, kneels before the duke, then implores him to “do a great right” even if it means doing a “little wrong,” by which he means that the duke should deny Shylock the bloody judgment he is demanding in accord with the terms of the bond and thereby spare Antonio’s life (4.1.212). Throughout Bassanio’s impassioned entreaty, Antonio is both astonished and grateful for the other man’s efforts. Bassanio’s plea, furthermore, serves to confirm yet again all that he will put at stake for Antonio; this includes not just three-thousand, but the sum of thirty-thousand ducats and, complementing Antonio’s earlier sacrifices for Bassanio, his hands, his head, and his heart. It seems that the love Bassanio bears for Antonio knows no bounds—as evidenced by these avowals. In fact, this entire episode can be understood as being an extended, thoroughly public declaration of Bassanio’s love for Antonio.

Unfortunately, Bassanio’s arguments have no effect on Shylock, who once again refuses to accept the money that has been offered him, preferring instead to cut off a pound of flesh from Antonio’s person. A defeated Antonio begs the magnificoes to make their judgment at last. After conferring with the duke, Balthazar/Portia proclaims, “Why then, this [the determination of the court] it is: / You must prepare your bosom for his knife” (4.1.240-241). With the sentence pronounced, the court bailiffs see to it that the faint, about-to-be-sick Antonio is stripped naked to the waist and seated in an ornate chair in which he will receive the attentions of Shylock’s brutal knife. His lean, bare, and hairless chest gleams almost ethereally in pale relief. The exposure of Antonio’s flesh only accentuates the homoerotic quality of his appearance.

When Balthazar/Portia asks if Antonio has anything to say before the court's judgment is carried out, Antonio resignedly answers with, "But little. I am armed and well prepared" (4.1.260). Though he claims to have little to speak, that little proves to be of great import. First, Antonio requests that Bassanio give him his hand. Bassanio surges forward and holds out his hand to Antonio; Antonio grabs Bassanio's hand and kisses it as he shudders in fear. This is nothing less than an intense physical expression of love for Bassanio on Antonio's part. Antonio slowly, almost reluctantly, pulls away from Bassanio's hand, then looks up at the bent over Bassanio and tells him, "fare you well," before burying his face in the crook of Bassanio's welcoming shoulder (4.1.260). Having composed himself, Antonio continues with, "Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you," then adds:

Commend me to your honourable wife;
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death,
And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
Repent but you that you shall lose your friend
And he repents not that he pays your debt.
For if the Jew do cut but deep enough
I'll pay it instantly with all my heart. (4.1.262-277)

As Antonio talks, Graziano must physically restrain Bassanio from setting Antonio free from the straps holding him to the chair; this Graziano does by wrapping his arms around Bassanio's upper body and keeping him firmly in place. Though undoubtedly frightened,

Antonio's words are heartfelt and filled with emotion. He wants to make sure Bassanio knows how deeply Antonio loves him. Beyond that, Antonio wants Bassanio to speak of Antonio and their love to others in general and Portia in particular. There is, in other words, no need for their relationship to be hidden away in euphemism or silence. Thus it can be understood that Antonio meant what he said when he told Bassanio that he would unlock his purse, person, and most extreme means to and for Bassanio. Dying for Bassanio certainly qualifies as the most extreme means Antonio could use to prove the depth of his love for Bassanio.

Tears running down his cheeks and otherwise being only just able to control himself, Bassanio responds to Antonio with:

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.
I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
Here to this devil [Shylock], to deliver you. (4.1.278-283)

Again, just as Antonio was willing to give all for Bassanio, Bassanio is willing now to give all for Antonio. Indeed, he would forego his wife and marriage, all of his monetary and material possessions, *and* his very existence, if necessary, to spare Antonio from Shylock's vengeance. This seems like far too much for a mere friend to sacrifice for another; a lover, on the other hand, would sacrifice all this and more. And, as Shylock is about to slice into Antonio's breast with his lethal carving knife, Bassanio holds Antonio's head in his hands in order to steady his beloved merchant. With this gesture, it

seems that Bassanio will see to it that Antonio is able to die within the space between Bassanio's arms—a place that he has inhabited so many times before in other, happier circumstances—since Bassanio could not, by the laws of Venice die in Antonio's stead.

Even Balthazar/Portia can see how much Bassanio and Antonio love each other as the two men exchange words and attempt to comfort one another given what is about to happen. Though Radford, making a more powerful impression with visuals than with words, cuts Balthazar/Portia's lines in which he/she insists in an aside that "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer," referring to Bassanio's swearing to give up all for Antonio, the director has Balthazar/Portia drop her eyes to the ground in dejection upon hearing Bassanio's vow to Antonio (4.1.284-285). She cannot be unaware that Bassanio's love for Antonio is stronger than his love for her. Such knowledge may well provide her with the motivation she needs to allow, rather sadistically it seems, Antonio's life to hang in the balance until, quite literally, the very last possible second when she finally screams for Shylock to "Tarry a little," thus stopping the moneylender from slicing into Antonio's bosom and, very likely, killing him in the process (4.1.300). For characters and audiences alike, the drama of these moments is beyond intense.

Having brought the proceedings to a dramatic halt by invoking the exact letter of the law to his/her advantage and Shylock's downfall, Balthazar/Portia demands to know what mercy Antonio can offer Shylock. In a soft voice, Antonio tells the court that he would prefer Shylock not lose all of his wealth as long as the moneylender agrees to allow Antonio to oversee half of the fortune as it is put to the benefit of Jessica and Lorenzo. While he speaks, Bassanio remains steadfast by Antonio's side, holding the still

trembling merchant. For his part, Antonio grasps Bassanio's left forearm with his right hand as he attempts to regain his composure after coming so close to death. The contact between the two men is as intimate as it is affectionate, as caring as it is loving.

After the end of the trial and the duke's dismissal of the court, a relieved and happy Antonio keeps his right hand positioned possessively on Bassanio's back as the two men opportune Balthazar/Portia to accept some kind of a token of their appreciation for his/her masterful handling of Antonio's defense. So situated, Antonio and Bassanio appear very much like a couple that looks, if nothing else, as if they belong together. So united, they are ultimately successful at convincing Balthazar/Portia to take a memento from each of them. He/She requests to have Antonio's gloves, but when he/she reaches for Bassanio's ring, Bassanio objects because it is a wedding ring given to him by his wife and when she put it on his finger, he swore that he should "neither sell, nor give, nor lose it" (4.1.423-439). Balthazar/Portia reluctantly relinquishes her desire for the ring, but once he/she and his/her clerk (the equally disguised as a young man Nerissa) begin to walk away in order to complete their legal business in Venice so that they can return to Belmont posthaste, Antonio interjects with, "My lord Bassanio, let him [Balthazar/Portia] have the ring. / Let his deservings and my love withal / Be valued 'gainst your wife's commandment," an entreaty that, in Radford's film, Portia overhears (4.1.445-447). Not long thereafter, Graziano, at Bassanio's request, seeks out and finds Balthazar/Portia and his/her Clerk/Nerissa in a gondola on one of the canals of Venice and gives Balthazar/Portia the ring Bassanio would not surrender to him/her earlier. Thus despite the fact that Bassanio is married to Portia, and that Antonio's life has been spared, the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio remains strong enough for Antonio to prevail

upon Bassanio and to convince him to break the vow he swore to Portia regarding the ring. Antonio, in other words, is still far more important to Bassanio than Portia.

When they finally arrive at Portia's estate in Belmont, it is Bassanio who, on this occasion, possessively clasps Antonio's shoulder while he begs of Portia, "Give welcome to my friend. / This is the man, this is Antonio, / To whom I am so infinitely bound" (5.1.133-135). It is quite significant that Bassanio considers himself as remaining "infinitely bound" to Antonio even though their mutual troubles have been brought to a conclusive end. Antonio means a great deal to Bassanio, and in an entirely different way than Portia does. Nevertheless, Portia, as completely nonplussed as ever, welcomes Antonio to her and Bassanio's home. If she feels any concern over Antonio's presence at her estate, and in her and Bassanio's lives, she does not reveal it as the entire company retires into one of the ornate rooms of the mansion where the final denouement of the ring plot ring plays itself out.

Graziano betrays Bassanio by telling Portia that Bassanio gave his ring away, too, to the lawyer who argued Antonio's case in the Venetian Senate's chambers. Just as Portia—disguised as Balthazar—allowed Shylock to condemn himself in his unrelenting quest for justice in accord with the exact terms of the bond, Portia allows Bassanio to incriminate himself fully in the matter of what happened to Portia's ring. Playing the game to the maximum, Portia refuses to believe that Bassanio gave the ring to a young *male* doctor of laws and not some other woman. When Bassanio explains that he was "enforced" to give the ring to the doctor—the person who saved his "dear friend" Antonio—and that doing so filled him with "shame and courtesy," Portia remains disdainful. Even when Bassanio insists that Portia would have done the same exact thing

herself as Bassanio did and would have given the ring to the lawyer, Portia does not let up one bit in her prosecution of Bassanio. In many respects, Portia here echoes Shylock in his single-minded determination to see Antonio suffer the utmost for failing to pay his debt to Shylock when it came due and regardless of the circumstances surrounding the default.

Antonio, looking out for Bassanio as is his seemingly never-ending penchant to do, and undoubtedly feeling a certain amount responsibility for Bassanio's predicament, chooses this moment to step in with his attempt to make things right between Bassanio and Portia. He proceeds to tell Portia solemnly:

I once did lend my body for his wealth,
Which, but for him that had your husband's ring,
Had quite miscarried. I dare be bound again:
My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord
Will never more break faith advisedly. (5.1.249-253)

These lines make clear that Antonio's love for, and devotion to, Bassanio have not diminished in the least; if anything, they have increased. Despite what he has suffered already on Bassanio's behalf, Antonio willing to put himself on the line yet again—by



Figure 7: Antonio giving Bassanio the wedding ring in *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice* (dir. Michael Radford, 2004), DVD screengrab.

pledging his eternal soul as surety this time—for Bassanio. Of course, in so doing, his objective encompasses reassuring Portia that he will not seek to influence Bassanio in such a way that Bassanio incurs Portia’s mistrust ever again. Portia takes Antonio up on his offer. In so doing, she hands Antonio a ring and instructs him to: “Give him [Bassanio] this, / And bid him keep it better than the other” (5.1.254-255). Thus schooled by Portia, Antonio crosses the room to stand next to Bassanio. As they face one another (see Figure 7), Antonio places the ring in Bassanio’s hand, smiles, then says, “Here, Lord Bassanio, swear to keep this ring” (5.1.256). Without uttering a word, Bassanio accepts the ring and, by extension, the vow that is attached to it.

The visual composition of the part of the scene in which Antonio gives Bassanio the ring is striking in both its homoeroticism and its inherent challenge to heteronormativity. Indeed, it could not be more queer. At the outset of his study of Shakespeare’s text of *Merchant* in relation to the vexed issue of same sex marriage, Little makes the point that one reading of the play engages with the idea “that Antonio wants to ‘marry’ Bassanio – at least, if we define marriage as two people committing to sexual and civil rites with an intention to form an intimate union ‘so as to form one’” (“Rites” 216). Taking this notion to very nearly its maximum cinematic expression, Radford’s film shows that Antonio not only *wants* to marry Bassanio, but that he actually *does*, they become one incorporate. In this part of the scene, audiences see the two men from behind, as if they were the dearly beloved gathered together in a church, or its equivalent in this case, as the all-important witnesses to the joining of Antonio and Bassanio in holy matrimony. Beyond them is not a religious official of some kind, but, rather, an elaborate and artfully blurred candelabra of the kind that might well be found in a church or other

sacred place. So situated, Antonio stands in what traditionally would be the groom's position, while the slightly shorter and longer-haired Bassanio stands in what traditionally would be the bride's position—if this were a heterosexual marriage ceremony which it most decidedly is not. In the very center of the frame, it can be seen that Antonio is giving Bassanio the ring that Portia has given to him. This can be considered Antonio's way of symbolically and, more importantly in this context, publicly claiming Bassanio as his and his alone.

The wedding ceremony between Antonio and Bassanio that Radford depicts at this point in his *Merchant*, as Little points out, is representative of a “performative (performed), essentially the enactment of a ritual to bring realness (culture recognition and value) to parties entering an ‘artificial kinship’ arrangement” like that which Antonio and Bassanio share (“Habitation” 211). Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick add that, like a drama or a film, such a ceremony is “constituted as a spectacle that denies its audience the ability either to look away from it or equally to intervene in it” (11). Hence viewers of these moments in Radford's film have been privileged to be the witnesses of the spectacle of the same-sex union of Antonio and Bassanio which, in turn, makes that union all the more real and all the more legitimate. If, as Little claims, the trio of romantic comedies *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* present the “three most elaborate dramatizations of queer marriage in Shakespeare, and our being witnesses to it,” then *Merchant*, as both an original Shakespearean playtext and as it has been conceived of by Radford in cinematic form in the twenty-first century, certainly qualifies as the fourth (“Habitation” 212). There can be nothing more

homoerotic, or homonormative, in the broadest sense, than two men like Antonio and Bassanio being joined 'til death do they part in marriage.

With the amount of sustained and sympathetic attention Radford devotes to the male homoerotic subtext that is more than evident in Shakespeare's *Merchant*, it proves more than a little disappointing that the director chooses to finish Antonio and Bassanio's story in a heterosexist manner. Indeed, Radford's *Merchant* concludes in total, seemingly unquestioned, accord with Bruce Smith's observation that "all of Shakespeare's comedies and tragicomedies end with male friendship yielding place to heterosexual love" (72). This can be seen in that, not long before the closing credits of the film begin to scroll, Portia turns back toward Bassanio before walking out of the room and says in a voice that can only be described as determinedly, even triumphantly, seductive:

It is almost morning,
And yet I am sure you are not satisfied
Of these events in full. Let us go in;
.....
And I [we] will answer all things faithfully. (5.1.293-297)

From the way Portia speaks these lines, it seems as if she and Bassanio are going to "go in" not only to talk, but also to make love. Bassanio slowly follows her into another part of the mansion as if he is in a daze. In so doing, he quite clearly forgets, or just plain ignores, Antonio, who stands watching them from only a few feet away, as Bassanio walks past him and after Portia.

Moments later, the last time Antonio is seen in the film, he is obviously alone and unsure of what to do with himself now that Bassanio and Portia, and Graziano and

Nerissa, the male and female couples, have gone off to consummate their marriage. He paces to and fro like he did when he was consumed by sadness in his palazzo back in Venice prior to Bassanio's arrival. This demonstrates in cinematic form how, as Little describes it, "Shakespeare's romantic comedies end not only with the reifying and presumed stability of heterosexuality but with Shakespeare's audience being coerced into witnessing the end of queer desire and queer marriage" ("Habitation" 211). In all fairness, however, it must be remembered that Shakespeare's *Merchant*, as has been pointed out many times before elsewhere, does not provide any definitive insight about what, exactly, happens to Antonio by the time the curtain closes or, in this case, as the screen fades to black. Even so, Radford's choice to depict Antonio in the manner he does serves to perpetuate only negative stereotypes about gay men who are, in this conception, doomed to a life of loneliness and despair because the men they choose to love cannot, or will not, return that love in either kind or quality. Given Radford's penchant for creating scenes that do not, technically, exist in Shakespeare's *Merchant*, as well as his facility with depicting stage directions and textual cues in visual form that make logical sense in tandem with the context—and particularly the homoerotic context—of the original dramatic text, such a pessimistic end to Antonio and Bassanio's relationship seems rather odd. Further scrutiny of Shakespeare's dramatic text makes it clear that Antonio, and therefore the homoerotic itself, remain very much a part of its concluding fabric. There is no word from Bassanio, or Portia for that matter, of exiling Antonio from their home in Belmont. It is also mentioned, by Bassanio himself no less, that he foresees absenting himself from Portia at various times in the future, and there is more than sufficient reason to suspect that Bassanio will be in Venice, in the arms and the bed of his beloved

Antonio. Would that Radford had created a scene or even a montage for the closing of his version of *Merchant* that capitalized on these potentialities and was as attentive to the male homoerotics in these moments as he was in the balance of his unparalleled cinematic production of the play.

Notes

¹ Rothwell lists a thirteenth production of *Merchant* as being in progress at the time of the publication of the second edition of his book, though it seems never to have been completed. Apparently, it would have starred Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart. See *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*, Second Edition (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999 and 2004), 274 and 351.

² As detailed in the “Introduction,” these are feature-length, Anglophone productions, by a Hollywood studio or an independent film company, originally released in movie theaters, and are considered in this study irrespective of the length of the screening run.

³ This situates the advent of queer theory with the publication, in the mid-nineteen-eighties, of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s groundbreaking volume, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

⁴ The two critical pieces mentioned here are: Laury Magnus’s “Michael Radford’s *The Merchant of Venice* and the Vexed Question of Performance,” *Literature/Film Quarterly* 35.2 (2007): 108-120, and Anthony Guy Patricia’s “‘Through the Eyes of the Present’: Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama,” in *Presentism, Gender, and Sexuality in Shakespeare*, ed. Evelyn Gajowski (Houndmills, U.K. and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 157-178, especially 158-165.

⁵ Michael Radford, dir., *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice*, Al Pacino, Jeremy Irons, Joseph Fiennes, and Lynn Collins, perms., Sony Pictures Classics, 2004, DVD. This and all subsequent references to Radford's *Merchant* in this chapter are to this production.

⁶ On the concept of "to-be-looked-at-ness," see Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in her book *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14-26, especially 19.

⁷ All citations of *The Merchant of Venice* are from the play as it appears in *The Norton Shakespeare, Based on the Oxford Edition*, Second Edition, eds. Stephen Greenblatt, et. al. (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 1121-1175, and cited only parenthetically hereafter.

⁸ A great deal of critical effort has gone into attempts to determine the actual source(s) of Antonio's sadness. In his gloss on the word "sad" as Antonio speaks it in 1.1.1 of the play, and the longer note that complements it, John Drakakis offers a good summary of the possibilities that have been considered over the years. See Drakakis' *The Merchant of Venice, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series* (London: Methuen Drama/A&C Black Publisher's Ltd., 2010), 169 and 392.

⁹ Interestingly, the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines "bedroom" as a "room used or intended to contain a bed or beds; a sleeping apartment" (Def. 2.). The *OED Online* editors would thus have readers believe that the term did not acquire specifically sexual connotations until the early twentieth century. But to support the definition of bedroom as a place for nothing more than rest, the editors cite a line spoken by the character of Lysander to his girlfriend/fiancé Hermia, having lost their way and therefore preparing to

spend the night in the forest outside Athens, in Shakespeare's *Midsummer*: "Then by your side, no bed-room me deny." The irony of this citation is that Lysander is trying to get Hermia to sleep—as in, have sex—with him in their outdoor bedroom. It is left to Hermia to school the randy Lysander in the kinds of behavior appropriate for a virtuous bachelor and a maid like themselves to engage in if they are to remain as chaste as they should be until they are married.

¹⁰ Kenneth Branagh, dir., *William Shakespeare's Hamlet*, Kenneth Branagh, Julie Christie, Billy Crystal, Gerard Depardieu, Charlton Heston, Derek Jacobi, Jack Lemmon, Rufus Sewell, Robin Williams, and Kate Winslet, perfs., Castle Rock Entertainment and Warner Brothers Pictures, 1996 and 2010, Blu-ray Disc.

¹¹ Consider, for example, the intercut scenes Branagh presents between the 33:00 and 35:00 minute marks of his production.

CHAPTER 4

I DO ADORE THEE SO: SCREENING THE MALE HOMOEROTICS OF *TWELFTH NIGHT*

Because of the detailed diary entry of a well-to-do student by the name of John Manningham, it is accepted historical fact that *Twelfth Night* was initially enacted by Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, during the Christmas season of 1601/2 in the Middle Temple, one of the city of London's four prestigious law schools that comprised an educational institution known collectively then, and still today, as the Inns of Court.¹ A transcription of Manningham's handwritten record of this performance by Robert Parker Sorlien begins as follows: "At our feast wee had a play called 'Twelve night, or what you will'; much like the comedy of errores, or Menechmi in Plautus, but most like and neere to that in Italian called Ignanni" (48).² Manningham goes on to describe almost in full one of the play's three main plot strands:

A good practise in it to make the steward believe his Lady widdowe was in Love with him, by counterfayting a letter, as from his Lady, in generall termes, telling him what shee liked best in him, and prescribing his gesture in smiling, his apparraile, &c., and then when he came to practise making him beleeeve they tooke him to be mad. (48)

Brief though it is this diary entry nevertheless reveals a great deal of tantalizing contextual information about both its writer and its subject. Keir Elam, editor of the recent *Arden Shakespeare* edition of *Twelfth Night*, describes Manningham in highly complementary terms as the "ideal spectator: young and well educated, he brought to the performance an impressive array of precise literary and theatrical knowledge, enabling

him to place the comedy culturally” (4). Elam bases this assessment on the fact that Manningham is able to associate *Twelfth Night* with *The Comedy of Errors*, another play involving the separation of twins that would have been performed at the Inns of Court, also by Shakespeare’s company, only a few years prior to his tenure as a law student there, and to his equally informed linking of the twins plot that drives a significant portion of *Twelfth Night* to that explored by the Roman playwright Plautus in his *Menaechmi*, and to the mid-sixteenth century Italian play, *Inganni*, that deals with a similar dramatic situation.³

Furthermore, the phrase “A good practise” that leads into the second paragraph of Manningham’s entry shows that he took particular delight in the gulling of Malvolio plot that runs concurrent with that of the twins’ plot and the various romances in *Twelfth Night*.⁴ Though the first, Manningham would not be the last playgoer to single out Malvolio for commentary indicative of the enjoyment that his character engendered. Elam reveals, in fact, that no less a figure than King Charles I “wrote marginal notes to the list of contents in his copy of the 1632 Second Folio indicating the leading – or perhaps his favourite – characters; against the title *Twelwe Night, or what you will*, he wrote ‘Malvolio’” (5). It can be said then, that where Malvolio is concerned, as with many of the characters that populate his corpus of plays, Shakespeare touched a particular kind of nerve that resonated with royalty, the rising middle class and, undoubtedly, the hoi polloi, as well.

But whether because of its plot of twins separated by the vicissitudes of fate, its depiction of romantic courtship, or its story of a servant who dares to imagine himself rising above his station in life through marriage to his mistress, *Twelfth Night* proved to

be a triumph from its first performance in the great hall of the Middle Temple. Indeed, James Schiffer notes that *Twelfth Night* was “popular in its own time up to the closing of the theatres in 1642,” and that, by the mid eighteenth century, *Twelfth Night* had become what he describes as a “mainstay of Shakespeare’s theatrical repertoire, one of his most performed plays” (1). Considering *Twelfth Night*’s success and popularity from a slightly different perspective, in what is a necessarily abbreviated listing, Elam catalogs an astounding 120 stage, film, and television productions of the play occurring in the four hundred years between 1602 and 2004 (146-153).

Focusing on the latter two media, Kenneth S. Rothwell identifies a total of only eight film or television adaptations of *Twelfth Night* that were produced in the last one-hundred-and-two years. Leading this short list is a ten-minute, black-and-white, silent production of the Vitagraph Company of America that appeared in 1910; the last is Sir Trevor Nunn’s sumptuous full-length feature film of the play that came to the screen in 1996. After that, an appropriation of *Twelfth Night* entitled *She’s the Man*, aimed at the notoriously fickle American teen movie audience, premiered in 2006. But otherwise, filmmakers and television producers have—oddly considering what is almost universally agreed to be the play’s excellence and appeal—shied away from *Twelfth Night*. In part because of this paucity of screen examples, and as proved to be the case in the previous chapter on *The Merchant of Venice*, only Nunn’s cinematic version of *Twelfth Night* fits within the parameters of the present work.

H.R. Coursen describes Nunn’s production of *Twelfth Night* as “one of the more straightforward translations of a Shakespeare script to film. It places itself squarely within the genre of Shakespeare film by telling the story pretty much as the First Folio

tells it, as opposed to making it an allegory of our times” (199-200). Yet, at the same time, Coursen notes that what he terms Nunn’s metaphorical treatment of Viola’s appropriation of male costume begs questions such as, “what is gender? what are the stereotypes of gender? what are the limits of stereotype? In this sense, the film, for all of its fidelity to ‘Shakespeare,’ speaks directly to us. This is not an ‘imposition’ on the script. Shakespeare was asking the same questions” (202). In Coursen’s view, because the playwright himself was concerned about issues with gender that continue to be vexing to audiences in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, and Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* is equally attentive to those exact same issues, the supposed anachronistic folly of imposing present-day anxieties onto the past is avoided.

Be that as it may, and as Nunn himself points out in the “Introduction” to his screenplay for *Twelfth Night*, both he and Shakespeare were also concerned with the related problematics of (homo-)eroticism and desire. On this subject the director puts forth his own set of queries: “how are men in love different from women in love; what is attractive to men about the male in women; what is attractive to women about the female in men; is love between two people of the same gender of the same kind as between people of opposite gender?”⁵ From a queer perspective, of course, Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* answers the latter question posed here in the affirmative; same-sex love *is* equivalent to opposite-sex love. As in Shakespeare’s play, this idea manifests most explicitly in the cinematic narratives of the couples Cesario and Orsino and Antonio and Sebastian. And, although they have been touched on in a few other studies, no critic has as yet explored either the instantiation or the implications of male homoerotic desire, and its correlate, male same-sex love, evident in Nunn’s film as fully as is intended in what follows.

“What country, friends, is this?” Viola asks in the first scene in which she appears in Shakespeare’s playtext of *Twelfth Night*; and she is informed by the Captain that she is in the land known as Illyria (1.2.1-2). As their dialogue continues, it is made plain that Viola and the Captain are among the small number of survivors of a shipwreck that, as far as they can discern, has left Viola’s beloved brother dead, swallowed by the angry sea (1.2.3-19). Nunn, making full use of the visual power of film to show rather than tell a story, transforms this bit of exposition into a series of moments that dramatize the chaos and the horror the passengers on the doomed vessel experience, the heartbreaking separation of the twin siblings, and the eerie aftermath of the disaster in which those who came through it relatively unscathed must find their bearings in an irrevocably changed world. Rothwell describes this extended interpolation as being akin to a “*Titanic* trope” that proves wholly effective at conveying to the audience the extraordinary circumstances Viola (Imogen Stubbs) suddenly finds herself plunged into (227).

Furthermore, where Viola and her exhausted companions are concerned, Nunn adds another layer of danger that is but a rather oblique element in the source text.⁶ While scurrying to hide in a cave from a group of Illyrian military scouts on horseback, the Captain (Sid Livingstone) informs Viola in a panicked whisper: “The quarrel between the merchants here and ours / Too oft has given us bloody argument. / We must not be discovered in this place,” as Nunn writes in his screenplay (8). The director also reveals that he chose to establish “Illyria as ‘enemy territory’ for the shipwrecked survivors” because doing so offered “a host of reasons for Viola’s plight, her need for the Captain’s help and the tension of her continuing fear of discovery” since she is, albeit through no fault of her own, in a place that she is not supposed to be in (“Introduction” n.p.). As

such, this war between the merchants of her native Messaline and those of Illyria lends verisimilitude to the notion that being found out would put Viola in certain peril in Nunn's adaptation of *Twelfth Night*. Rothwell complains that "this added plot element also robs Viola of some of the mystery that Shakespeare surrounded her with," but he overlooks the fact that it adds a welcome note of suspense regarding Viola's potential discovery as a fugitive in Illyria that is noticeably absent from Shakespeare's original play (227).

To ensure her complete safety after she is told that it is unlikely that she would be able to enter into the service of the Countess Olivia (Helena Bonham Carter) while she remains in Illyria, Viola entreats the Captain to assist her in a rather unorthodox way: "I prithee be my aid / For such disguise as haply shall become / The form of my intent. I'll serve this Duke," and she intends to do so by presenting herself as a boy to him (Nunn 12; Elam 1.2.49-53).⁷ When the Captain scoffs at this preposterous idea, Viola insists that "It may be worth thy pains, for I can sing / And speak to him in many sorts of music / That will allow me very worth his service" (Nunn 12; Elam 1.2.54-56). Viola throws her arms around him and hugs him tightly when the Captain shrugs and smiles, indicating his acquiescence to her plan. Perhaps he realizes that, all things considered, she has no other options and, kind man that he is, decides to help her rather than hinder her.

Jean E. Howard allows for a further, more nuanced understanding of Viola's predicament and why she chooses, specifically, to usurp male attire and to seek out a position in the court of Count Orsino. Howard begins her inquiry into the fashion conventions of the 15th and 16th centuries in England proper by expertly historicizing the fact that "crossdressing in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods caused controversy"

(420). Indeed, the seemingly rampant problem of women dressing in men's clothes at this time in history was dealt with harshly by the various authorities, including the agents of the crown, the law, and the church. Citing the work of R. Mark Benbow, Howard reveals that "many of the women apprehended in men's clothing during the period were accused of prostitution," while those who were not so charged were at the very least thought to lead "loose" lives (420-421). She continues by explaining that

It is impossible to tell the "class" position of many of these women. Most appear to be unmarried women of the serving class eking out a precarious living in London. Some are recorded as being "in service" to various London tavernkeepers and tradesmen; some may have worn male clothing for protection in travelling about the city; some may have been driven to prostitution by economic necessity, with their crossdressed apparel becoming a demonized "sign" of their enforced sexual availability. (421)

Even though both Shakespeare and Nunn's *Illyria* is, in many respects, an exotic stand-in for early modern London, it is beyond doubt that their *Violas* would be facing a stint in prostitution in order to survive like some of those women Howard discusses in her piece. But even so, she is an unmarried woman without any relatives in an enemy country and she has no immediate tangible means of supporting herself, even for just long enough to enable her to return to familiar territory. As such, her position is indeed precarious. In order to stave off the unwanted attentions of the unscrupulous and to secure some kind of a future for herself in more amenable circumstances, she really has no other choice but to embrace the wickedness of disguising herself in men's clothing. In addition, being a duke instead of one of the tavernkeepers or tradesmen Howard mentions, Orsino is a powerful

man who, Viola shrewdly discerns, will be able to help her beyond merely employing her in service even if he is unaware of doing so because of her assuming masculine dress.

In the montage that follows his agreement with her understandably necessary plan, the Captain supervises Viola's transformation from female to crossdressed male. And in short order, Viola allows her long hair to be cut so that it falls just above her shoulders; she removes her corset and exchanges it for a pair of naval cadet trousers; she pads her crotch with a folded cloth in order to create the appearance of a penis; she binds her breasts tightly by wrapping her chest in a lengthy swathe of red fabric as if she were a living mummy; and she dons a formal military jacket that matches her pants and a pair of black men's boots. She then receives "on-the-job" instruction from the captain in how to walk with the stride of a man and practices using her voice as a man would by bellowing at the Illyrian sea. Lastly, she places a faux moustache on her upper lip so that, in the end, she looks much like her dead twin brother, Sebastian. Thus Cesario, the young man that both Olivia and Duke Orsino (Toby Stephens) will fall in love with, is born.

It proves helpful at this juncture to consider a few important points associated with the performance of gender and gender in performance as regards Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* before launching into a detailed analysis of the male homoerotic valances of the relationship between Cesario and Orsino as Nunn depicts it in his film. That female characters like Viola were played on the stage by boy actors during the early modern period in England is a matter of well-explored historical fact. And, as Phyllis Rackin writes, in a theatrical world governed by the convention

where female characters were always played by male actors, feminine gender was inevitably a matter of costume; and in plays where the

heroines dressed as boys, gender became doubly problematic, the unstable product of roleplaying and costume, not only in the theatrical representation but also within the fiction presented on the stage. (29)

To play a convincing Viola, then, a boy actor would have had to don clothing appropriate to a young woman and affect a feminine voice and mannerisms – to, in turn, become a convincing Cesario, that same boy actor would have had to (re-)assume masculine attire and the corresponding tone and behaviors evocative of a young man. The concept of gender, irrespective of biological sex, can thus be understood, borrowing Judith Butler's paradigm from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, to be a learned performance rather than a natural or innate characteristic that someone is born with and knows intuitively how to present to the world. Specifically, Butler writes that gender "is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-44). Butler's insights here lead to the relevant supposition that it is in the theatre in general, and in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* in particular, in this case, that the concept of gender is exposed as the artificial construction it really is. Viola proves that one is not born a woman, or a man, for that matter, and the implications of that fact are far reaching considering the representation of male homoeroticism.

Meanwhile, building on the insightful work of both Jonas Barish and Lisa Jardine, Stephen Orgel shows how the anti-theatricalists of the period, men like Philip Stubbes, John Rainolds, and William Prynne, inveighed against the kind of performative crossdressing discussed by Rackin and Butler because they had an inordinate fear bordering on the pathological of the potential effects of the mutability of gender on,

specifically, adult male actors and their playgoing counterparts.⁸ Summing up these reactionary and misogynistic arguments, Orgel writes that it was thought that such men “will be seduced by the impersonation” of females by boy actors “and losing their reason will become effeminate, which in this case means not only that they will lust after the woman in the drama, which is bad enough, but also the youth beneath the woman’s costume” (27). In other words, according to the anti-theatricalists, the uncontrollable sexual desires of older male actors and their counterparts in the audience will be inflamed less by the female characters playwrights put forth in dramas like *Twelfth Night*, and more so by the actual male youths who portray them on the stage. Therefore, these desires, these lusts, as the anti-theatricalists concede, are of an essentially homoerotic nature.

But what happens when Viola and Cesario are played by an actress instead of a boy or young male actor as they are in Nunn’s *Twelfth Night*? A heterosexist view of such a scenario would exhibit little, if any, anxiety as regards the intimate relationship that develops between Duke Orsino and his male servant Cesario and that is dramatized throughout much of the film. From this perspective it is entirely acceptable that Orsino desires Cesario because Cesario is really no more than the fictional creation of the female Viola who is, in turn, the equally female Imogen Stubbs. As Maria F. Magro and Mark Douglas remark, viewers of the production, if they are so inclined, “can safely indulge in some homoerotic titillation without guilt” where Orsino and Cesario are concerned because that titillation is really hetererotic rather than homoerotic in nature given the actuality of Viola’s, and the actress who plays her, female gender (53).⁹ The attraction Orsino and Cesario/Viola feel is therefore, at its heart, based on normative principles and,

since audiences are in on the crossdressing joke from the outset, they can watch their romance unfold with total assurance that the traditional man and woman will end up coupled in holy matrimony by the time the end credits roll. But it must also be acknowledged that it is just as possible to understand, and therefore to analyze, Nunn's depiction of the Orsino and Cesario relationship as one that is equally indicative of a substantive, as opposed to a merely titillating or a laughable, form of male homoerotic desire.

Authorization for taking the approach to the story of the duke and his servant suggested in the above paragraph can be found in several quarters. For instance, two of the critics mentioned earlier describe Orsino and Cesario's association in Nunn's production in what can be considered homoerotic terms. Coursen rather matter-of-factly declares that "Orsino is very attracted to this boy" (203), while Rothwell makes a similar assertion when he comments on "Orsino's falling in love with a boy" (227). In addition, acknowledging Orsino's attraction to, and love for, Cesario—an attraction and love that is requited by Cesario—represents what Paul Edmondson describes as the willful yearning of "its audiences to position (or to find) themselves in relation to the play: such is the desire of every critical act" (78). Though he does not invoke the name of the interpretive stance he identifies here, Edmondson's comments discern a theoretical approach that is inherently Presentist; critical acts are the result of immediate, subjective engagement with texts, whether they are in written or cinematic form. Finally, Edmondson's notion of critical willfulness also merges neatly with Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin's idea that "a queer film is one that is viewed by lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer spectators," all of whom "experience films differently than do straight

viewers” (10). So informed by the provocations of Coursen, Rothwell, Edmonson, and Benschhoff and Griffin, there is a palpable sense of obligation to document the male homoerotics of the Orsino/Cesario coupling in Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* and to produce a reading of their relationship in its entirety without being heterosexist.¹⁰

Once he has been brought into being by Viola and the Captain, Cesario is next seen in Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* after his having been in the service of Duke Orsino for almost three months. David Schalkwyk explains that service was a ubiquitous “condition in early modern England” that “tied people to each other” (19). He continues by detailing the fact that service was primarily an economic institution whereby servants

worked for a master or mistress, in jobs ranging from domestic or personal service through crafts and cottage industries. These included weaving or brewing, sowing or harvesting, milking and tending animals, or trade and hospitality, in (ideally) mutually beneficial relationships through which the master or mistress received assistance in return for board, lodging, and wages (which were usually low). (21)

But as Schalkwyk also makes clear through the course of his argument, service often created an environment that fostered the development of various kinds of love, including eros, or the kind of romantic love that encompasses everything from infatuation, to desire, to sexual intercourse. So it is perhaps unsurprising that Shakespeare uses service as a plot device through which the characters of Orsino and Cesario are brought together in a set of dramatic circumstances that facilitates the evolution of their interpersonal relationship. This is an aspect of *Twelfth Night* that Nunn exploits to the fullest in his cinematic text. Cesario is never seen in the film performing any of the comparatively

menial tasks that Schalkwyk lists above and that real servants would have been expected to carry out. Instead, Cesario plays the piano for Orsino, functions as his sounding board, acts as an opponent in games of cards and billiards, and accompanies him on horseback on scouting missions in Illyria. In this regard, both Shakespeare and Nunn manage to elide the merely pedestrian. And thus it is that Cesario's being in Orsino's service binds them to one another in a pragmatic sense but also, in due course, on an emotional level. Service sets the stage, so to speak, for each of these two men to court the other in roundabout fashion, something that would not, could not, have happened otherwise.

Though an affected melancholic because of what he obsessively describes as his unrequited love for the disdainful Countess Olivia, Orsino nevertheless cuts a dashing and masculine figure that many a queer male viewer of Nunn's film, like Cesario, might well find attractive. One morning the imperious Duke, with his right arm in a sling for reasons unexplained but likely involving the war between the merchants of Illyria and Messaline, seeks Cesario out while Cesario is at fencing practice with all of the other men that make up Orsino's company. As they leave the gymnasium, Orsino unselfconsciously places his good arm around Cesario's shoulders in an action that indicates their intimacy, that embarrasses Cesario, and that does not go unnoticed by the rest of Orsino's people. This gesture also indicates that Cesario has, comparatively quickly, become Orsino's favorite subordinate. Thus, quite by chance, Cesario occupies a highly privileged and influential position vis-à-vis Orsino that is analogous to the so-called "royal favorite," a highly problematic figure during Shakespeare's time. King James I, as is well known, had a series of male favorites—and likely lovers—that those in his court who did not enjoy such intimate privilege always mistrusted.¹¹ Curtis Perry explains that many in the period

felt that the “political intimacies of royal favoritism inhabit[ed] the dark corners of the state – the privy chamber or bedchamber and other sites of restricted access to the body of the monarch,” hence they “frequently imagined the influence of royal favorites in eroticized terms” (131).¹² Although *Twelfth Night* is not in any sense a political play or film, nor is Cesario out to bring down the Illyrian government, it is not difficult to suspect based on Perry’s insights that Orsino’s courtiers, retainers, and counselors might well think ill of Cesario precisely because of the intimate erotic connection they can plainly see—given that Nunn represents it visually in the manner discussed above—exists between Orsino and this upstart who came out of nowhere and superseded them all.

Given his already special place in the Illyrian court, Orsino and his royal favorite Cesario proceed to have a private conversation that takes place on the bluffs overlooking the sea. There, as Orsino sits so close to Cesario that Cesario may as well be in his lap, Orsino reminds Cesario that he now “knowest no less but all. I have unclasped / To thee the book even of my secret soul” (Nunn 16; Elam 1.4.13-14). With these lines, audiences watching *Twelfth Night* can understand that the close relationship Orsino and Cesario have extends beyond physicality and into the realm of the personally revealing. It is doubtful that anyone, much less someone like Count Orsino, would confide his deepest thoughts and wishes to one in whom he does not have full faith, confidence, and trust. That being the case, at this point in their story, Orsino wants to use his chosen one as a romantic go-between for himself with the Lady Olivia. When Cesario demurs taking on such an assignment because he thinks doing so might be an exercise in futility, Orsino once again wraps his left arm around Cesario’s shoulders and holds him tightly. It is almost as if Orsino is trying to give Cesario some of his strength through the power of

human embrace so that Cesario will not fear approaching Olivia on Orsino's behalf. It is also yet another moment of homoerotic physical closeness between these two men.

However, Orsino's actions toward Cesario become downright aggressive when Cesario still objects to attempting to woo Olivia in his master's stead. Orsino insists that Cesario is the only man for the job and then literally asserts his physical dominance over the frightened boy. While leaning ever closer to him and explaining that Olivia is apt to accept Cesario's entreaties on account of the fact that, being only a boy, he is not in the least threatening, the impassioned Duke suddenly looks at Cesario intently and says, "Diana's lip / Is not more smooth and rubious" (Nunn 17; Elam 1.4.31-32). As he speaks these words, Orsino rubs his thumb across Cesario's upper lip as if he is trying to confirm for himself that what he is saying is, in fact, true. Then, so emboldened, Orsino presses himself even more firmly against Cesario and comments: "Thy small pipe / Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman's part" (Nunn, 17; Elam 1.4.32-34). It is only following the utterance of these words that Cesario, who has been struggling against Orsino the entire time Orsino has been so persistently forward with him, succeeds at throwing Orsino off. Given his insensitivity toward Cesario, it is fitting that Orsino strikes his already hurt right arm against the rocks of the bluff because Cesario is able to push him away so forcefully. So much for his being merely a non-threatening boy.

The physical homoeroticism evident in the relationship between Orsino and Cesario becomes even more pronounced in a pair of subsequent scenes in Nunn's *Twelfth Night*. In the first of these, the director marshals bits of Orsino's and Cesario's individual dialogue from Acts 1 and 2 in Shakespeare's text; the innovation is the setting in which

these lines are spoken and the stage directions that accompany them. After a hard early morning ride on horseback, Orsino beckons Cesario with, “Come hither, boy” (Nunn 54, Elam 2.4.15). At this order, Cesario steps gingerly into a large dimly lit room with a fire burning in the fireplace against the far wall. In the center of the space, Orsino is soaking naked in a huge clawfoot tub. The Duke’s well-muscled shoulders and arms glisten in the shafts of light that are filtering in through the windows and falling solely upon him as if he were the subject of a great master’s painting. Though Cesario is obviously discomfited by this unexpected set of circumstances, Orsino exhibits no such concern. He seems, in fact, to have no problem being nude in the presence of his young male servant. As Cesario sits down in a nearby chair, Orsino waxes poetic about the Countess Olivia. “How will she love, when the rich golden shaft / Hath killed the flock of all affections else / That live in her,” he muses (Nunn 54, Elam 1.1.34-36). Then he hands Cesario a puffy yellow sponge and leans forward in the bath. Cesario understands the wordless command and begins to wash Orsino’s back. Within seconds, Cesario becomes lost in his task. The repeated smiles that play upon his face serve to exemplify how one man can take delight in the body of another. That Cesario desires Orsino is unmistakable in this, one of the most overtly sexual moments in all of Nunn’s film. But, before long, Cesario comes to his senses and begs permission to leave the bathroom and repair to Olivia’s estate in order to continue his doomed pursuit of her affections on Orsino’s behalf.

The scene described above invites, if not begs, for a non-heteronormative interpretation, and performing such an interpretation involves what Alan Sinfield describes as “reading against the grain, queering the text,” here transformed into “seeing against the grain, queering the cinematic text” of Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* (29). In other

words, though audiences know that Cesario/Viola is being played by a female actress (Imogen Stubbs), they are nevertheless encouraged to see what is literally right before their eyes: the young male page Cesario – complete with moustache and military uniform – attending to the equally male Orsino’s bathing needs. Those needs include his being scrubbed with a sponge in a room where Orsino and Cesario are the sole occupants and which is crackling with the (homo)erotic energy of two characters who are in the process of falling in love with one another regardless of their actual and assumed genders. These images are punctuated by highly suggestive language. Orsino muses to Cesario about what kind of an effect his “rich golden shaft” will have when it finally penetrates his beloved; there can be no mistaking such an extended metaphor as a verbal representation of sexual intercourse. A queer reading of the cinematic text lays bare the homoerotic possibilities such a staging, and the corresponding dialogue, presents. With all of these elements operative, queer viewers and their allies are free to indulge in the sensual depiction of one man seeing to the desires of another man in a way that is titillating without being crass. Such viewers may well find themselves giving in to the not unwelcome fantasy of being either Cesario or Orsino and, thus, vicariously experiencing an intimate moment with the object of their desire. They do not, in other words, have to read this bath scene in accord with the usual heterosexist paradigms that would erase the effects of any kind of a queer intervention from legibility.

Later in the film, Orsino and Cesario race through the darkness to one of the barns on Orsino’s property. There, Orsino demands that Feste (Ben Kingsley) perform a solo for the duke and his servant of a piece he is convinced will relieve his passion much (Elam, 2.4.5). Though not referred to as such in Shakespeare’s play, the song could be

titled “Come Away Death,” and it is about the fate of an unrequited, but defiant lover—a person not unlike Orsino himself. When Feste begins to sing, Orsino and Cesario are some ways apart from one another; Orsino is leaning on a towering stack of straw, while Cesario is across from him, standing with his back against the oversized wheel of a horsecart. It is clear from the moment Feste launches into “Come Away Death” that Orsino is deeply affected by the words and the music, but not in any way that accords with relief. Indeed, Orsino seems even more melancholy than ever. The expression on his handsome face morphs from one of joy to one of cynicism. His unhappiness is magnified when he glances over at Cesario and sees his servant in equally pensive thought. It may well be that, in this moment, Orsino understands that he and Cesario are sharing the same dark feelings about life, love, and death, and that he feels a connection to the young man unlike any other he has felt for someone else before.

Perhaps because he is simply unable to contain himself, or maybe because he is feeling guilty for making Cesario experience any kind of pain, Orsino leaves his haystack to go and stand right next to the young man. Then, as he has done twice before in Nunn’s *Twelfth Night*, Orsino once again puts his arm around Cesario’s shoulders and holds him firmly against his side. This is a decisive intimate move on Orsino’s part and it is, on one level at least, redolent with homoeroticism. Because Viola has presented herself as a boy, as Cesario, to Orsino, and the Count has accepted Cesario at face value, Orsino only knows Cesario as his male servant Cesario. At the level of character and narrative then, what is happening here in the barn is happening between an older and a younger man. And, as in the earlier bath scene, this is another moment when Orsino seems to be perfectly comfortable being in such close proximity to someone of his own gender.

Cesario, perhaps carried away by being held in the arms of a man he already desires so much, allows himself to relax and presses his back into Orsino's chest (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Duke Orsino and his servant, the young man known by one and all as Cesario, about to kiss one another in *Twelfth Night* (dir. Trevor Nunn, 1996), DVD screengrab.

Slowly, he turns his head away from the singing Feste and toward Orsino who, obviously content now, too, closes his eyes. By exquisite degrees, Cesario moves his lips upward and ever closer to Orsino's. It could not be more any more apparent that these two moustached men want to kiss each other in what qualifies as one of the most achingly homoerotic scenes in the entirety of Nunn's production. Nunn's film of *Twelfth Night* thus succeeds at conveying something vitally important in the context of the present study that Howard insists the playtext does not. She claims that, in Shakespeare's original, "Orsino, in contrast to Olivia, shows no overt sexual interest in the crossdressed Viola," who is, after all, his male servant Cesario, and furthermore that "the text makes his attraction to Cesario" unintelligible (432). As the scene under consideration here attests, Orsino *does* show his attraction to, and sexual interest in, Cesario, and in a way that epitomizes the intelligibility of the homoerotic. On screen this desire *is* overt rather than oblique as in the written text of *Twelfth Night*.

But then, Feste's song comes to an end and, in the sudden, deafening quiet, Orsino and Cesario realize what they were about to do and pull apart from one another. What lingers, however, and most particularly for queer audience members of *Twelfth Night*, is the visceral memory of the same-sex kiss that Orsino and Cesario almost shared. As the film continues, the physical homoeroticism between Orsino and Cesario detailed above transforms into explicitly romantic homoeroticism. For instance, late one evening not long after Cesario has made his first unsuccessful embassy to Olivia, the two men smoke cigars and play cards. In a brilliant move, the director overlays this scene with Feste's singing of a decidedly sedate version of the love song, "Oh Mistress Mine." While playing the hand each has been dealt and listening to Feste's melancholy performance, Orsino questions Cesario: "How dost thou like this tune?," to which Cesario responds, "It gives a very echo to the seat / Where love is throned" (Nunn 43, Elam 2.4.20-22). Surprised that one so young and inexperienced as Cesario can speak with such authority on the subjects of music and affairs of the heart, Orsino hits upon the idea that Cesario must be smitten with someone: "My life upon't," he says, "young though thou art, thine eye / Hath stayed upon some favour that it loves" (Nunn 45, Elam 2.4.23-24). Though a bit taken aback by Orsino's unexpected guess, Cesario confirms that he has indeed been struck by one of Cupid's arrows. In true heterosexist fashion, Orsino assumes that Cesario has fallen for someone of the opposite gender: "What kind of woman, is't?," he asks the boy (Nunn 45, Elam 2.4.26). With an appealing mixture of sheepishness and bravado, Cesario tells Orsino that the individual he has taken a liking to is of Orsino's "complexion" (Nunn 45, Elam 2.4.26). Pausing to consider this understated

moment in the film more closely reveals how remarkable it actually is in the context of the present study.

Doing so requires, perhaps, the invocation of Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous dictum from his *Biographia Literaria* regarding the "willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (677). For audiences to suspend that disbelief in the fiction that Shakespeare and Nunn present only insofar as to accept that Cesario is a crossdressed Viola is equivalent to their performing but half of their responsibility. But if viewers of *Twelfth Night* also allow themselves the pleasure of seeing what is occurring before their eyes in the way that Orsino does—who, after all, has no reason to doubt that Cesario's gender is male—what they have just witnessed in Cesario's revelation that his gaze has alighted on someone who resembles the Duke amounts to nothing less than one man (Cesario) confessing that he finds another man (Orsino) attractive enough to fall in love with him. The fact that Cesario is wearing a cadet's uniform and, in tandem with his master, sports a moustache, serves to facilitate such an interpretation. Furthermore, it is just as remarkable in a late twentieth and early twenty-first century epoch infused with historically specific forms of homophobia that Orsino seems to have little problem at all with the idea that Cesario finds him appealing enough to be smitten with someone who looks like him. Indeed, without missing a beat, Orsino merely continues bantering with Cesario. That Cesario's love interest takes after him in countenance causes Orsino to chuckle and remark, "She is not worth thee, then" (Nunn 45, Elam 2.4.27). Orsino's unguarded self-deprecation in this line proves quite charming not only to Cesario, but to those watching *Twelfth Night* who feel a queer kinship with the young servant, too.

The cigar smoking/card playing scene detailed above is not the only one in which Cesario confesses his love for Orsino. A short while later in the film, and once again on the bluffs overlooking the sea but this time with an angry wind whipping around them, an incensed Orsino orders Cesario to return to the Countess Olivia and, somehow, force her to not only accept Orsino's love, but to requite it as would become a woman of her social status, as well. A frustrated Cesario does his best to convince Orsino that he must accept the fact that Olivia will never be able to return his interest in her. Blind to everything but his own selfishness, Orsino spews a litany of misogynistic venom about Olivia: "There is no woman's sides / Can bear the beating of so strong a passion / As love doth give my heart," he roars (Nunn 78, Elam, 2.4.93-95). According to Orsino, such women "lack retention" and, that being the case, they are unable to love not just in the same way that men like him are, they are unable to love at all; thus Cesario best not make any "compare / Between that love a woman can bear me / And that I owe Olivia" (Nunn 78-79; Elam, 2.4.96 and 101-103). But an equally upset Cesario cannot tolerate such blasphemy and chooses this moment to stand up to his master, once again belying his assumed weakness; assumed because of his youth and servitude, both of which would auger for his complete deference to his social, familial, and economic superior.

Cesario attempts to diffuse Orsino's livid vehemence by speaking of a non-existent sister he has who, he reveals, "loved a man – / As it might be perhaps, were I a woman, / I should your lordship" (Nunn 79; Elam, 2.4.107-109). And yet again, if viewers pause to think about it carefully, they will realize that Nunn has presented to them a second scene in which one man admits of his love for another man. Orsino still has been given no reason to question what he sees before his eyes: that Cesario is a male

like himself. As before, the cadet's uniform and the moustache both continue to testify to Cesario's masculine gender. So here, too, the exchange of dialogue between these two characters essentially operates on a homoerotic level, as in fact their entire relationship has done since Cesario joined Orsino's court. Touched by Cesario's story, Orsino inquires about its outcome in a subdued voice. Cesario, uttering some of Shakespeare's most metaphorically beautiful poetry, explains how his sister "pined in thought, / And with a green and yellow melancholy, / She sat like Patience on a monument," with no more than unrequited love as a suitor (Nunn 79; Elam 2.4.110-114). Hearing this, Orsino asks a retreating Cesario, "But died thy sister of her love, my boy?" (Nunn 79; Elam 2.4.119). Though he claims, as cryptically as in Shakespeare's original, to be "all the daughters of my father's house / And all the brothers too," Cesario insists that he does not know the ultimate fate of his sister (Nunn 79; Elam 2.4.120-121). Thus Cesario the servant tries to teach Orsino the master a thing or two about the nature of love and how people, inclusive of men like themselves, and women like his sister and the Countess Olivia, are capable of experiencing it as a palpable force in their lives.

Coursen comments that it is in 2.4 that Orsino "shows his first sign of concern for someone other than his infatuated self" (206). And, indeed, it is the first time in the film that Orsino displays anything resembling real compassion toward another human being. What Coursen takes no notice of, however, is the fact that the Count expresses this empathy for Cesario, his male servant; Orsino never takes a similar stance where Olivia, the woman that he swears up-and-down he loves, is concerned. Furthermore, the fact that Orsino uses the phrase "my boy" for the first time in his address to Cesario in this scene should not go overlooked. The note of possession in these two little words is

unmistakable. Cesario has now become specifically Orsino's boy; Cesario belongs to Orsino and to no one else. Based on this nugget of evidence, it can be argued that, at this point in Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, Orsino and Cesario are now a bona fide male same-sex couple.

Orsino and Cesario's homoerotic love for each other comes to the fore again in the denouement of Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, and in a way that dramatizes its physical and its romantic aspects. In order to take care of a bit of necessary business associated with Antonio (Nicholas Farrell), who is being held under guard there by his soldiers, Orsino arrives on Olivia's estate. The moment the Countess herself appears, Orsino rapturously tells Cesario, "now heaven walks on earth," and goes to greet her with a spring in his step (Nunn 115, Elam 5.1.93). Initially, he is solicitous and respectful to Olivia, but when she cruelly rejects him yet again, and this time to his face rather than by Cesario as her proxy, Orsino loses his temper. The Duke's fury is centered on the fact that he now knows that Olivia loves his servant rather than himself. As he stalks around the courtyard he hurls the following question at the uncivil lady: "Why should I not – in savage jealousy / Like to th'Egyptian thief at point of death / Kill what I love?" (Nunn 116, Elam 5.1.108 and 113-115). Not at all incidentally, Orsino is referring to Cesario in these lines. This is also the very first time Orsino speaks of his love for Cesario. The wonder is that he does so in such a public manner. The homoeroticism apparent here functions in a way that is quite similar to the way Bruce R. Smith describes homoeroticism at work in performances of *Henry V*. Smith considers the Duke of Exeter's report of "the battlefield deaths of the Duke of York and the Earl of Suffolk," which seem to Smith to be "more appropriate to Romeo and Juliet than to two soldiers," referring, of course, to the two young lovers who

died for each other rather than face the world alone or as the spouses of people they could not countenance (122-123). Significantly, Exeter's account does not even attempt to shy away from repeated mention of York and Suffolk kissing one another in their last moments. In fact, Exeter's words both valorize and exalt this kind of same-sex intimacy. For Smith, the "fact that the expression of such love takes place between two men—and that it is narrated by a third man for the pleasure of several thousand others in the theatre—makes it an instance . . . of *homoeroticism*" (123).¹³ As in *Henry V*, Orsino's expression of love for Cesario occurs between two male figures, himself and his boy servant; and although it is not narrated by another man, the fact that, in this instance, it happens in a film rather than on a theatre stage means that it is enacted for the pleasure of, potentially, the millions of other men who have chosen to screen Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, many of whom might well be gay or queer and predisposed to be receptive to such passionate declarations of love between men.

Of course, Orsino does not stop with posing questions to the Countess, who does not, indeed, cannot, love him. He vows with a sneer that he will remove Cesario from Olivia's presence once and for all: "But this your minion, whom I know you love, / And whom, by heaven, I swear, I tender dearly, / Him will I tear out of that cruel eye" (Nunn 116, *Elam* 5.1.121-123).¹⁴ While uttering these words, Orsino stalks over to Cesario and takes Cesario's hand into his own, creating a visual exclamation point, as it were, of his intentions and his feelings. Meanwhile, the phrase "tender dearly" could be glossed as another way of saying, "love," as in "I love him;" it can, as textual editors often note, also be taken to mean that he cares deeply about Cesario. He neither loves, nor cares very much for Olivia despite his many poetic declarations to the contrary. What Schalkwyk

has to say about Orsino in this regard is apropos: the play, in tandem with Nunn's film, reveals the "qualitative difference between Orsino's *desire* for Olivia and his *love* for Cesario, something which the character himself is deeply unaware" until these key moments in both the written and the cinematic texts (125). Thus the punishment that Orsino intends to dole out to Olivia by irrevocably separating her and Cesario actually allows the Duke to secure what he most wants—and has most wanted all along—for himself: an exclusive relationship with Cesario, with someone of his own gender.

Throughout these dramatic and tension-filled moments, Cesario is observing Orsino with nothing less than adoration animating his face. He is, it seems, beyond content to be claimed in such a physical, public, and aggressive way by the man he loves. Echoing his master, he offers his own passionate avowal to Orsino: "And I most jocund, apt, and willingly / To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die" (Nunn 117, Elam 5.1.128-129). Although Cesario has spoken of his love for Orsino before, his readiness to die again and again for that love—though certainly hyperbolic—nevertheless proves quite extraordinary in this extended consideration of the male homoeroticism in Nunn's *Twelfth Night*. In many respects, Cesario's eagerness to die for the man he loves compares to the merchant Antonio's eagerness to die, if need be, for his beloved Bassanio, as was seen in Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*. Though certainly excessive, this is homoerotic love of the highest order.

In addition to the story of Orsino and Cesario, Nunn's treatment of *Twelfth Night*'s other male couple, Antonio and Sebastian (Stephen Mackintosh), is significant. Considering Antonio and Sebastian first requires a return to the prologue that serves as the opening scenes of the film in which the director dramatizes the harrowing events that

brought the two men together in the first place, circumstances that Shakespeare alludes to only in snippets of dialogue in the playtext rather than out-and-out action. So, once more to that dark and stormy night through which the ship bound home to Messaline is making its way. In the vessel's grand salon, two young twins with long, black hair, who are dressed exactly alike in exotic, androgynous outfits complete with veils covering their faces, entertain the assembled company with a lively ditty. The voice high jinks on the part of the performers that ensue reveal that one of them is, in fact, a male, the other a female. This bit of good-natured, gender-bending comedy seems to delight everyone but the man standing removed and aloof at the back of the crowd. The man is dressed in a formal maritime uniform and he has brown, shoulder-length hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He is neither smiling nor frowning; but, in fact, his bright blue eyes are focused with laser-like intensity on the twins and their antics on the makeshift stage across the room. This man with the severe countenance and bearing is, of course, Antonio. And, although it is clear that he has not yet made Sebastian's acquaintance, he is nevertheless mesmerized by the young man. Why? It is just possible, given Sebastian's uninhibited crossdressing in feminine garb, that Antonio's fascination with him derives from the fact that said crossdressing signifies Sebastian's possible sexual availability; that, in short, Sebastian may be willing to play the woman in bed for Antonio since he is at least comfortable with being thought of as a woman by others in order to amuse them in a stage performance.

The fun and games come to an abrupt end when, in the voiced-over words of the film's narrator, the steamer, having strayed off its course because of the storm, runs into serious trouble when it hits "upon submerged rocks," as Nunn puts it ("Introduction"

n.p.). Everyone is thrown into a state of panic; people are being wrenched about as if they were toys, tables and chairs are tipping over, and terrified shrieks are heard as the vessel lists violently to and fro. After changing clothes and gathering what they can of their belongings, the twins venture to the ship's main deck where, within moments, things go from bad to worse. Viola is ripped out of her brother's grasp due to the violence of the wind and the rain swirling around them. Having lost hold of her, Sebastian screams in horror as his sister is tossed into the churning sea. He is momentarily stopped from throwing himself off the deck in order to go after Viola by none other than Antonio. But Antonio is only able to keep the younger man in his arms for a second or two before Sebastian hurls himself off the side of the ship so that he can try to save his only living family member. Antonio is next seen after having climbed onto the ship's rigging so that he has a better view to look at the roiling sea below. It is obvious that he is hoping against hope to catch a glimpse of the twins and of Sebastian in particular. This also makes it clear that Antonio already has a significant emotional investment in Sebastian, one that would drive him to save the young man's life if he could, even at great risk to his own. Furthermore, as the narrative of the homoerotic love these two men come to share continues to unfold, this motif of self-sacrifice on Antonio's part will be repeated in two other, equally dramatic, sets of circumstances.

It is not until some forty minutes later into Nunn's film proper that audiences learn both Sebastian and Antonio survived the wreck of the steamer, the former because of the latter's determined efforts. The scene opens on an idyllic but unnamed location where, presumably, the two men have spent the better part of the previous three months while Sebastian recovered from the trauma he suffered in the disaster that, as far as he is

knows, claimed the life of the sister he tried to rescue from the sea. Sebastian is walking toward a quay at the mouth of a river where a group of men are busy building a ship. Hurrying after him, Antonio asks, with distress evident in his voice, “Will you stay no longer?,” then he reaches out and grabs Sebastian by the arm, forcing the younger man to stop and face him (Nunn 37, Elam 2.1.1). Certain that Sebastian is paying attention to him, Antonio pleads: “Let me yet know of you whither you are bound” (Nunn 37, Elam 2.1.8-9). Joseph Pequigney seizes on the lines cited here in order to argue that Antonio’s “openly amorous language habitual to him whenever he speaks to or about Sebastian—and rarely does his attention turn to anything else—is the foremost clue to the erotic nature of their friendship” (179). As such, it supplements the visual evidence of Antonio’s desire for Sebastian that Nunn provides in both the prologue and this particular scene of his film. The way Nicholas Farrell plays him, Antonio’s face is almost always a study in longing for Sebastian. Nevertheless, in response to Antonio’s entreaty, Sebastian takes his black overcoat from him and says, “No, sooth, sir,” then he turns his back on Antonio and starts to walk away from him (Nunn 37, Elam 2.1.10). But he only goes so far before practically collapsing in evident frustration on a nearby bench.

Within a moment or two, Sebastian turns to Antonio once again; Antonio looks at him with the deepest compassion. It is clear that all Antonio wants to do is to, somehow, make any and all of the pain Sebastian is feeling go away. For Sebastian, the time has come for him to confess the truth: “You must know of me then, Antonio, my name is Sebastian. My father was that Sebastian of Messaline whom I know you have heard of” (Nunn 37, Elam 2.1.15-17). Antonio allows himself the briefest of smiles, indicating that he is indeed familiar with Sebastian’s father, if only by report than by any other means.

Sebastian continues, explaining that his parent “left behind him myself and a sister, Viola, both born in an hour – would we had so ended! But you, sir, altered that; before you took me from the breach of the sea was my sister drowned” (Nunn 37-38; Elam 2.1.17-21). As he is speaking here, it is obvious that Sebastian is only just able to keep from bursting into tears because he loved his sister so deeply; he likely wishes he, too, were dead so that he could be with her in the afterlife. The only thing an honestly affected Antonio can say at this point after hearing Sebastian’s revelations is, “Alas, the day,” but then he sits down right next to the grieving young man (see Figure 9). In a trembling



Figure 9: A compassionate and adoring Antonio (left) attempting to comfort an extremely distraught Sebastian (right) in *Twelfth Night* (dir. Trevor Nunn, 1996), DVD screengrab.

voice, Sebastian continues by describing his sister as a “lady, sir, though it was said she much resembled me, was yet of many accounted beautiful” (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.23-24). Then, worn out from mourning, Sebastian lets his tears burst forth while simultaneously burying his face in Antonio’s chest. Antonio welcomes the chance to comfort Sebastian by wrapping his arms around the young man and holding him tightly. The homoerotic intimacy Antonio and Sebastian experience in this moment is similar to that Orsino and Cesario often share in their relationship.

Sebastian remains in Antonio's arms until the sound of an approaching carriage being pulled by a team of four horses is heard. After drying his eyes with his hands and steadying himself with a deep breath, he leaves Antonio, who hurries after him. As Sebastian strides toward the coach with grim determination, he attempts to apologize to Antonio by tossing over his shoulder the following words: "O good Antonio, forgive me your trouble" (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.31). Antonio will not accept being dismissed in such a way, and once again he grabs Sebastian by the arm and forces the younger man to turn around and face him. "If you will not murder me for my love," he says, "let me be your servant" (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.32-33). Here, Antonio longs to be Sebastian's servant in very nearly the same way that Cesario sought out a similar position in the household of Duke Orsino. Furthermore, Schalkwyk has already pointed out that service in the context Antonio uses it was a fact of life for many during the early modern period in England, and that it was something Shakespeare often used in his plays as a way of bringing his characters together and into dramatic situations involving courtship and romance. On these lines in particular, he writes that Antonio's

demand stems from the necessary mutuality that is entailed by the concepts of friendship and service. Sebastian's acknowledgement of Antonio as either friend or servant would necessarily create a mutual bond between them. If he cannot continue to be his friend, service will allow Antonio to prolong intimate contact with Sebastian, and perhaps even gain some affective hold on him. (128)

There can be no disputing the dynamics Schalkwyk outlines in this passage. Antonio does not wish to be parted from Sebastian regardless of the circumstances, even if that means

placing himself in a subordinate position to the younger man. And it is more than likely that, by so doing, he does indeed hope to secure Sebastian's romantic affections. But his plea is, or so it seems, in vain, as Sebastian firmly, though not unkindly, tells Antonio: "Desire it not. Fare ye well at once" (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.35-36). But after he has boarded the carriage and seated himself, he looks down at Antonio and reveals, "I am bound to the Count Orsino's court. Farewell" (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.38-39). At this point, the only thing Antonio can do is watch the coach as it takes Sebastian away from him. "The gentleness of all the gods go with thee," he says softly to himself, then adds, "I have many enemies in Orsino's court, / Else would I very shortly see thee there –" (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.40-42). Thus it seems that a hapless Antonio has been abandoned by Sebastian. Or does it?

Arguably, this is one instance where Nunn's screenplay of *Twelfth Night* does something of a disservice to those viewers who are familiar with Shakespeare's original. In the source text, Antonio utters two additional lines that prove key to any study of the homoerotic aspects of the relationship he has with Sebastian. Following the mention of his Illyrian enemies, Antonio goes on to say: "But come what may I adore thee so / That danger shall seem sport, and I will go" (Elam 2.1.43-44). There can be no mistaking that the words "I adore thee so" attest to the fact that Antonio, in accord with the insights of Pequigney, already desires, if not outright loves, Sebastian in a romantic and sexual sense by this comparatively early point in their story. For audiences, the antidote to this elision lies in remembering that the Antonio who seems to give up in Nunn's film is the same Antonio who dived into the roiling sea in order to save Sebastian's life despite the risks to his own person. This may alert them to the possibility that, regardless of what he says in this scene about having many enemies in Orsino's court, he will indeed pursue Sebastian.

And it is, of course, to the director's credit that he trusts them to recall that information and to speculate on just such a scenario coming to pass. But the excision of the "I adore thee so" phrase is troubling. Without it, viewers of Nunn's production are given too little of an indication of the homoerotic nature of Antonio's interest in Sebastian. The filmmaker thus makes it far too easy for them to rest on the assumption that it is simply in most humans' nature to come to the aid of others when they are in danger, regardless of where they may fall on the affective spectrum in terms of their love object desires. Put in slightly different terms, the absence of Antonio's "I adore thee so" threatens to render any hint of non-normative sexuality where he and Sebastian are concerned completely unintelligible.

Some thirty minutes further on into Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, Sebastian, with a *Baedeker Guidebook to Illyria* in hand, a detail Rothwell approvingly describes as a nice "touch of whimsy" on the filmmakers' part, is seen making his way through the bustling streets of the market town that sits in the shadow of Duke Orsino's palatial residence (227). Within seconds it is made clear that Sebastian believes he is being followed and that he is trying to escape from his unknown pursuer. However, Sebastian fails to elude the man, who catches up with him rather quickly. The man happens to be dressed somewhat oddly in the comely garb of a Christian cleric, but as soon as he removes his hat and glasses, he reveals himself to Sebastian to be none other than his savior, Antonio. Cynthia Lewis describes Antonio as the ultimate Christian priest: "If any figure in *Twelfth Night* calls Christ to mind," she writes, "it is Antonio," whose role is to be a "Christ-like giver of love" in the play (92, 93). It is interesting to consider that, insofar as Antonio's having usurped the attire of a man of the cloth, Nunn's thinking was on the

same wavelength as Lewis's. But it also demands arguing that Antonio's love for Sebastian is far more secular than religious. Indeed, he looks at Sebastian with a sheepish expression and confesses, "I could not stay behind you," by which he means that he was unable to remain separated from Sebastian (Nunn 71; Elam 3.3.4). Though taken aback by the presence of someone he did not expect to see again so soon, Sebastian is nevertheless thrilled to see Antonio. In point of fact, he exclaims, "My kind Antonio," then he flings himself into Antonio's arms (Nunn 71; Elam 3.3.13). Caught up in the moment, Antonio squeezes his eyes shut and holds Sebastian tightly, indicating how profoundly satisfying being so intimate with Sebastian is for him. This, it warrants pointing out, is the reunion of friends . . . and lovers. Hence, the embrace between these two men is at least as homoerotic as, if not more so, than any of those shared by Orsino and Cesario as discussed previously.

When their hug reaches its end, Antonio continues his explanation about why he came in pursuit of Sebastian: "But not all love to see you – you sir are / A stranger in these parts," he says, by which he means that he came to Illyria not only because of his love for Sebastian, but also so that Sebastian would have the company of a familiar face while he pursues his quest, whatever that quest may entail (Nunn 71; Elam 3.3.6-11). Sebastian, as his response suggests, is grateful for Antonio's having sought him out: "I can no other answer make but thanks, / And thanks. And ever oft good turns / Are shuffled off with such uncurrent pay" (Nunn 71: Elam 3.3.14-16). He wishes, in fact, that he could thank Antonio for the kindness Antonio has shown him with something other than words. That being the case, after glancing at his guidebook, he presents Antonio with the following rather curious suggestion:

I am not weary, and 'tis long to night.
I pray you, let us satisfy our eyes
With the memorials and the things of fame
That do renown this city. (Nunn 71, 73; Elam 3.3.21-24)

On a literal level, Sebastian is merely proposing that he and Antonio spend the rest of what is left of the afternoon sightseeing in Illyria. But it does not require a huge leap of the imagination to also understand that, on another level, what Sebastian is really asking Antonio qualifies as the late twentieth and early twenty-first century equivalent of his asking Antonio out on a date. This understated romantic moment between these two men is crucially important as it, in tandem with Sebastian's spontaneously throwing himself into Antonio's arms moments before, testifies to the fact that Antonio's homoerotic feelings for Sebastian are not entirely one-sided as many critics of *Twelfth Night* have been all-too quick to insist.

Alas, Antonio must refuse Sebastian's offer because he has risked enough by appearing in Illyria in the first place. That being the case, Antonio leads Sebastian to a spot very nearby that affords a bit more privacy in order to explain why he is declining to go sightseeing in the city with him. Once out of the earshot of passersby, he proceeds to confide to Sebastian:

I do not without danger walk these streets,
Once in a seafight 'gainst Orsino's galleys
I did some service – of such note indeed
That were I ta'en here, it would scarce be answered. (Nunn 73; Elam
3.3.25-28)

Awestruck by this revelation, Sebastian responds with: “Belike you slew a great number of his people?,” (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.29). Indeed, this line registers the fact that Sebastian is wholly impressed by the notion that Antonio was valorous enough to take on a cadre of Orsino’s troops; it is something he finds attractive about Antonio. Diverging somewhat from Shakespeare’s text, Nunn allows Antonio to confirm Sebastian’s supposition when he comments, “For which, if I be lapsèd in this place, / I shall pay dear,” which causes Sebastian to become immediately concerned for Antonio’s welfare: “Do not then walk too open;” this is yet another verbal indication that his feelings for Antonio are on a par with the older man’s for him and encompass the homoerotic, as well (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.36-37). At the very least, if Sebastian did not admire and care for Antonio on some level, he would not be so quick to express his wonder at the nature of Antonio’s exploits or his worry about Antonio’s well-being.

In any case, being in something of a rush to conceal himself from the Illyrian authorities, Antonio goes on to tell Sebastian breathlessly that he shall find him “at the Elephant,” then he hands the younger man a small black bag that is obviously filled with money (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.39). Understandably, Sebastian is confused about why Antonio has just given him his purse, so Antonio explains: “Haply your eye shall light upon some toy / You have desired to purchase; and your store, I think, is not for idle markets, sir” (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.43-46). Antonio starts to rush off, but stops himself long enough to reiterate excitedly to Sebastian, “At th’Elephant;” in response Sebastian chuckles and says, “I do remember” (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.48). Then the two men part and go their separate ways. But viewers of Nunn’s *Twelfth Night*, who, after all, lack the benefit of textual glosses, would do well to pause here and consider in more detail the

implications of what they have just witnessed in this exchange between Sebastian and Antonio.

At first, it might seem surprising that Antonio would simply hand over his purse containing any of what can be thought of in late twentieth and early twenty-first century colloquial terms as his “hard-earned money.” But this is the same Antonio who risked his own life to save Sebastian in the shipwreck that brought them together and, presumably, has overseen the younger man’s recovery from nearly drowning in the sea. This is also the same Antonio whose obvious desire for Sebastian extends beyond shared traumatic experience or homosocial camaraderie and into the realm of the affective, the romantic, and the homoerotic. Pequigney makes the claim that Antonio does what he does here with his money “with the ulterior motive of pleasing if not purchasing the desired youth” (204). Unfortunately, this assessment serves to perpetuate the tiresome notion that the only way an older (gay) man like Antonio can secure the affections of a younger (straight) man like Sebastian is to buy those affections, which does not paint either Antonio or Sebastian in the most flattering of lights. In fact, this rather cynical idea makes their relationship seem both predatory and mercenary when neither adjective describes the truth. In keeping with his generous character, Antonio gives his purse to Sebastian for no other reason than so that the latter will have sufficient funds to purchase a luxury item if he happens to come across one that he fancies during his wanderings in Illyria. And Sebastian accepts it in kind.

A great deal more suggestiveness attends on the Elephant, the location Antonio instructs Sebastian to rendezvous with him at after he has completed his sightseeing tour of the Illyrian capital. Uninformed viewers of Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* will undoubtedly be

content with thinking of the Elephant as roughly equivalent to their contemporary ideas of what a hotel or a motel is: a place to rest for the night. However, citing an essay by Gustave Ungerer in a footnote to Shakespeare's reference to the Elephant and the London suburbs, Elam reveals that "there was indeed an Elephant Inn on Bankside" during the early modern period, "which was in practice 'an inn-cum brothel'" (272).¹⁵ In any study of the male homoerotics of *Twelfth Night*, textual or cinematic, this bit of information cannot be ignored. Yu Jin Ko considers the subject of the Elephant further than does Elam: "It is not at all clear what kind of brothel the Oliphant was, though it does seem clear, as Alan Bray has demonstrated, that Elizabethan London had its share of homosexual brothels" (71).¹⁶ The implications of this insight are unmistakable: the Elephant at which Antonio and Sebastian are going to meet could well be a place where sex between males was not only encouraged, but actively sought out. Whether or not such liaisons were little more than financial transactions is, in this specific case at least, beside the point. Antonio and Sebastian can certainly take a room at the Elephant if they wish without participating in its larger sexual economy. Doing so would, not incidentally, afford them the privacy in which to (re-)consummate their relationship on a physical level without fear of interruption or censure. From this perspective, the fact that Sebastian does not outright refuse to meet Antonio at a place like the Elephant proves significant as yet one more indication that his desire for Antonio matches Antonio's desire for him.

In accord with Shakespeare's play, following their night at the Elephant, Antonio makes a dramatic reappearance in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* when he intervenes in the duel that the rascals Sir Toby Belch (Mel Smith) and Fabian (Peter Gunn) have engineered for their amusement between the foppish Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Richard E. Grant) and a

clueless Cesario. Given that Cesario looks exactly like him, Antonio, of course, thinks he is entering into this manufactured fray in order to protect his beloved Sebastian. Seeing what is taking place between Sir Andrew and Cesario in one of the orchards on the estate of the Countess Olivia, a look of horror spreads across his face and, from his perch on the top of an outer wall ringing the grounds, he shouts to the utter surprise of one and all, “Put up your sword” (Nunn 98; Elam 3.4.307). Then, grim-faced, Antonio leaps off the wall and down into the orchard, strides over to the person he is certain is Sebastian, takes Sebastian’s sword, and forcefully moves the young man behind him so that he is the one facing Sir Andrew. In a flat, determined voice he says, “If this young gentleman / Have done offence, I take the fault on me” (Nunn 98; Elam 3.4.307-308). When asked by Sir Toby to explain exactly who he is, Antonio, while making a pointed show of assuring himself that Sebastian’s sword will work the way it is intended, tells the crafty man that he is someone “that for his love dares yet do more / Than you have heard him brag to you he will” (Nunn 98; Elam 3.4.311-312). These are the words and actions of high romantic chivalry. Antonio may as well be the fantastical knight-in-shining-armor and Sebastian his “damsel” in distress. Hyperbole aside, the Antonio defending Sebastian here is the very same Antonio who rescued Sebastian from the sea and followed him to Illyria at equally great peril to himself, both the actions of a man who loves another man so much that he would, quite literally, do anything for him, including die for him if necessary. Again, this is male homoeroticism in its most exalted form.

It is thus no small wonder that Antonio’s sense of betrayal is so palpable when “Sebastian” refuses to help him by returning his purse after he has been apprehended by Duke Orsino’s militia and stands in desperate need of his money. “Will you deny me

now?," he roars at the perplexed young man, then, in one swift movement, he pushes him away, causing the coins Cesario was attempting to give to Antonio instead of Antonio's own funds to go flying every which way (Nunn 100; Elam 3.4.344). Sure that they have a situation on their hands, Orsino's men choose that moment to punch Antonio square in the stomach and he doubles over in pain. After he recovers, he looks at "Sebastian" with barely concealed contempt in his eyes. After saving his life, after coming to be with him and him only in a foreign land, after spending at least one night in which their passion for each other was given free reign, and after having placed himself into the middle of a duel not his own on "Sebastian's" behalf, he is certainly justified in feeling as if he deserves better treatment from him.

Cesario, not surprisingly considering the circumstances, remains mystified by Antonio's behavior, while the soldiers and Sir Toby, Sir Andrew, and Fabian could care less about why Antonio is so upset with "Sebastian." When confronted later by Orsino, the count demands to know how Antonio came to be in the predicament he now finds himself in: a long sought after prisoner. Once again, Antonio looks darkly at "Sebastian" and claims in a voice tight with emotion, "A witchcraft drew me hither. / That most ingrateful boy there by your side," and then he erupts in total anger when he adds, "For his sake / Faced the danger of this adverse town" (Nunn 114 and 115; Elam 5.1.78 and 80). For those familiar with Shakespeare's later play *Othello*, the word witchcraft might well resonate when they recall that, according to her incensed father, Brabantio, the only thing that could have made Desdemona fall in love with what she feared to look upon is Othello's spells and enchantments. Othello insists, however, that stories about himself and his experiences were the only form of witchcraft he used on Desdemona. On this

point, Antonio's feelings are akin to those of Brabantio: the only way he could have been fooled into believing, trusting, and, ultimately, caring so deeply for someone as "ugly" as Sebastian has turned out to be despite his considerable physical beauty, is through some sort of witchcraft. From his point of view, there can be no other explanation. And in the painful moments discussed here, the depth of Antonio's emotion at being so callously cast aside serve, if it is needed, as a final exclamation point in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* to the homoerotic nature of his desire and love for Sebastian.

A reminder of the distinction made between the homosocial and the homoerotic in the "Introduction" of this study might prove useful at this juncture. It was Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who, borrowing it from the social sciences, defined the term homosociality in the way it is being used here in regard to Nunn's *Twelfth Night*: "it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex," such as the phenomenon known colloquially as male bonding and other activities in which men look out for and promote the interests of other men (1). But as Sedgwick takes great care to make clear, homosociality is not to be understood as being synonymous with homosexuality; nevertheless, homosociality is almost always "potentially erotic" because, hypothetically speaking, at least, homosociality and homosexuality exist on a "continuum" that links these two ontologies in the realm of experiential possibility (1). From this perspective, Orsino and Cesario and Antonio and Sebastian qualify as male characters involved in homosocial relationships with each other; all four are concerned with the welfare of their counterparts regardless of where their romantic predilections lie. The potentially (homo)erotic nature of Orsino and Cesario's and Antonio and Sebastian's associations is made legible in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* via the film's representations of intimacy, physicality, and verbal passion that occur

repeatedly as these characters' stories unfold. As has been shown above, the relationship between the characters of Orsino and Cesario is marked by intimate physical contact and rhetorical challenge. Orsino often drapes his arm over Cesario's shoulders; they share an almost-kiss as well as a full-on kiss while Cesario is in his usurped attire as a young man; they find themselves in the privacy of a bath with one of them in a state of complete undress; and they both give vent to their anger and frustration with the other's views on the "opposite" gender, a circumstance that betrays their mutual desire for each other. Similarly, Antonio and Sebastian are depicted as embracing several times as they reunite and reunite again after washing up on the shores of Illyria; they may have slept together at the Elephant; and Antonio's sense of betrayal when "Sebastian" leaves him to fend for himself after his arrest by Orsino's soldiers engenders his passionate denunciation of the ungrateful boy. Even if, as Alan Bray has shown,¹⁷ such behaviors were commonplace among men in the 15th and 16th centuries in England and not necessarily explicit signs of homoeroticism, much less out-and-out homosexuality, they register differently in a late 20th/early 21st century queer reading of Nunn's *Twelfth Night*. These actions all qualify as being homoerotic as opposed to being homosocial because of the virulent homophobic proscriptions against them that prevail in the present day. While they quite often do get angry with each other for myriad reasons, men are not supposed to be physically intimate with each other like Orsino and Cesario and Antonio and Sebastian are; they are not supposed to kiss one another like Orsino and Cesario do; and they are most certainly not supposed to sleep together as Antonio and Sebastian likely do for months on end and, later, during a single night at the Elephant before Antonio's capture. What Nunn has thus succeeded in effecting in his cinematic text of *Twelfth Night*, is the creation of a queer

space that allows for a focus on “the awkward, disruptive demands which powerfully homosexual feelings make,” as Paul Hammond puts it (68), on those characters – Orsino and Cesario and Antonio and Sebastian – who experience an emotional tumult that is given explicit homoerotic expression. This homoerotic expression manifests in the explicit depictions of their intimate physical and affective relations with one another. And that, in itself, is a significant achievement in the history of Shakespeare on film.

It is not an overstatement to assert that with *Twelfth Night* in particular, among all his plays, Shakespeare succeeds at blending the melancholic, the vicious, the mirthful, and the joyful in a way that uncannily mirrors the human experience of life. So, it can be said, does Nunn in his cinematic adaptation of the play. As Rothwell notes at the conclusion of his commentary on the film in relation to the original play, “Shakespeare created a verbal structure that probes the sadness and sweetness in the mystery of life, and Nunn has gracefully and wittily put that daunting challenge into moving images” (229). True enough. Yet where Nunn errs, and Shakespeare does not, at least not in the same way or to the same extent, is at the end of his otherwise outstanding production. Coursen agrees with this assessment:

Where does this film not work?—at the end. But then it often does not work on stage either, where the ending can be crowded. It calls for exquisite blocking. Here, it could have been condensed, with film solving some of the traffic problems and giving us shorthand for some of the language. (204).

For Coursen, though, the reason the Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* does not succeed at the end is because it is unwieldy, featuring as it does too many characters, too much stage business,

and too much dialogue all crammed into a few minutes' time. But it is crucial to understand that what Coursen is commenting on here is the movie's denouement—which does follow Shakespeare's text quite closely—not its actual finish. For reasons that are not explained in the published screenplay, Nunn includes a coda that serves as the true conclusion to his film, and it is this coda that is quite problematic, at least for queer audiences, considering all that precedes it.

Magro and Douglas articulate the issue at stake in the close of Nunn's film as follows: "it rehearses homosexual desire and then disavows it in order to postulate the naturalness and transparency of heterosexual relations" (55). The rehearsal of the homosexual desire Magro and Douglas mention in this cogent statement of the problem at hand has, it is to be hoped, been explored as fully as possible in this chapter. As was seen, Orsino, all the way until the movie's denouement, thinks he has been dealing with Cesario, the young male servant that he falls in love with while attempting to accord to the precepts of compulsory heterosexuality in his pursuit of the Countess Olivia. Similarly, from the very beginning, Antonio's interest in, and later devotion to, Sebastian, is a function of his requited love for that young man. Both of these male couples enjoy hugs, almost kisses, and for Antonio and Sebastian at least, a probable night of sexual passion, all ontological signs for both the characters and audiences of a homoeroticism that is undeniable. So when, in the coda to his *Twelfth Night*, Nunn chooses to show Cesario in his woman's weeds, dancing with Orsino at a wedding celebration, and an Antonio stalking away—alone—from Olivia's estate into the cold, gray twilight, queer viewers of the movie, and their allies, have every right to feel betrayed.

The ending to Nunn's *Twelfth Night* is pure heterosexist fantasy that, once again in the words of Magro and Douglas, exposes the fact that "it is heterosexuality that is the dependent concept, relying on homosexuality to provide it with its seeming authenticity" (55). And therein lies the ultimate value of Nunn's production to the larger project of screening the male homoerotics of Shakespearean drama on film. Where Orsino and Cesario are concerned, the director's coda overlooks the fact that, at the end of Shakespeare's play, the Duke is still talking to Cesario, to his boy, who has sworn that he "never shouldst love woman like to" him (Elam, 5.1.264). It also ignores the possibility that, when he says he looks forward to seeing Cesario in woman's clothes, the Count literally means Cesario, not Viola; that, in other words, Orsino may be rather titillated by the thought of dallying sexually and otherwise with a crossdressed Cesario.

The continued homoerotic potentialities are even more pronounced where Antonio and Sebastian are concerned. Following Pequigney's only partially tongue-in-cheek query about a *ménage à trois* between Antonio, Sebastian, and Olivia resulting from the latter two's marital union, Alan Sinfield comments that:

Sebastian's marriage to a stranger heiress need not significantly affect Antonio's relationship with him . . . They might all live together in Olivia's house . . . So Antonio need not appear at the end of *Twelfth Night* as the defeated and melancholy outsider that critics [and Nunn] have supposed; a director, reading only partly against the grain, might show him delighted with his boyfriend's lucky break. (65-66).¹⁸

While it is a far-fetched idea that the Antonio, Sebastian, and Olivia triad would set up permanent housekeeping in the manner Pequigney and Sinfield put forth, Sebastian,

though married, was free to do as he pleased given his position as, now, a gentleman of the nobility. He could, in other words, elect to prolong his relationship with Antonio indefinitely and without necessarily risking his vows, as long as he made at least some effort to keep up normative appearances. But Sinfield is right to point out that there is no reason whatsoever why Antonio would not be happy that Sebastian had managed to secure a living for himself that could, when all is said and done, benefit both of them in ways neither imagined before.

In conclusion, it can be said that, with his penchant for interpolation, Nunn could have easily included a scene or a montage at the end of his *Twelfth Night* that shows Antonio and Sebastian embracing as the former prepares to depart, but agreeing to meet in Messaline, perhaps, where they can once again enjoy all of the emotional, affective, and erotic pleasures that two men can share with each other if they are so inclined. To these he could have added images of a crossdressed Cesario leading an ecstatic Orsino to bed, ready to consummate a union of two people capable of truly delighting in each other and their unorthodox love for one another. Instead, Nunn chose to end his film in a way that accords with heterosexist paradigms. But his queer audiences and their allies will always have the comfort of screening *Twelfth Night* in the way that Sinfield advocates for: “against the grain, queering the text,” and thus in a way that makes perfect sense to them from their unique perspective.

Notes

¹ On the history of The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, see “Hunsdon’s/Chamberlain’s/King’s Men, 1594-1608,” chapter 16 of Andrew Gurr’s *The Shakespearian Playing Companies*

(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 278-305. Gurr's more recent volume, *The Shakespeare Company, 1594-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), also contains a wealth of good information on The Lord Chamberlain's Men. On theatre and the Inns of Court, see A. Wigfall Green's *The Inns of Court and Early English Drama* (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1965).

² The extant manuscripts of Manningham's diary are held by the British Library, London, and have not yet been digitized for public use as far as can be determined. The publishers of Sorlien's work saw fit to include a facsimile of two pages from one of these texts as part of the unpaginated prefatory material in his still unsurpassed volume. See *The Diary of John Manningham of the Middle Temple 1602 – 1603* (Hanover, NH: The University Press of New England, 1976).

³ Editions of Plautus's works are readily available. For information on *Inganni* in one of its Italian derivatives, see Paul Edmondson's *Twelfth Night: A Guide to the Play and Its Theatrical Life* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 16-22.

⁴ Charles Whitney, in *Early Responses to Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), speculates that the lawyer-in-training's delight in Malvolio "may not have been merely superior, as the result of repressing a connection between himself and the play's festive killjoy, but also laughter at himself or someone in his position, a potential suitor for place as well as for spouse" (128). Though it is doubtful Manningham would have enjoyed being made into a dupe like Malvolio, Whitney's more salient point is that he might well have identified with the mistreated steward in some respects because he, too, would have needed to secure an advantageous marriage for himself in order to flourish in the social and professional worlds he inhabited. To the idea that Manningham

might have seen something of himself in the character of Malvolio, Whitney points out that this ought to remind audiences “that festive rituals of expulsion may include awareness that the identities of group members and the expelled ‘others’ are reversible” (128). Put in another way, the same kind of exclusion could happen to anyone and for the most arbitrary of reasons.

⁵ The “Introduction” to Nunn’s screenplay of *Twelfth Night* is not paginated.

⁶ That there is any strife at all between the Messalines and the Illyrians is referenced only two times in Shakespeare’s text, both involving Antonio, and neither involving merchants. The first of these occurs when Antonio, having followed him to Illyria, confides in Sebastian that he was “Once in a sea-fight ’gainst the count his galleys” and “did some service of such note indeed” that he would be punished severely if caught by Orsino’s men in, what for him, is enemy territory (Elam 3.3.26-28). The second of these is a confirmation of the information in the first, and it occurs when Antonio is being interrogated by Orsino. Orsino characterizes Antonio as a pirate, a thief, and a brawler of the worst sort. Antonio denies these charges, but claims that, “on base and ground enough,” he is “Orsino’s enemy” (Elam 3.3.70-72).

⁷ To avoid cluttering up the text of this chapter going forward, the MLA in-text citations from Nunn’s *Twelfth Night: A Screenplay*, and their correlates in Elam’s *The Arden Shakespeare: Twelfth Night, Or What You Will*, will take the following parenthetical format: (Nunn 12; Elam 1.2.49-52).

⁸ Specifically, Orgel cites Barish’s *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) and Jardine’s *Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983 and 1989).

⁹ The same would apply, of course, to the Viola/Olivia relationship.

¹⁰ The phrasing here is a deliberate borrowing from Alan Sinfield and the title of his essay, “How to Read *The Merchant of Venice* Without Being Heterosexualist,” which is Chapter 4 of his volume, *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality: Unfinished Business in Cultural Materialism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 53-67.

¹¹ On James I and his royal favorites, see Michael B. Young’s *King James and the History of Homosexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2000).

¹² For more on favoritism in general, see historians J.H. Elliott and L.W.B. Brockliss’s edited collection, *The World of the Favourite* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).

¹³ The section of *Henry V* that Smith refers to here occurs at 4.6.7 through 4.6.32. See William Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, Ed. T.W. Craik, The Arden Shakespeare, Third Series (London: Routledge / Cengage Learning, 1995), pp. 306-308.

¹⁴ For a discussion of the homoerotic significance of the term minion that Orsino uses in this citation, see “Master and Minion,” Chapter Six of Bruce R. Smith’s *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1991 and 1994), pp. 189-223.

¹⁵ Ungerer’s essay is entitled, ““My Lady’s a Catayan, We are Politicians, and Malvolio’s a Peg-a-Ramsie,” and it appears in *Shakespeare Survey* 32 (1979), pp. 85-104.

¹⁶ In his consideration of what kind of a place the Elephant could be in *Twelfth Night*, Ko, like Elam, also references Ungerer’s essay. Unlike Elam however, Ko uses Ungerer’s alternate spelling of Oliphant instead of Elephant.

¹⁷ See Bray's *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982 and 1995); "Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England," in *Queering the Renaissance*, Ed. Jonathan Goldberg (London and Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), pp. 40-61; and *The Friend* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

¹⁸ See Pequigney, "The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*," in *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, eds. Deborah E. Barker and Ivo Kamps (London and New York: Verso, 1995), pp.178-195; esp. 182.

CHAPTER 5

I AM YOUR OWN FOREVER: SCREENING THE MALE HOMOEROTICS OF *OTHELLO*

Othello stands as one of Shakespeare's most celebrated – and most disturbing – tragedies. Almost certainly written immediately after *Hamlet*, the first documented performance of the play was on the 1st of November, 1604. It might, as Lois Potter explains, “have been finished in time to be acted before the death of Elizabeth I and the plagues that closed the theatres for much of 1603-4, or the recorded performance may have been one of the first in James I's reign” (6). Regardless, *Othello* “belongs to a period when the London theatres were competing to produce plays of an apparently new genre, domestic drama” (6). Although the action unfolds in both Venice and Cyprus, and there are hints of nationalistic themes in the war that never materializes between the Venetians and the invading Turks, *Othello* qualifies as a domestic tragedy because of the fact that it charts the terrible disintegration of a marriage – perhaps the most insular and intimate of human social institutions.¹ And, given his penchant for innovation, it makes perfect sense that Shakespeare was involved in his own idiosyncratic way with both the genesis and the evolution of what constituted an original form of theatrical representation that Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences would embrace with characteristic enthusiasm.

As it traveled through time from the early 17th to the early 21st century, *Othello* would remain a popular, but increasingly problematic, work of drama. Concerns with the coarseness – particularly where sexual matters are involved – of the play's language were noted in the 1700s and 1800s. The offending lines were dealt with accordingly, usually by the means of elision in performance and publication. Furthermore, because of the

unavoidable legacy of slavery in the West, as well as the institutionalized misogyny that pervades Western culture at large, *Othello* became something of a problem play by the 20th and early 21st centuries. But beyond the issues raised by those with investments in racial, postcolonial, gender, and feminist concerns, *Othello* has also been the subject of what can be, in the broadest sense, characterized as queer critical inquiry.

Despite the problematics related to race, postcoloniality, gender, feminist, and sexuality touched on above, directors and performing artists have not shied away from bringing *Othello* to the big and the small screens alike. In fact, including appropriations and more or less literal adaptations of the tragedy, Kenneth S. Rothwell lists 25 film and television productions of *Othello* as having appeared between 1908, when Vitagraph's 10 minute, black-and-white silent version made its debut, and 2001, when Tim Blake Nelson's teen-oriented "*O*" once again brought the play to the attention of cinema audiences (352-354). In keeping with the overall parameters of this study, this chapter will offer analytical consideration of three of these movies: Orson Welles's *Othello* (1952), Laurence Olivier's *Othello* (1965), and Oliver Parker's *Othello* (1995). Each of these productions, it is argued, deals with the male homoeroticism so clearly evident in Shakespeare's original playtext in specific ways that are indicative of the historical periods from which they emerged.

Before delving into the specifics of the male homoerotics evident in the films that will serve as the exemplars for this chapter's discussion, it proves instructive to consider the interventions that have been made into *Othello* as a written, theatrical text from a queer perspective. This is because many of the insights and questions raised by this kind of analysis find their way into *Othello* in its cinematic incarnations. As such, the queer

line of interpretation of *Othello* can be traced back to the work of Stanley Edgar Hyman who, over forty years ago, wrote that the character of Iago is “motivated by strong latent homosexuality (or acts as does a person so motivated). This is not only abundantly clear in the play, but it is clearly of Shakespeare’s deliberate contrivance,” rather than a facet the playwright derived from his source materials (101). Indeed, directly comparing Iago to the character that, in Cinthio’s *Hecatombithi*, served as Iago’s prototype, Hyman goes on to insist that Shakespeare’s Iago “neither loves Desdemona nor believes for a moment that she loves Cassio. . . . It is he [Iago] who unconsciously loves both Othello and Cassio; that love is repressed and, by the defense mechanism called ‘reaction formation,’ turned into hate” – creating a set of circumstances not to be found in Cinthio (101). This is a classic Freudian/psychoanalytic reading of Iago. And while there is no doubt that it was a groundbreaking and insightful interpretation forty years ago, in the second decade of the 21st century, it comes across as condescending and homophobic.

In fact, Hyman’s analysis could only have been produced from the presumptively normative heterosexual reading position he inhabits and that results in a view of homosexuality as always already the opposite – rather than the equal – of itself. This is why Hyman perceives Iago’s homosexuality in the negative: as latent, unconscious, and repressed. Within the superstructure that is hegemonic heterosexuality, homosexuality can only ever be hidden, unknown, and regulated, as opposed to open, above board, and uninhibited. Indeed, this is how, as Foucault has painstakingly explained in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, heterosexuality perpetuates itself as the gold standard of human interpersonal relations. By preemptorily defining and policing homosexuality, heterosexuality can control what it considers to be its opposite on its own terms.² Thus, in

this reading, because he is presumed to be a homosexual rather than a heterosexual, there is something inherently and fundamentally unnatural and wrong about Iago. He is, in Hyman's words, filled with "contempt for women" and "disgust with heterosexual love and marriage," three of the cornerstones at the heart of the patriarchal system in Western culture (102). Homosexuals, from this adamantly heterosexist perspective, can only have dislike for women and an extreme discomfort with the very idea of opposite gender sexual activities and the institution of holy matrimony. Hyman gives no thought at all to the possibility that homosexuals can and do like women without wanting or needing to have sex with them, or the possibility that there are other ways for human beings to love and to have stable, long-term relationships (the equivalent of heterosexual marriages) with people of the same gender. And that serves to provincialize his psychoanalytic reading of Iago in a way that renders it suspect.

Hyman proceeds to claim that Iago's supposition that Othello is having an ongoing sexual affair with Iago's wife, Emilia, is nothing less than Iago's "unconscious wish that Othello go to bed with him" instead, and that Iago is jealous of Desdemona because she is the one Othello goes to bed with rather than himself (104, 107). Of course, the unwritten assumption here is that Othello and Iago have never slept together as lovers prior to the action of *Othello* proper. Given that both are part of an all-male milieu – military service – known throughout recorded history for the prevalence of homoerotic couplings within its ranks – such a heterosexist conjecture warrants qualification.³ Be that as it may, Cassio's dream about making love to Desdemona that Iago "reluctantly" relates to Othello, then, becomes the fantastical means by which Iago transforms himself into the imagined object of sexual desire that is, in turn, pursued by both Cassio and Othello –

two exceptionally virile men that Iago longs to be ravished by, perhaps simultaneously, while in a state of decadent homosexual excess. Taking all of these forces into account leads Hyman to the perhaps inevitable conclusion that Iago's suggestion to Othello that, rather than poison her, Othello should strangle Desdemona in the very bed where they sleep and have sex, is "in this context a strikingly homosexual wish, the transformation of the heterosexual act into murder," a murder that would, for all intents and purposes, remove Desdemona as an impediment to Iago's sublimated desire to be with Othello as his one and only friend and lover (114). A "strikingly homosexual wish?" This disturbing pronouncement serves, in effect, to stereotype all homosexuals – as opposed to only just Iago, a *character* in a Shakespearean tragedy – as psychopaths whose sole option is to kill women to have the opportunity to be with the men they desire and cannot secure for themselves in any other way than by eliminating the competition. Still, quoting Desdemona's last words, Hyman manages, yet again, to equate the "homosexual motivations" that brought about her death at Othello's – and, by extension, Iago's – hands, with the unnatural and the foul (117). There can be no question but that Iago is the villain of *Othello*; however, he is not, as Hyman seems to believe, villainous solely because he is a homosexual in the (out)dated psychoanalytic sense of that word.

Ben Saunders's more recent discussion of Iago's use of the term "clyster-pipes" (2.1.176) in reference to Cassio's kissing of his fingers while he talks to Desdemona after their arrival on Cyprus seems to pick up the psychoanalytic thread where Hyman left off despite Saunders's disavowal that he does "not see Iago's clyster-pipes as a means to reintroduce . . . a traditional Freudian interpretation of the character as a 'repressed homosexual'" (151). This is because, Saunders explains, while such a reading comes

across to him as being “perceptive in its acknowledgement of the dynamic role played by male-male desire,” it is also a critical practice best avoided given the unavoidable fact that the resulting “dogmatically Freudian accounts of sexuality are frequently homophobic and dependent on categories of sexual identity that cannot be applied to Renaissance texts without anachronism” (151). Nevertheless, Saunders then proceeds to construct an elaborate gloss of Iago’s clyster-pipes as symbolic of enema tubes that would be used in the purgation of bodily waste. Hence, by conflating clyster-pipes and enema tubes together in this manner, Cassio’s fingers are instruments that have quite likely been in, significantly at the outset of Saunders’s argument, an unidentified character’s anus.⁴ What follows is Saunders’s attempt to convince his readers that Iago represents “a portrait of the villain as anal-retentive artist” (150) who revels in the manifest pleasures of clyster-pipe/enema tube-induced eliminations. The detritus Iago enjoys expelling in this manner is Desdemona, with her “excessive [heterosexual] desire” (154) for Othello as well as Othello himself, whom Iago cannot countenance because of his status as a Moor whose dark skin brands him the equivalent of a waste product unworthy of participating in civilized, white, patriarchal, Christian culture (175). Thus, as Saunders concludes, Iago’s “‘monstrous birth’ is no welcome and innocent baby, then, but rather a tremendous evacuation—the inevitable and horrific consequence of a ‘diet of revenge.’ And the complete success of Iago’s enema is attested to when this masterful” manipulator refuses to speak after all of his misdeeds have been revealed and he stands in the custody of the Venetian authorities (175-176). There is, in other words, nothing left for him to expel from his mind or body. The thorough purge of wastes that Iago sought

and took such pleasure in effecting has been achieved; he is left to revel in the satisfied silence and relief of post-enema-induced bliss.

But it demands arguing that Saunders's psychoanalytic reading of Iago's clyster-pipes is not so far removed from Hyman's as he would have his readers believe. The ultimate purgation of Desdemona and Othello that Iago has given such monstrous "birth" to could also be seen, in Hyman's words, as a "strikingly homosexual wish" that subjects heterosexuals to eradication by murder – a murder that, no matter how vicariously, Iago as, specifically, a homosexual, takes great erotic pleasure in bringing about. The Iago that emerges from the interpretation that Saunders constructs in his work is just as deviant and not at all normal (read: not heterosexual) as the Iago that Hyman constructs in his study. Though, cleverly, it is never alluded to by him outright, the heterosexist presumption that informs Saunders's essay is that straight males and their literary representations would never derive sexual enjoyment from the administration of an enema to themselves or any other person. Such satisfaction is something only gay or queer males who, like Iago, are deemed to be sick and perverted, are capable of experiencing. However, the point bears repeating: Iago is not evil because his erotic desires are non-normative; he is evil simply because he is evil. Equating the two like Hyman and Saunders do in their respective analyses does a serious disservice to the larger project of Shakespearean criticism.

On the other side of the interpretive coin, Arthur L. Little and Robert Matz are two scholars whose criticism of *Othello* is, arguably, more nuanced as regards the play's repeated evocations of male same-sex homoeroticism. Indeed, both Little and Matz read *Othello* without being heterosexist, to borrow Alan Sinfield's titular phrasing;⁵ thus they part company with Hyman and Saunders. In his piece, Little uses the Freudian-

psychoanalytic concept of the primal scene to interrogate the racial anxieties that pervade the dramatic text of *Othello*. These anxieties, he insists, are both reflected and refracted in the play's treatment of sexuality. Indeed, Little goes so far as to argue that the way *Othello* "responds to and creates these anxieties is by mocking the sexual coupling of Othello and Desdemona and by associating it with other culturally horrifying scenes of sexuality, especially bestiality and homosexuality" (306). Little makes a strong case for reading this vision as a description of a homosexual encounter between the ensign and the lieutenant. Thus here, the "image hidden from, but being made visible for, Othello is supposedly of Desdemona and Cassio, while Iago presents a homoerotic scene involving the sexual interaction between Cassio and himself" (317). Othello's verbal reaction to Iago's account of Cassio's dream, which includes the doubly-invoked adjective "monstrous" (3.3.428), Little claims, "rather than missing the sex scene of Iago and Cassio, can be seen as immediately directed towards this sexual coupling" (318). In other words, for Little, monstrous is used to characterize not, significantly, Iago's homosexuality, but rather, Cassio's. It is monstrous in the same grotesque manner that would apply to the transgressions of bestiality (called to mind when, in 1.1, Iago crudely compares Othello and Desdemona to, respectively, a black ram and a white ewe, and adultery (the specter of which Iago brings forth in his many implications that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair that Othello) that are instantiated concurrently as the dramatic action of *Othello* unfolds (318). It is not, therefore, that bestiality, adultery, or homosexuality in and of themselves are monstrous, but, rather, that the persons who would dare to engage in such transgressive acts at the expense of other, "normal acts," are monstrous. Put in another way, Cassio is monstrous in Othello's view because of his

alleged affair with Desdemona and not the fact that this expressly forbidden coupling is couched within the context of a homosexual narrative involving Cassio and Iago.

How relationships of all kinds, but especially those between men, were policed during the early modern period in England is the larger subject of Matz's work. Where *Othello* is concerned, he notes that, "in seeking to discredit Cassio, [Iago] also seeks to displace Desdemona as Othello's 'bedfellow'" (264), or, following Bray, as the person who is in the privileged position of sharing the most public and private intimacy possible with another individual of some influence. Since "intimacy means access", for Matz, too, the relationship Iago seeks to re-establish with Othello by removing Desdemona from the equation encompasses the homoerotic in addition to the homosocial (264-265).⁶ Indeed, the "supposed desire between Cassio and Desdemona substitutes even more clearly for the desire that Iago continually pursues and is pursuing in the dream" he relates about Othello's wife and his lieutenant evokes "his own desire to win back Othello's love" (265). Desdemona is, therefore, no more than the means to Iago's ultimate end: his intimate, erotic, and entirely self-serving reunion with Othello.

As is perhaps obvious from the information presented above, interpretation of the text of *Othello* from a queer perspective has not yielded any kind of a consensus. Even so, such inquiry does provide a particular foundation from which to approach the study of how people like Welles, Olivier, and Parker have dealt with the play's male homoerotic elements in the cinema. To that end, it can be noted that, although it was largely vilified when it premiered in Europe and, later, in America, in the early and the mid-1950s, respectively, Welles's *Othello* gained a great deal of both popular and critical currency when it was restored and re-released, largely through the efforts of the director's

youngest daughter, Beatrice Welles-Smith, in 1992. The movie opens with an extreme close-up of a seemingly dark-skinned man, whose head is upside down to the viewer, lying in state; an insistent drumbeat and, very soon thereafter, sinister piano notes, accompany this sobering image. Haunting choir music begins to sound as the body is lifted by hooded pallbearers who, underneath a blindingly bright sky, lead a funeral procession along the grounds of a vaguely medieval Moorish castle. Suddenly, across this tableau, a slight-looking man is led like a dog in chains and, before long, is thrown into a cage and hoisted high into the air for all to see in his imprisonment. The man can do no more than look out through the iron bars on the somber memorial service taking place below, his expression grim but unrepentant. Thus Welles transforms the presumed ending of Shakespeare's *Othello* into a compelling visual prologue to his cinematic adaptation of the play. Following a brief, voice-over introduction to the major characters and the story that brings them together, the film proper begins. And, though the production is not overtly homoerotic per se, it still yields insights that are well-worth considering from a queer perspective.

Critics from Michael Anderegg to Rothwell agree that Welles's *Othello* qualifies as an example of American film noir, a cinematic genre that finds its origins in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, given the specificity of the director's emphasis on Iago's machinations in the production, the latter describes the movie as a "foray into entrapment and fear [that] carries the movie into the realm of film noir, the Hollywood B movies that reflected the dark, paranoid side of America obscured by the genial fatuousness of the Eisenhower years" (77). But what, exactly, is film noir? According to William Park, film noir is "defined by a subject, a locale and a character. It consists of all three. Its subject is crime,

almost always murder but sometimes a theft. Its locale is the contemporary world, usually a city at night. Its character is a fallible or tarnished man or woman” (25). These elements are, in turn, complemented by “expressionistic camera work” and “narrative devices such as the voice over and flashback” to create the overall, claustrophobic effect (26). Where the subject of crime is concerned, because it both rearranges and extrapolates on the end of Shakespeare’s original, Welles’s *Othello* creates the uncanny effect of placing the viewer in the position of the detective or investigator who is trying to figure out what led to the deaths of Othello and Desdemona and, perhaps more importantly, who was responsible for such heinous acts. Welles’s *Othello* does not lead, as in its source text, to the commission of these transgressions; rather, it begins with them, and thus it follows the traditional storytelling trajectory of film noir. As the costumes, the locations – which range from Morocco to Venice and many points between, and the cinematography make clear, the film is not set in a contemporary city at night, but, rather, in Cyprus and at seemingly all hours. Arguably, though, the exotic look and feel of Welles’s imagined Mediterranean world substitutes well as a stand-in for the sprawling metropolis commonly found in film noir. And, if nothing else, *Othello* qualifies as a fallible film noir character around which the drama of a man who thinks he has been wronged and is seeking revenge swirls. These features are punctuated by the two things that contribute to film noir’s evocation of claustrophobia: expressionistic camera work – something perhaps most notable in Welles’s penchant for staging his scenes from disorienting visual angles and the incorporation of myriad jump-cuts, as well as the use of voiceover and flashback. Indeed, almost the entirety of the movie is one long, extended flashback.

Based on these criteria, it can be (re-)asserted that Welles's *Othello* fits comfortably within the genre of film noir.

Meanwhile, Richard Dyer explains that among the “first widely available images of homosexuality in our time were those provided by the American film noir. Given the dearth of alternative images, it is reasonable to suppose that these had an important influence on both public ideas about homosexuality and, damagingly, gay self-images” (52). As might be suspected, these images were not at all flattering; indeed, they can now be understood as stereotypical and reactionary despite, or perhaps because of, the fact that they were in accord with the prevailing heteronormative views of the time. Dyer goes so far as to label them “aspects of the armoury of gay oppression” (52) many in the straight world of the time used to disparage homosexuals and homosexuality. He proceeds to delineate the recurring iconography of gays' representation in film noir as follows: “fastidious dress; crimped hair; perfume; manicured nails; love of art; bitchy wit; knowledge of clothes, jewellery, perfume; love of music; gaudy clothes; fussy hairstyles; love of fine cuisine” (60). It is through this constellation of signifiers that, in film noir, “[g]ays are thus defined by everything but the very thing that makes us different,” with that thing being, of course, sexual identity, which could not be represented literally on the silver screen during the 1940s and 50s because of censorship on the part of conservative regimes like the Catholic Church and the cinema industry's resulting self-policing of its images (61). Based on these observations, Dyer is left to conclude that, in film noir, the ideological pairing of male homosexuality with luxury and decadence (with connotations of impotence and sterility) is of a piece with the commonplace [and misogynistic] linking of women with luxury (women

as expensive things to win and keep, women as bearers of their husbands' wealth) and decadence (women as beings without sexuality save for the presence of men). The feeling that gay men are *like* women yet *not* women produces the "perverse" tone of this mode of iconographic representation.

(65)

Although, considering its troubled reception history, it must have been a minor one compared to other more prominent examples of the genre, the role Welles's *Othello* played in this overarching dissemination of pop culture knowledge about gays through the medium of film noir is apparent in retrospect.

Like all of the other male characters in Welles's *Othello* save the great Venetian general himself, Iago's (Micheál MacLiammóir) hair is shoulder-length rather than crimped, and always in a state of some disarray. What sets Iago apart in this aspect of his appearance is that his hair looks stringy and greasy. It is as if he does not care in the least about the image his coiffure presents to others. This unkempt, as opposed to fussy, hair quality contributes to the aura of the "not quite right" (i.e., the "not quite straight") that surrounds this Iago. Whether or not he has a penchant for perfume, manicured nails, fine dining, art, and/or music, as Dyer's rubric suggests, is left to the viewer's speculation. Where clothes are concerned, on many occasions in the production, when he is not in the requisite tights filmmakers' costume designers employ to mimic, more or less correctly, early modern male dress, Iago is pictured wearing a long, flowing cloak complete with a willowy hood that frames his face like a veil. Not surprisingly, perhaps, this garment has the effect of muting his masculinity while heightening his non-normative effeminacy (see Figure 10). Of course, the obvious symbolism of Iago's cloak ought not to be ignored; it



Figure 10: Iago effeminately cloaked and hooded in *Othello* (dir. Orson Welles, 1952), DVD screengrab.

is, after all, a piece of clothing that, given its specificity, suggests whomever is wearing it is hiding something sinister about himself from the rest of the world. This is apropos since Welles's Iago, following Shakespeare's original, *is* disguising his malevolent nature from one and all he associates with so that he can execute the vengeance he desires for having been so wronged by Othello in being passed over for promotion to the rank of lieutenant. The cloak also makes plain Dyer's point that, in film noir – and the larger homophobic culture that gave birth to the genre – gay men are represented as *like* women yet, at the same time, *not* women. Dressed as he is at a number of points in Welles's *Othello*, Iago looks like a woman who is not actually a woman. Hence, from a reactionary heterosexist perspective, Iago is, in such garb, a perverse mixture of the masculine and the feminine rather than being an obvious example of one or the other as he should be in accord with the usual gender – and their corresponding sexual – binaries. He is, to put it

in slightly different terms, the ultimate horror: a gay man hiding in plain sight who has nefarious, and undoubtedly erotic, designs on the straighter-than-straight hero whose honor and machismo must be protected at all costs from such predators.

As portrayed by MacLiammóir, his Iago often gives voice to the bitchy wit Dyer claims is part and parcel of the film noir depiction of gay men. This is true even though most of his lines were supplied by Shakespeare and incorporated without much, if any, alteration by Welles into his screenplay for *Othello*. For instance, as the story proper gets underway and Iago is feigning commiseration with the inordinately besotted Roderigo (Robert Coote), the latter asks Iago what he should do now that the object of his desire, Desdemona (Suzanne Clautier) is married to Othello (Welles) instead of himself. Iago responds by rolling his eyes behind Roderigo's back and telling the other man that he should "go to bed and sleep" (1.3.305) in a tone dripping with sarcasm. That Iago does not respect him in the least, and could not care less about his romantic misfortune, is lost on Roderigo, who blurts out: "I will incontinently drown myself" (1.3.306). With evident asperity, Iago proclaims, "Oh villainous" (1.3.312) in response to Roderigo's assertion. But, of course, it is perfectly clear that Iago would shed no tears if Roderigo were to kill himself over Desdemona. Nevertheless, because he needs Roderigo's financial resources, Iago adds: "Ere I would say I would drown myself for . . . love . . . I would change my humanity with a baboon" (1.3.315-317). MacLiammóir utters each word of this exchange with both admirable precision and a pronounced lisp that does everything to heighten the entirely caustic effect. Underneath the off-kilter humor, however, lies the bitter anger of someone who is deeply unhappy with how he has been treated by life and his fellow man,

an experience not at all unfamiliar to queer folk the world over and dealt with in the same or similar passive-aggressive manner.

Though, once again, the words are Shakespeare's, it is difficult not to wonder if MacLiammóir's own homosexuality infuses his performance of Iago in this portion of *Othello* with the kind of bitchy wit – produced by the actor's idiosyncratic combination of inflection and gesture – demonstrated in the lines quoted above. It is Potter, among other critics, who calls attention to MacLiammóir's non-normative sexual identity in her extended analysis of Welles's film. In doing so, she cites and interprets a key passage from the actor's published diary that details his involvements on and off set during the lengthy production of *Othello* from the end of January 1949 to the beginning of March 1950.⁷ At a dinner in Paris attended by MacLiammóir, Welles, and a number of actresses, all of whom were, at the time, vying to play the role of Desdemona, Welles insisted that the character of Iago “was in his opinion impotent” and that “this secret malady was, in fact, to be the keystone of the actor's approach” to the role (*Put Money In Thy Purse* 26). Moments later, with far more animation, the director went on: “‘Impotent,’ he roared in (surely somewhat forced) rich bass baritone, ‘that's why he hates life so much -- they always do’” (26). About this anecdote, Potter remarks that MacLiammóir could not have been unaware in these moments he recorded for posterity that Welles was “taunting him in public” about his sexuality and, furthermore, that the auteur was especially wary “of the reality of the ‘all-male’ persona being projected” into the cinematic narrative of *Othello* he was in the process of constructing (143). However, such a reading needs must be tempered with additional thought.

If, as Potter suggests, Welles was openly “taunting” MacLiammóir about his sexual proclivities, MacLiammóir does not say as much anywhere in *Put Money In Thy Purse*. Had he been offended by Welles’s remarks, it seems likely he would have expressed the feeling. Indeed, the overarching impression to be taken from *Put Money In Thy Purse* is that both Welles – who, after all, wrote a Foreword to the memoir that is equal parts praise for MacLiammóir and self-deprecation – and MacLiammóir had a great deal of professional and personal respect for one another. From the remove of nearly 65 years, Welles’s words do come across as rather unkind and, perhaps more importantly, simultaneously evocative of then prevailing stereotypes, fueled by misinformation and fear, about gay men who, from a strictly heterosexist perspective, were thought to be impotent because of their lack of “normal” desire for women. In relation to homosexuals and film noir, Dyer explains it this way: “Such an image [i.e., of the impotent man] is amplified in the gay characters by the culturally widespread notion (reinforced by the non-sexuality of the gay iconography) that gays are intensely physical beings who cannot ‘do anything’ physically and hence vibrate with frustrated twisted sexual energy” (68). From this perspective, Welles’s Iago cannot “do anything” sexually with Othello because Othello is straight, thus Iago is little more than a dangerous bundle of sexual frustration that will eventually manifest itself in the form of vengeance. The idea that two men could reciprocate romantic, affective, and erotic – inclusive of the sexual – desire for each other was still a rather alien one to most of the general public of the time period and would remain so until at least the Stonewall Riots in 1969 in New York City, if not for a long while after that momentous event.

It is also difficult not to wish that Potter had expanded on her interpretation about Welles being wary of the “reality” of the all-male ethos at the heart of his *Othello*. Presumably, she means that Welles was concerned about the “reality” of the homosexual/homoerotic aspects of the written text being more pronounced in cinematic form, particularly as regards the relationships Iago has with Roderigo, Cassio, and Othello himself in the film. But, as will be developed more fully below, the finished product does not bear out such a hypothesis, at least not in the most simplistic sense. For the moment, it is sufficient to offer the reminder that Benschhoff and Griffin note that one way to “define queer film could be via its authorship: films might be considered queer when they are written, directed or produced by queer people or perhaps when they star lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer actors” (10). In retrospect, knowledge of MacLiammóir homosexuality, a fact 1950s European and American audiences would have been unlikely to be aware of, thus allows queer and queer-allied 21st century viewers of Welles’s *Othello* to recoup a part of their heritage that had hitherto remained hidden from them. This understanding, in turn, activates another of Benschhoff and Griffin’s definitions of queer film: that “all films might be potentially queer if read from a queer viewing position” (10). Though not by any means heroic or admirable, the Iago that emerges under interpretive pressure of this type is queer kith and kin. Straight audiences might well find MacLiammóir Iago simply weird or odd in addition to being discomfiting; queer audiences, on the other hand, have the inherent ability to take a more nuanced view of the character. Their Iago is one man in love with another (Othello) who has been deeply hurt because of that love – no matter how one-sided that love may be.

The project of queering Welles's *Othello* and isolating its homoerotics can be continued in light of Daniel Juan Gil's fascinating recent work on the film in relation to the director's *Macbeth* (1948) and *Chimes of Midnight* (1965). In this study, Gil argues that, where *Othello* is concerned, Welles effects what he describes as an idiosyncratic visual grammar of sexuality. To do so, Welles uses a "version of the shot/reverse shot technique" – the cinematic way of conveying the sense of two characters having a more or less private conversation with each other – to represent "a socially deviant form of sexualized bonding" as occurring between Iago and Othello ("Avant-garde Technique"). As Gil explains it, in the first third of *Othello*, Othello and Desdemona almost never appear in scenes that show them talking to one another in accord with the shot/reverse shot convention as might be expected of a newly-married couple in the process of forging their marital relationship. Instead, they favor "side-by-side, often non-linguistic, often public appearances" that can be read as a rather impersonal way of associating ("Avant-garde Technique"). Of course, the same seems to apply to Othello and Iago; but that, Gil insists, only holds true until the precise moment when Iago begins to poison Othello's mind about Desdemona's sexual faithfulness. It is at this point that the conversationally intimate "shot/reverse shot becomes the perfect visual emblem for Iago's inexplicable, antisocial scheming" against Othello ("Avant-garde Technique"). Issue can be taken with Gil's use of the term "inexplicable" here in his otherwise insightful analysis. In Welles's *Othello*, Iago's motives for striking back at Othello are no more, nor less, inexplicable than they are in Shakespeare's original playtext. "I hate the Moor" (1.3.385), Iago tells Roderigo as the two are standing at the back of the Venetian church in which Othello and Desdemona are being bound in holy matrimony. Not long thereafter, Iago insists: "I

know my price, I am worth no worse a place” (1.1.10), giving voice to his complaint that the Florentine, Cassio, has been promoted to the position of lieutenant to Othello even though Iago, “God bless the mark,” is “Othello’s ensign” (1.1.32). Thus, contra Gil, it seems perfectly clear that Welles’s Iago, like Shakespeare’s original, is acting out of a lethal combination of jealousy, spite, and malice.

But perhaps what Gil finds really inexplicable, like many *Othello* critics before him, is the excessiveness of Iago’s desire for vengeance, which does, on the surface at least, appear completely out of proportion in comparison to the “wrong” he thinks he has suffered. At the same time, however, Gil does seem to find an explanation for this immoderation in what he considers to be Iago’s unrequited longing for Othello which, in turn, becomes part and parcel of the visual grammar of sexuality evident in Welles’s *Othello* that he takes such pains to delineate in his work. Of course, it must be noted that the specter of Freud and the original, heterosexist psychoanalytic understanding of male homosexuality haunts Gil’s interpretation. Hence Iago’s desire for Othello is sublimated, or “impotent” as Welles put it, and only gains what can be characterized as a sexualized intelligibility as his all-consuming thirst for revenge which is represented onscreen in accord with the visual grammar Gil atomizes, inclusive as it is of the shot/reverse shot intimacy experienced by Othello and Iago as they spiral ever further into anti-sociality. The homoeroticism at the core of these circumstances is thus perverted into something ugly and, ultimately, deadly. Iago’s penetration of Othello is always only ever symbolic rather than literal; verbal rather than physical; suggestive rather than concrete. Still, it remains one man’s penetration of another man nonetheless, and that penetration can be understood in, broadly speaking, sexual – or even homoerotic – terms. Gil’s visual

grammar of sexuality provides one means of mapping it in a visceral way that is attuned to the language of film.

Despite its capaciousness, Gil's essay elides discussion of one part of Welles's *Othello* that seems to confirm, or at least to extend, his overall hypothesis regarding the visual grammar of sexuality the film evidences. This occurs approximately two thirds of the way into the production and involves the specificity of the fact that Welles chooses to set the scenes of Roderigo's unsuccessful attempt to murder Cassio, and that of Iago's later successful slaying of Roderigo, within the depths of an all-male sauna (see Figure 11). As the still below makes clear, this is a place of decadence, if not exactly opulence.



Figure 11: Inside the Cypriot sauna, where, a short while later, Iago will stab Roderigo to death in *Othello* (dir. Orson Welles, 1952), DVD screengrab.

It is also, not incidentally, the kind of location in which a homosexual like Iago would be expected to appear. Exposed male flesh is visible from the foreground to the background of the composition – though strategically-placed white towels conceal both genitalia and buttocks. One of the men gathered here is being massaged by a grim-faced attendant

while the entire company is being treated to the sounds of guitar music as they relax and unwind. Meanwhile, another man is lying almost prone on a table in the lower left hand corner of the shot; he seems to be in a deep conversation of some sort with the two other men who are very nearby. The whole aura of this setting is at once provocative and suggestive; this is particularly true for anyone with a knowledge of queer history. Saunas, also known as bathhouses in their more contemporary late 20th and early 21st century incarnations, have been relatively safe places where gay men have met each other for camaraderie and to have sexual relations for eons. Thus, there can be no mistaking the connotations of such a place in relation to the character of Iago. No matter how platonic it may appear, homoeroticism seethes just below the surface and around the edges of this space. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Welles stages Iago's murder of Roderigo in the Cypriot sauna. After having failed to kill Cassio and sending everyone into a panic, Roderigo makes the mistake of seeking Iago out. When the two are alone, Iago stabs Roderigo to death using a long sword. The Freudian/psychoanalytic reading of this action endorses the symbolic, homoerotic sexuality at its heart. In stabbing Roderigo, Iago has penetrated another man with his (substitute) phallus and has, thus, succeeded in having what can be considered the most perverse kind of sex possible with the unfortunate fop. He has, in other words, finally "done something" with a member of his own gender and moved beyond the strictures of sublimation and impotence. The problem, of course, lies in the fact that he had to kill another human being to do so. He has thus become the homosexual who, in accord with heterosexist paradigms, must be punished for his abhorrent, anti-normative behavior.

As noted above, in a sentiment to which a provisional disagreement was ventured, Potter claimed that Welles's *Othello* betrays the director's wariness of the film's all-male ethos. It demands arguing that, on the contrary, Welles exploits the homosociality and the homoeroticism inherent in his source material to the fullest extent possible. In fact, it seems that, rather than shying away from either, Welles deliberately uses the potent combination of homosociality and homoeroticism bequeathed to him by Shakespeare to tell what amounts to a cautionary tale about homosexuals – at least for those who are able and willing to read his cinematic text from a queer perspective. That, in so doing, Welles manages to conflate homosexuality with murderous deviance is problematic because it fits a little too neatly with heterosexist paradigms about homosexuals: that they are sad, lonely, and angry people who will never be able to live life to the fullest because of their perceived abnormality. Yet, in most quarters during the 1950s, this is exactly the kind of thinking that was commonplace. Welles's *Othello* thus stands as an important queer artifact of a thankfully bygone era in Western history.

Only a little more than a decade separates Welles's from Olivier's *Othello*. Yet, despite the fact that it was made in the middle of the so-called Swinging Sixties, when the Sexual Revolution was well under way, the latter film displays no great advance in the treatment of male homoeroticism. On this subject, it proves instructive to begin in what may, at first, seem like a roundabout fashion. To that end, in his "Introduction" to the Arden Third Series edition of *Othello*, which was first published in the mid-1990s, Honigmann asserts that one of "Shakespeare's most original achievements in *Othello* is his exploration of the psychology of sex" (49). At least twice thereafter, Honigmann reiterates this point, even going so far as to describe *Othello* as a "sex-drenched play"

(49, 52). However, this idea is a bit misleading. As in many of Shakespeare's works, there is a lot of discussion about sex in *Othello*, but there are no bona fide sex scenes per se in the entirety of the drama. Even so, discourse regarding sex – inclusive of often crude depictions of sexual acts and sexual beings – does seem to predominate as the story of *Othello* unfolds. That being said, Honigmann takes great rhetorical pains to insist that *Othello* is only ever a heterosexual play. One example of this maneuver appears when he writes: "Despite the presence of one significant instance of male bonding, that of Cassio and Othello, we must beware of making too much of Iago's supposed homosexuality" because, if it is operative in the narrative of *Othello* at all, it is buried so deep within the recesses of Iago's subconscious as to be unintelligible (51). The echoes of Freudian/psychoanalytic theory are unmistakable in this assertion, which could be rewritten as, "Iago's sublimated homosexuality," and make the same exact, heterosexist point. From such a homophobic perspective, homosexuality has to be "supposed," or "sublimated," or "latent," or it has somehow escaped heteronormative control.

Honigmann's notion that, apparently, there is one, and only one, significant instance of male bonding in all of *Othello* warrants interrogation. For him, this involves the characters of Othello and Cassio who, on at least two occasions in the play (in 2.3 and 5.2), speak of each other in what can be considered "lovers" terms, and on three others (in the early part of 3.3), when they are specifically referred to as "loving" one another by Desdemona. But for Honigmann, these moments call attention to "nothing more than the non-sexual bonding of males who 'play in the same team' (here, military service)" (51). Insofar as it goes, this is a valid argument; Othello and Cassio do not ever seem to have anything more than a professional relationship with one another. However, oddly in the

context of discussion about *Othello* and even potential homoeroticism, Honigmann fails to interpret the latter part of 3.3, in which Othello and Iago swear their vows of devotion to each other with such striking passion. Certainly this must also qualify as a significant instance of male bonding, one that proves far more difficult to reduce to the level of the mere platonic as Honigmann would stubbornly have it. This does not mean, however, that Honigmann avoids discussing the implications of Othello and Iago's union entirely – but he chooses to do so in a condescending manner that betrays a written form of homosexual panic.

In pointed remarks on the subject of homosexuality, Iago, and the performance history of *Othello*, Honigmann calls attention to a stage production of the play starring Laurence Olivier as the ensign in 1937 at the Old Vic. Apparently, Olivier was helped in the creation of the character by one Ernest Jones, a proponent of Freudian psychology, who counseled the actor that “Iago's ‘deep affection for Othello explained his actions’ because it encompassed “a ‘subconscious affection’ the homosexual foundation of which Iago did not understand” (50). Citing the work of Marvin Rosenberg, Honigmann insists that, although Olivier was thrilled to “have found a new interpretation,” the actual show was a disaster because no one could figure out what Olivier's Iago was doing or why (50). In other words, audiences and critics of the time could not fathom the idea of one man unconsciously in love with another man. For Honigmann, the fact that a homoerotic interpretation of Iago's relationship with Othello did not work once on stage is sufficient evidence for him to declaim the entire idea as misguided, at best, and just plain wrong, at worst. He thus proceeds, rather caustically, to reason that, “had Shakespeare really wished to push our thoughts towards homosexuality, why should he be so much more

secretive than in depicting the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus” (51-52)? At least Honigmann admits that Achilles and Patroclus in Shakespeare’s *Troilus and Cressida* – a play rarely read and even more rarely performed – are what can be understood as a homosexual couple; but his rhetorical insistence that *Othello*, in contrast, is “secretive” as regards homosexuality is disingenuous. In fact, such a statement could only have been written by an editor/critic who has no intuitive or inherent understanding of what it means to be a man attracted to members of his own gender. Proof of this assertion is to be found in Honigmann’s concluding thought on this matter: “it remains true that Iago’s perverted nature sets him apart from the more ‘normal’ men and women of the tragedy” (52). For Honigmann, where Iago is concerned, “perversion” and “not normal” are obviously anything outside of the straightjacket of heteronormativity in tandem with what Coleridge so colorfully referred to in the 19th century as the “motiveless malignity” that drives his character (Foakes, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 5.II.315).

The fact that Olivier played Iago as a latent homosexual in 1937 is important, at least in some respects, to a queer interpretation of his performance as Othello himself in the (in)famous 1965 film version of the play. Memory and/or knowledge of that earlier portrayal attends the later production in two respects, both borrowed from, once again, Beshoff and Griffin. First, queer spectators might well wonder as they screen the 1965 film if Olivier’s gay Iago from thirty years earlier influenced his Othello and, if so, how. Though definitely a masculine example of manhood (see Figure 12), Olivier seems, at times, to play Othello with an affected flirtatiousness – particularly when, as seen in the below screen cap, he is in the company of Iago (Frank Finlay). The impression such a staging gives is that this Othello knows his ensign desires him romantically and sexually



Figure 12: Iago and Othello talking in 1.2, moments before Othello is apprehended by Brabantio and summoned to the Venetian Senate in *Othello* (dir. Stuart Burge, 1965), DVD screengrab.

and is trying to provoke his attentions with no corresponding intention of requiting them in kind. Yet, at the same time, Frank Finlay's resolutely hirsute Iago remains aloof when it comes to Othello's charms. Indeed, it seems as if Finlay's Iago is as straight-acting as, in Welles's production, MacLiammóir's Iago is rather more stereotypically effeminate. Even in the latter portion of 3.3, when Iago has succeeded at convincing Othello that Desdemona is being unfaithful to him with Cassio, and Othello is doing all he can to embrace Iago – including holding one of his hands firmly in his own, Iago maintains his distance (see Figure 13). Though homoerotic – in the broadest sense – simply because it involves two men, this moment is lacking a distinct sexual charge despite the high-pitched level of emotion that is evident in the characters' interaction. Ironically, the overall impression Olivier's *Othello* gives is that it is Othello himself, rather than Iago, that is, or can be read as, queer or gay. Whether or not this is what Olivier intended, and whether or not his 1937 stage performance of Iago as a latent homosexual informed his



Figure 13: Othello and Iago bonding in their unholy, and soon to be murderous, union in *Othello* (dir. Stuart Burge, 1965), DVD screengrab.

later interpretation of Othello in any way, remain matters of speculation. The same must be said about Olivier's own sexual identity and preference. Some of his biographers have suggested that, despite the fact that he was married a number of times, Olivier was not immune to the charms of other men. Other biographers dispute this supposition.⁸ But, if true, this would allow for the activation of Benshoff and Griffin's notion that a queer film is one that stars "lesbian, gay, or otherwise queer actors" (10). It may also go a long way toward explaining his seemingly queer-inflected portrayal of Othello. This is significant because, as evidenced by the large body of criticism associated with *Othello*, Othello's heterosexuality – unlike Iago's – is never subjected to serious question. He is, in other words, always interpreted as being straight. Therefore, a queer or gay Othello opposite a straight Iago marks something of an innovation in Shakespeare on film.

One other element of Olivier's *Othello* must be remarked on before moving forward to the late 20th century and Oliver Parker's 1995 production. That is Olivier's now controversial decision to play Othello in blackface makeup. Though this may seem queer to the contemporary mindset, especially in light of the difficulties in race relations experienced in Britain and America because of these countries' respective associations with the African slave trade, it must be remembered that, when it was performed on the stages of early modern England, Othello would have been brought to life by a white actor in blackface makeup. Ayanna Thompson explains these circumstances thus: Othello "was originally created for, and performed by, the white Renaissance actor Richard Burbage" (97). She adds that, "[d]espite the modern production history to the contrary—with its long line of famous black actors performing the eponymous role—the part and the play were not written for black or even dark-skinned actors. Instead, Othello was a white man in blackface makeup" (97). As such, it would have been queer indeed for Shakespeare's audiences to see an actor so made up and a character that would have been utterly alien to them and what they were familiar with in their everyday lives brought to life on the stage of The Globe. But it would only have been queer to them in terms of the skin color being represented – not because of the nature of the relationship between Othello and Iago. Though the word homosexual did not exist in their vocabulary (and neither did heterosexual or bisexual, for that matter), early modern English people would have known intuitively how to read and how to understand Othello and Iago at the homosocial (i.e., as two men who were invested in the other's welfare) level. Furthermore, as long as each was thought to be meeting his respective social and professional obligations, whether their association involved sex acts of any kind probably would not have

concerned them as much as it concerns – to the point of vexation for some, like Honigmann – many in the present historical moment given the emergence of the homosexual as a distinct personality and psychology, as Foucault put it in *The History of Sexuality* (42-43). So, from a transhistorical perspective, while queerness still obtains as regards the character of Othello, it is that the particulars of that queerness have altered in the 400 years since his play was first performed from those related to race to those related to race *and* sexuality. What Olivier's *Othello* succeeds in doing is conflating the two in a way that can be read productively as the attempt here has been to effect.

Starring Laurence Fishburne in the title role, Oliver Parker's *Othello* begins in Venice and in the rather disturbing gloom of night. Gondolas furtively skirt the famed waterways of the darkened city, and Iago (Kenneth Branagh), the subject of much queer-oriented Shakespearean scholarship, is first encountered in the film with Roderigo (Michael Maloney) as they witness, in stealth – and in homage to Welles's *Othello* – Othello's marriage to Desdemona that takes place in a medieval Venetian church. After bride and groom kiss, Iago launches into his complaint about Othello's promotion of Michael Cassio (Nathaniel Parker)—instead of himself—to the position of lieutenant in the military organization in which they both serve the city-state of Venice: “[B]y the faith of man, / I know my price, I am worth no worse a place” (1.1.9-10). As spoken by Branagh, these words are filled with a potent mixture of bitterness and cynicism; they do a good job of explaining, at least initially, why he is so angry with Othello. But awareness of the homoerotic valence that inspires these sentiments, an awareness that, following Benschhoff and Griffin, informed queer Shakespeare spectators of Parker's

Othello bring to their experience of the film, renders Iago's feelings here almost poignant, or at least understandable, rather than mysterious and abject.

At this juncture, two scenarios involving Iago and Othello emerge. The first is that the relationship between these two men has already – at some time in the past and, therefore, outside of the play/film proper – surpassed the platonic and the professional to include the physical and the sexual. For all intents, then, Othello's choosing of another man as his lieutenant could also signal to Iago that his superior has decided to end their affair and replace him in the bedroom with Cassio. No matter their sexual identity or preferences, not many people, male or female, would be able to respond with anything akin to equanimity in such circumstances. The second possibility is, of course, that Iago's deeper feelings for Othello have always been unrecognized and/or unrequited by the general and, with the out-of-the-blue promotion of Cassio, are destined to remain so. Although the latter seems more likely in regard to both the written and the cinematic *Othellos* under discussion here, in either case, the crucial point to understand is that Iago suffers the pain of what he considers to be an absolute rejection – and he lashes out accordingly. In terms of the visual representation of male homoeroticism, it proves significant that, as part of this overall expository sequence, Parker shows Cassio's promotion through the equivalent of Iago's mind's eye. The moment includes Othello's giving of an ornate knife as a gift to Cassio, as well as, more significantly, the embrace of the two men as Cassio is welcomed into Othello's service. These images drive the point home that Iago has been set aside for another man. Iago's remembrance of Othello and Cassio's union here suggests that Iago understand he will never again experience such an intimacy with the general.

The homoerotic nature of Iago's character becomes even more explicit as Parker's *Othello* continues. For instance, a portion of what corresponds to Shakespeare's 2.1, a scene that involves Iago and Roderigo, takes place underneath a large, wooden cart at night during the riotous celebration of Othello and Desdemona's marriage on the island of Cyprus. Iago and Roderigo talk as they lie next to one another on the ground while a male and female couple enjoys rather energetic and noisome sexual relations in the cart directly above their heads. In reference to the relationship between Desdemona and Cassio he is in the process of fabricating to wreak his vengeance on Othello, as Iago speaks the suggestive line, "An index and obscure prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts," he moves his face slowly, and ever closer, to that of Roderigo (2.1.244-245). In fact, Iago's actions here become so intimate that it almost seems as if he is about to kiss the insensate Roderigo full on the lips. Alas, however, Iago does not kiss the other man, he merely continues his rhetorical exercise by saying, with as much bawdy innuendo as possible: "They met so near with their lips that their breaths embraced together. Villainous thoughts, Roderigo! When these mutualities so marshal the way, hard at hand comes the master and main exercise, th'incorporate conclusion" (2.1.245-248). Though he stops short of actually kissing Roderigo, it is nevertheless intriguing that Iago allows their "breaths to mingle" just as he has intimated Desdemona's and Cassio's have done in their illicit coupling. Furthermore, when he says the words "hard at hand" (in itself a bawdy pun on both male arousal and the frenetic nature of copulation), Iago slowly and deliberately places his right hand on Roderigo's thigh, then continues to move that hand until it cups Roderigo's penis. For his part, Roderigo is so distraught about the fact that Desdemona does not love him and, seemingly, prefers Cassio as a lover in

addition to Othello as a husband who also makes love to her, that he fails to notice the touch and/or location of Iago's hand on his person. Either that or, being groped by another man in such a manner is so commonplace an occurrence for him, that in and of itself, the sensation no longer registers on his consciousness. Of course, in this case, the former idea is far more likely than the latter. Nevertheless, the homoeroticism Parker depicts here cannot be overlooked or dismissed—regardless of the fact that Iago is only ever using Roderigo for his own ends. That Iago just *might* consider Roderigo an extraneous sexual partner as well as his dupe only adds another layer to the overall opportunistic maliciousness of his character while simultaneously confirming the non-normative nature of his erotic desires.

As in Shakespeare's play itself, the male homoeroticism reaches its peak in Parker's *Othello* during the depiction of Othello and Iago's bonding in 3.3. In the production, this scene takes place upon the battlements of a medieval castle on Cyprus, and it includes the exchange of a blood vow between the two men which is not, of course, an element in the source text. First, it is Othello who carves a gash into his palm with his knife, then, almost mesmerized, Iago follows suit immediately afterward. Then they clasp their bleeding hands together in complete solidarity with one another, and Othello says, "Now art thou my lieutenant" (3.3.495). At this point, both men are on their knees and, significantly, they embrace. First, this hug is seen from a distance, then the shot changes to a near close-up of Iago as he holds Othello and is, in turn, held in Othello's arms. As evidenced by the fact that his eyes are squeezed shut in an attempt to hold back his tears, the look on Iago's face is one of almost painful, yet at the same time, exquisite relief (see Figure 14). It is as if he cannot believe that he is, once again, allowed to be so close and



Figure 14: Othello and Iago kneeling, swearing their vows to one another, and embracing in 3.3 of *Othello* (dir. Oliver Parker, 1995), DVD screengrab.

intimate with his beloved Othello. “I am your own forever,” Iago says, and it is as if each word is being ripped from the very depths of his soul (3.3.496). The image presented here is redolent with emotion; it shows just how deeply one man may feel for another.

It is important, however, to take into account what occurs leading up to Othello and Iago’s heartfelt embrace. After kneeling on the ground in front of Iago, Othello says: “Now, by yond marble heaven, / In the due reverence of a sacred vow / I here engage my words” (3.3.463-465). Iago then joins Othello on his knees and proceeds to say:

Witness, you ever-burning lights above,
You elements that clip us round about,
Witness that here Iago doth give up
The execution of his wit, hands, heart,
To wronged Othello’s service. Let him command,
And to obey shall be in me remorse,
What bloody business ever. (3.3.466-472)

Significantly at this point in the scene, Parker uses the intimate, conversational shot/reverse shot cinematic technique as Iago speaks, and Othello hears, these words – this swearing of their vows to one another. In his discussion of the written text, Smith describes this moment in *Othello* as a “parody of a [heterosexual] marriage rite” (63). Of course, Smith was writing in the days before same-sex marriage became a reality in the contemporary Western world. But, disregarding—only momentarily and with specific purpose—the homicidal inflections the plot of *Othello* invokes, this passage, and the visual counterpart Parker presents, offers what can be considered a serious rendition of what a wedding ceremony between two men might well have been like if, as John Boswell and Alan A. Tulchin⁹ have persuasively argued, such unions had been allowed to take place in early modern Europe. In any case, Parker’s film both capitalizes on and makes vivid the male homoerotic potentiality inherent within this part of Shakespeare’s play – and he manages to do so in a way that speaks volumes to the present moment of human history.

Interestingly, Parker offers one additional homoerotic moment of note in his *Othello* that warrants attention. In the penultimate scene of the film, after the deaths Desdemona, Emilia and, finally, Othello himself, and angry Lodovico (Michael Sheen) forces Iago, who is on his knees and bleeding from several wounds, to gaze upon the heinous outcome of his deeds: “Look on the tragic loading of this bed,” Lodovico orders him, “This is thy work” (5.2.374-375). And Iago does turn his attention to the three lifeless bodies spread before him. But then, in complete and utter silence, Iago forces himself upward, onto the bed, and lays his head in the crook of Othello’s leg (see Figure 15). Though undeniably grotesque, this singular action of Iago’s reveals nothing if not the



Figure 15: Iago lying in the crook of Othello's leg at the conclusion of *Othello* (dir. Oliver Parker, 1995), DVD screengrab.

fact that his attachment to the general, his beloved Othello, lingers, even in the chaos of destruction and the finality of death.

Spanning a period of a little less than forty-five years, the bulk of the second half of the 20th century, the films of *Othello* discussed here also evidence specific ways of dealing cinematically with the male homoeroticism embedded by Shakespeare into the source text. By treating Iago, even in highly coded form, as a gay villain within an overarching noir structure, Welles's production manages to conflate homosexuality and psychology in a way that makes it seem as if Iago is the evil character he is because of his non-normative desires; this Iago is a sick individual who will stop at nothing – including the murder of innocents – to secure the kind of same-sex love he, being in the throes of sublimation, does not even realize is his prime motivation. This is a portrayal that fits then commonplace heterosexist notions of homosexuals and homosexuality that were informed by fear and paranoia rather than understanding or compassion. Olivier's *Othello*, on the other hand, comes across as queer from a 21st century view because of the filmmakers' choice to employ a white actor in blackface to perform the title role – even

though, ironically, such a decision accords with original theatrical practices of the early modern period in England. Where male homoeroticism is concerned, however, this has the discomfiting effect of equating sexual preference with race in a way that resonates with ugly stereotypes about those of African origin – that they are by their very nature highly-sexed beings who cannot, try as they might, control their excessive passions for couplings that involve miscegenation and gender irregularities. Put in a slightly different way, the dynamic operative in Olivier's *Othello* is that the character of Othello is queer because he is black and vice versa. This notion is made even more manifest given the fact that the Iago, the character normally conceived of as gay in criticism and performance, in this film is – with his deep voice, short hair, and barrel-chested appearance – never less than a resolutely heterosexual being. Parker's *Othello*, is the only cinematic production of the play that, it can be argued, gets all things right as far as race and male homoeroticism are concerned. Not only is the title character, in the figure of an actor with the stature and countenance of Laurence Fishburne, sufficient to quell any stereotypical notions about race and sexuality, but Kenneth Branagh's Iago is a masculine – as opposed to effeminate (like Micheál MacLiammóir's Iago) – villain who succeeds at being evil simply because he is evil and not because he also happens to be homosexual or, at the very least, bisexual in terms of his erotic desires. Of all three, therefore, it is Parker's production that registers most fully the cinema's increasing comfort level and sophistication with depicting male homoeroticism in the Shakespeare film. And that is a development worthy of celebration and encouragement.

NOTES

¹ For more on Shakespeare's involvement with the development of the genre of domestic tragedy in England, and *Othello's* status as an example of this new type of drama, see Sean Benson, *Shakespeare, Othello and Domestic Tragedy* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012).

² See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, Translated from the French by Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), esp. 3-13, although Foucault fleshes out his argument in the course of the entire book.

³ The literature available on the history of male homosexuality in relation to the world's various military institutions is extensive. Good general surveys that provide a starting point for investigating this subject include: Colin Spencer, *Homosexuality in History* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1995); B.R. Burg, ed., *Gay Warriors: A Documentary History from the Ancient World to the Present* (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003); and James Neill, *The Origins and Role of Same-Sex Relations in Human Societies* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co. Publishing, 2009).

⁴ Saunders's logic here is rather obtuse. Based on Iago's dream of sleeping with him that he relates to Othello in 3.3, readers are left to assume that the anus in question belongs to Cassio. However, the incident related in 2.1 that Saunders directs critical attention to suggests that the anus is Desdemona's. But in this schema, symbolically, the referent will always be the object of Iago's sublimated homosexual desire. As such, Desdemona, Cassio, and even Othello are conflated into the matrix.

⁵ See Alan Sinfield, “How to Read *The Merchant of Venice* Without Being Heterosexist,” Chapter 4 of *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality: Unfinished Business in Cultural Materialism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 53-67, particularly 53.

⁶ See Alan Bray, “Homosexuality and the Signs of Male Friendship in Elizabethan England,” in *Queering the Renaissance*, Ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 40-61, particularly 40-43.

⁷ The main reason Welles’s *Othello* took so long to shoot is one of financing. Drawing on anecdotal information in MacLiammóir’s *Put Money In Thy Purse*, Rothwell comments on this aspect of the production in *A History of Shakespeare on Screen: A Century of Film and Television*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999 and 2004), 79-80.

⁸ See, for example, Jesse Lasky, Jr., *Love Scene: The Story of Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh* (New York: Crowell, 1978); Anthony Holden, *Laurence Olivier* (New York: Atheneum, 1988); Donald Spoto, *Laurence Olivier: A Biography* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992); and Terry Coleman, *Olivier* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).

⁹ See John Boswell, *Same-Sex Unions in Premodern Europe* (New York: Villard Books, 1994); Alan A. Tulchin, ““Same-Sex Couples Creating Households in Old Regime France: The Uses of the Affrèment,” *Journal of Modern History* 79.3 (September 2007): 613-47.

CHAPTER 6

LOVE GOES TOWARD LOVE AS SCHOOLBOYS FROM THEIR BOOKS:

SCREENING THE MALE HOMOEROTICS OF *ROMEO AND JULIET*

It veers from comedy to tragedy as suddenly as life itself is wont to do at times. It explores the intertwined meaning of friendship, love, duty, and sacrifice. It is the artfully-constructed tale of a couple that wants nothing more than to be together for the rest of their days who, at the conclusion of the “two hours’ traffic” (Prologue, 12)¹ of the drama that bears both of their names in its title, are torn apart by their share of misfortune and happenstance, as well as, ultimately, by cruel death. This synopsis refers, of course, to Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, a work that Arden 3 editor René Weiss describes as “probably the most famous story of doomed young love ever written” (1). Despite the fact that, in the 17th century, the acerbic diarist Samuel Pepys characterized it as “the play of itself the worst that I ever heard in my life” (III, 39), *Romeo and Juliet* remains, as James N. Loehlin puts it, “one of the most popular” and “probably second only to *Hamlet* as the most frequently performed” of all the texts in the Shakespearean canon (*Romeo and Juliet* 1). Pepys’s caustic commentary notwithstanding, Loehlin’s pair of assertions are not mere hyperbole; they are based on the interpretation of solid archival evidence.

Loehlin details that Shakespeare “almost certainly wrote *Romeo and Juliet* for the Theatre, the first home of the Chamberlain’s Men and the first purpose-built theatre in London since Roman times” (*Romeo and Juliet* 3). In addition, the Chamberlain’s Men “probably performed the play at the Curtain, their temporary home during the closure of the Theatre, in 1598, and at the Globe after their move there in 1599” (*Romeo and Juliet* 3).² Given the sheer number of plays available during this time period – one of the great

flowerings of drama in human history, second only to that of the Ancient Greeks in the 5th century BCE – repeated performances are a sure sign of the success and popularity of a play. The same can be said of the publication of such works. Two quartos of *Romeo and Juliet*, one each in 1597 and 1599, extended the reach of the tragedy. And the title page of the first quarto bears the following copy about its contents: “it hath been often (with great applause) played publicly, by the right honorable the Lord of Hunsdon his servants.” Furthermore, as with many of Shakespeare’s dramas, there is no consensus on the matter of the exact date for when *Romeo and Juliet* was composed or first performed on the stages of Elizabethan England; however, 1596 is the year most often cited as being the likeliest candidate for these events, though they could have occurred anywhere between 1591 and 1595, as well. What matters in the present context is that, since the early to mid-1590s, quite literally hundreds of theatrical performances of *Romeo and Juliet* have been mounted around the world.

Not surprisingly, the popularity of *Romeo and Juliet* would be reflected in the play’s fate in the cinematic and televisual realms once these technologies came into being in the 20th century. According to Rothwell and other sources, *Romeo and Juliet* has, counting adaptations and appropriations, made it to the big and the small screens twenty-five times in the preceding one-hundred or so years (356-358). The first of these productions was Vitagraph’s 15-minute, silent, black-and-white version in 1908; the last was Alan Brown’s queer reworking of the drama called *Private Romeo* in 2011. In keeping with the overall parameters of this study, which is focused on Anglophone sound film, attention will be directed to Franco Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), Baz Luhrmann’s *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), and Brown’s *Private Romeo*. The guiding argument

here will be that, even though conventional wisdom holds that *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most well-known and universally admired stories of thwarted, *heterosexual*, love in the world's vast archive of cultural, artistic, literary, and theatrical inheritances, it has a great deal to offer gay or queer viewers and their allies in its cinematic incarnations.

Color is, perhaps, the first thing a viewer might notice about Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. Indeed, it is not overstating the case to claim that color infuses every aspect of Zeffirelli's production, from the rich textures of the buildings and the furniture it depicts, to the blazing Renaissance-styled costumes the actors wear that are made of luxurious velvets and silks. Everywhere the eye looks as it drinks in the myriad delights of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, it is greeted by a panoply of color. Meanwhile, there is no small amount of irony in the fact that this big screen Anglophone adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was directed by a bisexual man. It also proves significant that, unlike with Peter Hall's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, this *Romeo and Juliet* appeared at the height of the Sexual Revolution. Reviewing the movie for *The New York Times* in the fall of 1968, Renata Adler describes it as a "lovely, sensitive, friendly popularization of the play," and the "sweetest, the most contemporary romance on film this year" (n.p.). Though she expresses some concern with the inevitable loss of Shakespeare's language to visual effects, Adler nevertheless concludes that the film "should become the thing for young people to see" and "that it works touchingly" (n.p.). Coming from a film critic of Adler's status, this is high praise indeed. Aside from superlatives and qualifications, however, Adler was among the first of the intelligentsia to comment on what she terms "the softly homosexual cast over the film" (n.p.). This enigmatic and apropos remark was, for its time, an astonishing observation to make and to put into print in one of the

most well-known and highly-regarded newspapers in the world. That being said, it is important to note that Adler does not develop the idea further. The task of doing that necessary work would fall to scholars like Peter S. Donaldson, Joseph A. Porter, and William Van Watson, each of whom fleshed out the notion of the “softly homosexual cast” of Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* in a trio of important articles and book chapters.

In his book chapter titled, “Let Lips Do What Hands Do,” Donaldson claims that, when it appeared, Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* was “perhaps the most daring of all Shakespeare adaptations in its bringing to the surface homoerotic aspects of Shakespeare’s art” (145). However, he insists that the “homoerotic side of the film seldom breaks the surface of the film or transgresses the limits of public taste, remaining as allusion, implication, subtext” (145-146). This was because, he explains, “[h]omosexual desire could not be directly represented in popular film at the same period [the late 1960s] but hovers at the edges of the film, structuring Zeffirelli’s presentation of patriarchal violence, charging the separation of the heterosexual lovers with the pain of sundered male bonds, and inspiring the film’s treatment of intimacy, trust, and self-reconstruction” (146). It can be argued, however, that just the opposite from what Donaldson posits here is evidenced throughout Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The homoerotic does break the surface of the film and it does not merely hover at the edges of the film. Rather, the homoerotic is a palpable force throughout its 138 minutes’ running time. This is apparent when the gender and the attractiveness of the bulk of the cast; the specificities of masculine costuming or fashion; the physical intimacy the male characters are often depicted engaging in; the famous male nudity of Romeo in the morning-after-

the-wedding-night scene; and, finally, gay/queer viewers' sympathies are all taken into account.



Figure 16: Romeo, in lavender tights, attempting to reason with Tybalt, in brown and cream tights and with his back to the audience/camera, both surrounded by a cadre of Montagues and Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1968), DVD screengrab.

As evidenced by the image above, there can be no question but that Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* is populated by a literal host of attractive young men, from Leonard Whiting, the actor who plays Romeo, about whom Zeffirelli himself remarked: "his looks were perfect for the role; he was the most beautiful male adolescent I've ever met" (228), to Michael York, the actor who plays Tybalt; to Keith Skinner, the actor who plays Romeo's man, Balthazar. All of them are lean and in the bloom of health; fresh-faced and clean-shaven; have bright, shining eyes and straight, white teeth that reflect the sun when they grin or smile fully; have thick, luxurious hair; have gleaming, bronzed, unblemished skin; and were graced with shapely physiques that epitomize masculine strength, grace, and appeal (see Figure 16). As Donaldson puts it, Zeffirelli's camera "displays the men's bodies as objects of an engrossed, sensual appreciation. The young men are all trim and

attractive . . . they are presented, to use Laura Mulvey's useful phrase, 'to-be-looked-at'" (154). Indeed, they are all examples of the male form that many gay or queer men can and will take a great deal of delight in observing as they watch Zeffirelli's film.

Donaldson's somewhat casual invocation of Mulvey's notion of "to-be-looked-at-ness" belies the specificities associated with this important concept. Drawing heavily on psychoanalytic theory, and Freud in particular, Mulvey's deconstructive elucidation of the kind of visual pleasure that narrative cinema produces begins with recognition of the following patriarchal and phallogentric premises – that the

function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold: she firstly symbolises the castration threat by her real lack of a penis and secondly thereby raises her child into the symbolic. Once this has been achieved, her meaning in the process is at an end . . . Woman's desire is subjugated to her image as bearer of the bleeding wound; she can exist only in relation to castration and cannot transcend it. (200)

What is left in the aftermath of this paradigm is woman who "stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning" (201). This oppressive system is replicated in the collective masculine unconscious that rules the Western world, so to speak, and then replicated again in the realm of narrative cinema. In fact, over a long period of time, mainstream film, and by extension the Shakespeare film, succeeded at coding the "erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order" (201) that demanded the subjugation of women as objects of male desire and male desire only.

Thus positioned, women are powerless to effect anything of their own volition and the castration threat they symbolize to the men who so control them is obviated. In the real, material world, as well as in the fictional world of film, then, men are in complete control of the trajectory of erotic desire; women are nothing more than their puppets.

Other than sheer, unopposed force, what mechanics allowed film to transform the “erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order”? To answer this question, Mulvey continues to draw on Freud as she details one of the ways the cinema creates a particular kind of enjoyment through the phenomenon of scopophilia, or the pleasure in looking. Scopophilia involves the “taking of other people as objects, [and] subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (202). Thus scopophilia is an active function that provides the “erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object” (202).

Mulvey goes on to explain that:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. (203)

From this perspective, therefore, film can be seen in its proper light as a simulacrum of the masculine human consciousness inflected by patriarchal, misogynistic, and by extension, homophobic, values. The male spectator of film is thus enabled to identify with his fictional correspondent – the hero or the anti-hero – in the visual narrative being presented to him; their bond is unassailable. On a symbolic level, the male spectator of

film is able to identify so fully with the film's main male character, the figure that directs the action and, more to the point, makes woman do his bidding, that he inhabits the same psychic positional field. In other words, the male spectator of film and the male main character in that film are one in the same and they wield the same kind of power over women, a power that is informed by the castration fear, making it a very dangerous weapon indeed.

Given the parameters of this overall schema, Mulvey insists that the "male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like" (204). But it is crucially important to be aware of the fact that what Mulvey does not claim here is that the male equivalent to the female who always already occupies the representational space of *to-be-looked-at-ness* does not exist in film, or any other type of visual media, for that matter. However, she does not comment on the reasons why men are reluctant to gaze at other men in the same way that they gaze at women – as objects of erotic desire subject to their control. Would that Mulvey had made it plain that it is only heterosexual man who is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like and that this reluctance stems from the homoerotic implications such a gaze signifies. It is difficult to imagine, however, that a gay/queer man would experience such inhibitions when it comes to where he chooses to direct his attention in the pursuit of the kind of erotic pleasures film images can inspire. Hence Mulvey's assertions can be altered in two ways: 1) *Heterosexual* man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like, and 2) *Homosexual* man is *not* reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like. To the latter point it warrants adding that the "male figure *can indeed* bear the burden of sexual objectification." If nothing else, what Donaldson's appropriation of the concept of *to-be-*

looked-at-ness into the homoerotic reading of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* that he articulates in "Let Lips Do What Hands Do" without, alas, theorizing it as fully as necessary, succeeds at disrupting the dominant patriarchal order as surely as Mulvey's original critical intervention into visual pleasure and narrative cinema does because it creates the heady rhetorical space where the homoerotic can thrive rather than continue to be complicit in its subjection to the vicious regimes of repression.

Grounded as such, gay/queer men are provided with the means to describe in a sophisticated way their experience of narrative cinema in general and Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* in particular. This extends, for instance, to how such viewers are invited to gaze at characters like Tybalt and, even more particularly, Romeo, at various points in the film. What Van Watson refers to as Zeffirelli's "homosexual camera" (249) encourages a highly-charged homoerotic response to the lingering images of these young and attractive males. Where Tybalt is concerned, in his first appearance in the film, his feet come into view as they are striding purposefully across the dusty Verona square in which the Capulet and Montague men are about to engage in an out-and-out brawl. Those feet are attached to knees, calves, and thighs that are encased in form-fitting green and black tights. As the camera pans slowly upward, audiences are treated to a view of Tybalt's midsection which, not incidentally, features a very prominent codpiece. One of his hands is grasping the handle of a sword, indicating that this is a man who is ready for action; a man who, in Mulvey's terms, is ready to direct the action. Finally, the camera moves even further upward to reveal Tybalt's chest, which is clad in flattering, Renaissance-styled, fine clothing that is open at the neck. His handsome, clean-shaven face bears a

grin at, apparently, the mere possibility that a fight is imminent, while the brim of his hat curls up on either side in a way that makes the edges look like devilish horns.

Whereas Tybalt's initial appearance in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* seethes with a barely-repressed aggression that is simply waiting to spill out of him at the slightest provocation, Romeo's first appearance in the film is far more subdued. Van Watson describes his entrance in these terms: "Romeo walks into a close-up, the camera then following him in profile until he sits. When he finally reclines beside his cousin [Benvolio], the camera again shoots his face in close-up from above, and he talks of love" (249). He is the very epitome of melancholic distress brought about by what he considers to be his romantic misfortune. In his state of repose, he evinces an endearing vulnerability. Given his overall demeanor here, he occupies what Mulvey would consider the position that women in film would usually take in their circumscribed role as the sexual objects of men who are culturally sanctioned to toy with them in any way they so desire. With what Van Watson describes as "some of the most gently romantic theme music in the movie" (249) punctuating the affecting homosocial moment between them with an almost sublime poignancy, Benvolio (Bruce Robinson) asks Romeo what it is that has made Romeo feel so sad; Romeo replies with: "Not having that which, having, makes them short" (1.1.162). At this point in the film, many gay/queer members of Zeffirelli's audience may find themselves wishing to do everything in their power to comfort Romeo.

After Friar Laurence scolds Romeo for his cowardice and lack of faith in the aftermath of his banishment from Verona, Zeffirelli's movie cuts to a close-up shot of Romeo and Juliet in bed, each of their bare shoulders visible, and facing one another but

with their eyes closed. It is clear in this instant that Romeo followed the friar's sage advice to the letter. Furthermore, given this tableau, there can be no doubt that Romeo and Juliet have at last consummated their marriage as part of their mutual consolation for all that they have endured, all that they have lost, and all that they must soon sacrifice of their happiness. But this depiction of heterosexual bliss is interrupted by what surely qualifies as some of the most obviously homoerotic moments in all of Zeffirelli's film. As the camera slowly pulls back from the close-up of Romeo and Juliet's faces, Romeo's backside comes into full view (see Figure 17). What is equally striking about the



Figure 17: Romeo and Juliet in bed after consummating their marriage in *Romeo and Juliet* (dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1968), DVD screengrab.

composition of this shot is the fact that Juliet remains almost entirely covered up by the bed's sheets and her hair; thus, unlike Romeo, she is hidden from the gaze of the audience. In accord with the heterosexist imperatives of narrative cinema that Mulvey discusses so brilliantly in her work, the conventional expectation for a shot like this demands that Juliet's nakedness be on display for, always presumably, straight males to objectify, not Romeo's. With the sound of the morning larks chirping outside the room's open windows, Romeo's eyes flutter open. He smiles contentedly at the still sleeping

Juliet before kissing her softly on the lips. Then he rolls over and sits up while swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Upon standing, opening the nearby curtains and rubbing his eyes, viewers are presented with yet another shot of Romeo's backside. There can be no question that, in particular, scenes like this one epitomize what Adler described as the "softly homoerotic cast" of Zeffirelli's film.

In light of their prominence in Zeffirelli's film, it is important to the larger project of screening the male homoerotics of *Romeo and Juliet* to also consider the moments of masculine intimacy characters like Romeo, Mercutio (John McEnery), and Tybalt engage in at various points in the production. These moments can be categorized in two broad ways: as affectionate and as aggressive, with both forms complementing each other. A pair of examples will serve to make the point here, beginning with one that involves Romeo and Mercutio. When Romeo confesses to Mercutio that he "dreamt a dream" (1.4.50) that profoundly unsettled him, Mercutio proceeds to conjure for Romeo and the rest of the assembled Montague men the Queen Mab of fairy lore. In Mercutio's wonderfully fantastical view, Queen Mab is the agent that "gallops night by night / Through lovers' brains" (1.4.70-71), causing them to go mad with dreams of love – the kind of love that causes nothing but distress for the lovers which, in turn, leads to the disruption of civil society and all it holds dear. By the time he reaches the end of this powerful speech, Mercutio is in a state of obvious distress, and Romeo alone goes to comfort him.

Taking Mercutio's head in his hands, Romeo forces Mercutio to pay attention to him as Romeo tells him: "Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace, / Thou talk'st of nothing" (1.4.95-96). After several seconds of consideration, Mercutio places his forehead onto

Romeo's so that the two men are even closer to one another, almost embracing and almost about to kiss, and concedes to his friend: "True, I talk of dreams, / Which are the children of an idle brain" (1.4.96-97). This moment is astonishing because it involves two men who are evidently not afraid of being intimate and affectionate. It also qualifies as being homoerotic. For Porter, Mercutio's Queen Mab speech, in tandem with Romeo's reaction to both its words and the person who speaks them, emphasizes the "conflicting claims of friendship and love" (154) that many scholars have identified as problematic for the kind of men Shakespeare characterized in his plays, men who inevitably found themselves torn between the other men they loved and the women society demanded they marry and produce the next generation with. Men's homoerotic bonds with other men, like those of Romeo and Mercutio, cannot survive the demands of heterosexist, patriarchal culture. This point is made horrifically clear by Zeffirelli when Mercutio, having been stabbed in the heart by Tybalt, dies cursing the houses of the Montagues and the Capulets. As he is dying, and his vision moves in and out of focus (an effect Zeffirelli's camera cleverly presents from the audience's point of view), Mercutio only has eyes for Romeo; and, at one point while he is staggering around the square, Romeo catches Mercutio in his arms and, in a deliberate repetition of the intimacy and affection the two experienced just before the Capulet ball, Mercutio rests his forehead against that of an unresisting Romeo, bringing them close physically one last time. Add this to the fact that Mercutio dies because he was trying to defend and protect his beloved Romeo, and his death can be seen as redolent with poignant homoeroticism.

Horrified by Mercutio's death on his behalf, Romeo is not to be prevented by his fellow Montagues from pursuing Tybalt. After smashing the handkerchief that is stained

with blood from Mercutio's heart into Tybalt's face, the two men enter an all-out brawl that will leave one of them dead by the time it concludes. In many respects, their athletic grappling, wrestling, kicking, punching, and fencing forms an example of the aggressive type of male homoeroticism Zeffirelli goes to great lengths to present – and to critique – repeatedly in his *Romeo and Juliet*. Not at all incidentally, it also parodies in the extreme the physicality of sex between men, qualifying it as demonstrably homoerotic. This homoeroticism reaches its zenith when Tybalt impales himself on Romeo's sword, thus allowing Romeo to succeed at symbolically penetrating Tybalt – a penetration that, arguably, Tybalt longed for and deliberately sought out. Heightening the homoeroticism even further is the fact that Tybalt falls into and dies in Romeo's arms.

What this critical survey of some of the male homoerotic elements evident in his *Romeo and Juliet* has attempted to show is that Zeffirelli was able to push the envelope as far as these kinds of depictions were concerned. Perhaps, in this regard, Zeffirelli's triumph has everything to do with the moment in history in which his *Romeo and Juliet* was made. For Zeffirelli, of course, the Sexual Revolution was, in the late 1960s, in full swing, and the modern gay rights movement was only a few months from exploding into the consciousness of the general public via the 1969 Stonewall Riots in New York City. In other words, for Zeffirelli, the moment for honest representations of things homoerotic in film had arrived. And now the question becomes: how much impact would Zeffirelli's visions of male homoeroticism in *Romeo and Juliet* impact future cinematic productions of the play? As with much else where criticism is concerned, the answer is complicated.

In comparison to the *Romeo and Juliet* of Zeffirelli, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, even at a seventeen years' remove from its original premiere in 1996, is a wholly

postmodern take on Shakespeare's original text that often verges on the psychedelic. Filled with guns rather than swords; with helicopters rather than horses; with garish, anachronistic sets and costumes that almost overrun the senses with clashes of color; with erratic jump-cuts, special effects, and the pulsing, synthesized music of Generation X; and, more problematically, actors who struggle to transform Shakespeare's poetry into a thing of verbal beauty given their marked clumsiness with the Bard's language, this exuberant *Romeo + Juliet* is, at times, quite wonderful, at others, a wince-inducing experience to sit through. Indeed, many critics in the popular and the scholarly press have expressed their dismay with the film. Courtney Lehmann cites a number of contemporaneous reviews of it in which their authors complain about *Romeo + Juliet* being derivative, not Shakespearean enough despite the appearance of Shakespeare's name in the movie's title, and, ultimately, more flamboyant style than anything substantive (168-169). Academics were just as divided in their opinions of the production. Rothwell offers the following equivocal commentary: "This is watching Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* under strobe lights. It has been filtered through John Woo's Hong Kong action movies, and the hip-hop and gangsta rap of MTV, yet the characters speak in Elizabethan English. The verbal runs against the grain of the visual semiotics" (229). Yet, similarly to Janet Maslin, Rothwell finds a method to Luhrmann's madness in his *Romeo + Juliet*: "The interplay between the crude actualities of television newscasts and MTV fantasies generates the film's *raison d'être*, which is the displacement into contemporary idiom the oxymorons of Shakespeare's oppositions of womb and tomb, love and death, youth and age, and so forth" (229-230). The grand irony here is that, in comparison, Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* became an exemplar of fidelity

to Shakespeare's original, even though, in its historical moment, it too was criticized just as harshly – albeit for different reasons – as Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*.

While a delight on many levels, if there is one thing that Luhrmann stumbles over in his *Romeo + Juliet*, it is the simultaneous queering of the character of Mercutio (Harold Perrineau) and the homoeroticizing of Mercutio's relationship with Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio). This is an aspect of the film that a number of critics have merely noted, but have not otherwise explored in detail. Rothwell, for example, in commentary on the movie that totals only three, densely-packed pages, says that the actor who plays “a splendid Mercutio . . . performs a virtuoso Queen Mab speech” and that his friendship [with Romeo] hints at a streak of homoeroticism” (231-232). He then goes on to point out the fact that “[f]or the Capulet ball, Mercutio cross-dresses in a mini-skirt” (232). In a similar way, Loehlin explains that Mercutio “vogues through a glitzy camp performance of ‘Young Hearts Run Free’ that combines Busby Berkeley with *Paris is Burning*” before asserting that this “memorable performance, atop a brightly lit staircase, in high heels, spangled bra and Jean Harlow wig, serves the structural function of the Mab speech, encapsulating the brilliancy, imaginative energy and homosocial bonding of Mercutio's world, just before Romeo meets the woman who will draw him away from it” (“These Violent Delights” 127). Lehmann states: “Luhrmann's Mercutio is a black-skinned, white-sequined, drag queen who seems desperately disturbed by Romeo's heterosexual awakening” (173). Finally, Samuel Crowl writes: “The Capulet party is a raucous affair, more carnival than ball, dominated by Harold Perrineau's Ecstasy-inspired, drag Mercutio—a cross between Dennis Rodman and RuPaul—belting out “Young Hearts” to a pulsating Latin beat as he moves down Capulet's grand staircase in a silver corset”

(122). As is apparent from even the most cursory look at these critical assessments, they, individually and collectively, make the same empirical observations, but they do not consider the larger implications of their findings. That being the case, the purpose of what follows is to examine the significances of Mercutio's transvestitism and the homoerotic nature of his association with Romeo in *Romeo + Juliet* from a queer perspective.

The opening of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* is a montage of gritty and frantic images that tell the backstory of the Capulet and Montague feud. This sequence includes a visual representation of the film's dramatis personae. When Harold Perrineau appears



Figure 18: Romeo's best friend Mercutio in *Romeo + Juliet* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1996), DVD screengrab.

as Mercutio, his title card includes the following tag – “Romeo's best friend” (see Figure 18). This is an elaboration on the lists of dramatis personae that appear in print versions of the play, most of which describe Mercutio as either Romeo's or Prince Escalus's kinsman, and only as Romeo's friend rather than best friend. So the question is, why does Luhrmann call specific attention to Mercutio's relational status to Romeo by using the superlative “best” to modify “friend”? Certainly, doing so signifies that Romeo and Mercutio's friendship is more special and more important to them than their respective friendships with anyone else. At the same time, however, attaching such a modifier to

“friend” in this context seems like a not-so-subtle attempt to insist that Mercutio and Romeo are just best friends and nothing more. Put in another way, it seems like a not-so-subtle attempt to remove from the interpretive equation the mere idea that there is anything romantic, homoerotic, or sexual between Mercutio and Romeo. Perhaps this is Luhrmann’s means of circumventing the body of intertextual connotations that suggest otherwise (inclusive of, for example, Zeffirelli’s *Romeo and Juliet* which, as discussed above, establishes the fact of homoerotic intimacy as part and parcel of Romeo and Mercutio’s relationship) with the visual rhetorical equivalent of a preemptive first strike. The effect of such a move is to keep Romeo safely untouchable in the rarified realm of the heterosexual. Mercutio may not be straight, but Romeo is, and that is what matters most within the overall ideology of Luhrmann’s production.

Luhrmann’s choice to present Mercutio as a transvestite seems progressive and trendy. This aspect of *Romeo + Juliet* does, after all, come at a time in history when the cinematic zeitgeist brought such representations into vogue, as evidenced by films like *The Crying Game* (1992), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995), and *The Birdcage* (1996) – all very popular movies that took the male crossdresser from the margins of Western society and placed him at its mainstream center in what qualifies as, perhaps, the most accessible way possible: via the medium of cinema. But the problem with Luhrmann’s transvestite Mercutio is that Luhrmann provides his viewers with no corresponding context that is intrinsic to *Romeo + Juliet* itself that would allow them to interpret him. They are, in other words, left to their own devices; and in that fact there lies the potential for real difficulty. Of course, no one within the world of *Romeo + Juliet*

reacts to Mercutio's penchant for crossdressing in either a negative or a positive way; Mercutio is accepted by one and all with an admirable level of neutrality. Yet whether or not Luhrmann's viewers are capable of such equanimity is questionable – and this applies to viewers who span the sexual identity spectrum, from straight to gay or queer, to transgender, to intersexual, and beyond. Marjorie Garber helps in the quest to contextualize the dynamics being alluded to in this set of circumstances. In *Vested Interests* Garber writes: “[i]n mainstream culture it thus appears just as unlikely that a gay man will be pictured in non-transvestite terms as it is that a transvestite man will be pictured in non-gay terms” (130). Put in slightly different terms, Garber is arguing that, to many in the heterosexist population, gay men, simply because they are attracted to members of their own gender, are just like women, all of whom, from this myopic perspective, are only ever attracted to men, too; hence it is no surprise that (some) gay men dress up like women. Furthermore, any man who enjoys donning women's clothes *must be* gay given his fetish for a certain kind of apparel, even if his erotic and romantic interests involve people of the opposite sex. “It is as though,” Garber remarks, “the hegemonic cultural imaginary is saying to itself: if there is a difference (between gay and straight), we want to be able to *see* it, and if we see a difference (a man in women's clothes), we want to be able to *interpret* it” (130). In Foucauldian terms, this is how the superstructure that is the heterosexual patriarchy seeks to contain anything that would attempt to subvert its various paradigms and proscriptions and, thereby, attempts to perpetuate itself ad infinitum. For individuals who are part of the material world – gay, straight, bisexual, or anywhere in between – this set of circumstances is equivalent to an ideological catch-22.

Furthermore, what is also operative in this overall environment, Garber explains, is the

desire to *tell the difference*, to guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position in question. (If people who dress like me might be gay, then someone might think I'm gay, or I might get too close to someone I don't recognize as gay; if someone who is heterosexual like me dresses in women's clothes, what is heterosexuality? etc.) Both the energies of conflation and the energies of clarification and differentiation between transvestism and homosexuality thus mobilize and problematize, under the twin anxieties of *visibility* and *difference*, all of the culture's assumptions about normative sex and gender roles. (130)

Being neither as truly innovative, nor as truly subversive as it pretends to be, Luhrmann's representation of Mercutio as a drag queen serves to reinforce the strictest of binaries between straight men and gay men. Mercutio's transvestite appearance only feeds into mainstream heterosexist society's fears about its ability to differentiate itself from the Big Bad Wolf of the gay or homosexual other. And because Mercutio is marked as a deviant crossdresser on the very first instant he struts through the frame wearing what can be considered outlandish women's clothes, his difference from the norm(al) becomes an albatross around his neck that he can never escape from. While watching *Romeo + Juliet*, straight audience members, particularly those prone to homophobia, are encouraged by the subliminal effects of film to, as Garber puts it, *tell the difference* between what they can all-too easily perceive to be a heterosexual Mercutio and a homosexual Mercutio,

with the latter completely obliterating the former the second Mercutio appears on-screen as a transvestite. Such is the derogatory, and ultimately destructive, power of stereotypes where homosexuality and crossdressing are concerned. Having said that, it must also be noted that not even all the gay, queer, or bisexual men in Lurhmann's audiences are off the hook. Those that are not would include the legions of individuals who have so internalized Western society's homophobia that they resolutely identify themselves as "straight-acting" – with all of the attendant baggage such a phrase carries – and seek to distance themselves from their crossdressing brethren.

Thus all of what has been detailed here is why Lurhmann's *Romeo + Juliet* must be critiqued for its unmediated inclusion of a transvestite Mercutio. With no disrespect meant toward Perrineau – who really does give a virtuoso performance in the part – the Mercutio that emerges from the interpretive pressure applied in this analysis is not the celebratory figure that Rothwell, Loehlin, and other critics identify in their commentary on the film. Rather, the Mercutio that emerges conforms totally to pervasive heterosexist notions about the sad, unhappy, and angry gay man who is the way he is because he is caught up in the trap of forever pining for what he can never have: a true emotional, romantic, affectionate, and sexual relationship with the straight man – in this case, of course, Romeo – who will remain forever out of Mercutio's reach because he is unable to return Mercutio's feelings in kind. This heterosexist ethos, in turn, colors what had the potential to be the most homoerotic parts of Lurhmann's production: Mercutio's death and Romeo's response to that irrevocable loss.

The circumstances that lead to Mercutio's death begin when an already worried Benvolio states, after seeing them arrive at a park on the shore of Verona Beach, "By my

head, here comes the Capulets” (3.1.34). Nonplussed, Mercutio places his feet on the table and proclaims, “By my heel, I care not” (3.1.35). This is a show of bravado on the part of Mercutio; foolhardy bravado perhaps, but bravado nonetheless. It is also the kind of action mixed with words that would be expected from a man who is spoiling for a fight. And that is just what he gets when the Capulets, led by the fiery Tybalt, walk up to the assembled Montagues. “Gentlemen,” Tybalt says, “a word with one of you” (3.1.37). Employing a mocking smile, Mercutio responds with, “And but one word with one of us? Couple it / with something, make it a word and a blow” (3.1.38-39). As Weiss points out in the footnote that accompanies these lines in his Arden 3 edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, the phrase “a word and a blow” was proverbial in Shakespeare’s day indicating how easy it was for words to morph into fisticuffs (235). The problem is with the interpretive license Luhrmann takes with the lines in *Romeo + Juliet*. The way Mercutio delivers them is deliberately provocative. The stage directions in Craig Pearce and Luhrmann’s screenplay provide the following instructions: “Leaning close to Tybalt” in the seconds before the last word, ‘blow,’ is uttered, “he [Mercutio] camps it up” (97). Perrineau does not miss a beat as he delivers the word “blow,” after an ad-libbed dramatic pause, in a breathy, falsetto voice that is dripping with bitchy sarcasm.

Word and gesture thus combine here to make the bawdy meaning obvious – this Mercutio means “blow” in its 20th/21st century sense of the performance of the sex act known as fellatio. But what remains unclear is if Mercutio is suggesting that Tybalt ought to “blow” Mercutio along with the exchange of words Tybalt has requested, or if Mercutio is suggesting that Tybalt ought to allow Mercutio to “blow” Tybalt in exchange for having words with him. The concern with Luhrmann’s representation of the Mercutio/

Tybalt dialogue here has everything to do with anachronism. Sources such as the *OED* reveal that “blow” did not acquire the meaning of fellatio until the 1930s; it would not have meant anything of the sort in Elizabethan or Jacobean parlance. Be that as it may, though, Mercutio’s razor-sharp wit meets with success, as evidenced by the laughter it generates from the Montagues and those of their allies who surround them. Tybalt, however, is enraged, presumably because Mercutio has triumphed at making fun of Tybalt in a public forum. At the same time, though, Tybalt could be upset because of the homosexual/homoerotic implications inherent in the very idea of one man performing fellatio on another. It is also quite likely that both attitudes are influencing Tybalt. That being the case, Tybalt’s explosive anger makes him seem like the stereotypical homophobic man who is so insecure with his own sexual identity that he must deal accordingly with any such threat to that identity to protect his reputation as a “real” (i.e., not a gay, queer, or bisexual) man.

Things go from bad to worse the moment Tybalt blurts out contemptuously: “Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo” (3.1.44). At that point, all bets are off between the two men as Mercutio charges after Tybalt like an enraged bull, his anger matching if not exceeding Tybalt’s in intensity. Mercutio demands to know if Tybalt dares to compare Mercutio and Romeo to minstrels. Once again drawing on Weis’s footnotes in the Arden 3 edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, it becomes apparent that, in the early modern period in England, minstrels – not, ironically, unlike actors – were viewed by certain segments of the population as unsavory figures with a penchant for effeminacy and sodomy. Mercutio’s rage over the accusation Tybalt may, or may not, be making about the nature of Mercutio and Romeo’s relationship proves difficult to interpret within the

overall context of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. Certainly, on a homosocial level, Mercutio is looking out for Romeo and trying to defend his friend from being impugned in any way by Tybalt. But, is Mercutio upset because Tybalt is denigrating both Mercutio and Romeo in general? Or is Mercutio upset because Tybalt is suggesting that Mercutio and Romeo have the kind of intimate relationship with one another that is undeserving of contempt? Or is Mercutio upset because Tybalt is implying that he knows Mercutio and Romeo do not have the kind of love relationship with each other that Mercutio longs for so desperately? The answers to these questions remain frustratingly indeterminate, particularly for a study focused on teasing out and analyzing the male homoerotic elements in Anglophone Shakespeare sound film.

Interestingly, Luhrmann sets Mercutio's final battle with Tybalt on a dazzling, open-air stage that is itself located on Verona Beach and bears the name: Sycamore Grove Theatre. Though it may seem a heavy-handed sort of symbolism, it also has the effect of underscoring the fact that the story of *Romeo + Juliet*, like its source text, suddenly veers at this point from comedy to tragedy with Mercutio's death at Tybalt's hands, and that this is drama at its most theatrical *and* its most cinematic. Mercutio's evident desire to protect Romeo from Tybalt – inspired in no small part because of Romeo's pacifism where Tybalt's verbal and physical abuse of Romeo is concerned, signifies how deeply Mercutio feels about Romeo. It is not overstating the case to claim that Mercutio loves Romeo. But, once again, Mercutio's homoerotic longing for Romeo can only be viewed through the haze of the unrequited. Romeo may care just as much about Mercutio, and he may even love Mercutio, but, in Luhrmann's vision, Romeo's desire for Mercutio never crosses the line between the homosocial and the homoerotic.

This is made plain the moment Mercutio dies as a result of Tybalt's having impaled him with a lethal shard of glass. Romeo grabs the lifeless body of Mercutio and wails and cries over the loss while he holds Mercutio in his arms (see Figure 19). The moment is as



Figure 19: Romeo cradling his dead best friend Mercutio in his arms in *Romeo + Juliet* (dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1996), DVD screengrab.

affecting as it is disturbing; however viewers of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* are aware throughout that it takes place between two people who were best friends and not ever, even potentially where this Romeo is concerned, lovers. And, although Romeo – not unlike Achilles taking vengeance on Hector for Hector's killing of Achilles's beloved Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad* – races after Tybalt and, before long, guns him down, he is only meting out justice because he is one man looking out for another man, no more, no less.

Thus it is made apparent yet again that Luhrmann uses the potentiality of the male homoerotic in *Romeo + Juliet* as a specter that is always denied, that is always contained, in favor of the most adamant form of compulsory heterosexuality. This dynamic has been explored previously in the chapters on Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* (2004)

and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996). Of the latter film, recall that Magro and Douglas assert that "it rehearses homosexual desire and then disavows it in order to postulate the naturalness and transparency of heterosexual relations" (55). They add that the "moments of homoeroticism . . . represent and enact homosexual desire in order to construct heterosexuality as natural and definitive, drawing attention to the very queerness they are meant to purge" (55). The exact same imperatives inform Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. Mercutio's homoerotic desire for Romeo is brought to the fore repeatedly, and every time that happens, that homoerotic desire is suppressed and, finally, snuffed out of existence entirely with Mercutio's death, which serves, finally, to naturalize heterosexuality as the be all and end all of human relationships.

The year 2011 brought about *Private Romeo*, an American independent film by the openly gay writer and director Alan Brown that presents its audiences with an aching earnest homoerotic version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. This welcome production is described at its corresponding website⁴ and on its DVD packaging as follows: "When eight young cadets are left behind at an isolated military high school, the greatest romantic drama ever written seeps out of the classroom and permeates their lives." The copy continues with: "Incorporating the original text of *Romeo and Juliet*, YouTube videos, and lip-synched indie rock music, *Private Romeo* takes viewers to a mysterious and tender place that only Shakespeare could have inspired." That mysterious and tender place is one in which two young men – both American military high school cadets no less – just happen to fall in love with one another much like their star-crossed counterparts do in *Romeo and Juliet*. Given this fortuitous development, it will be argued that, with *Private Romeo*, Brown succeeds at fully queering – by which is meant that he

poses a sustained and successful challenge to the always assumed heteronormativity that attends nearly every aspect of Western culture, including its most celebrated artistic creations, like the works of Shakespeare – *Romeo and Juliet* in the cinema for the first time in the century-and-a-quarter history of the medium, and to consider some of the larger implications of such an accomplishment.

The first way that Brown begins to queer *Romeo and Juliet* in *Private Romeo* is by drawing explicit attention to the all-male world the characters of his film inhabit. Early on in the movie, it is explained through a combination of voiceovers and corresponding images that a group of eight high school cadets have been left behind at the McKinley Military Academy because they did not qualify to take part in a series of land navigation exercises that are taking place off-campus. This means that, for a period of four days, these cadets will be responsible for taking care of themselves; there will be no officers or faculty present to supervise them. They will, however, continue to follow a strict regimen of class work, homework, and physical fitness, all under the direction of a pair of the senior upper-classmen among them. Thus Brown creates from the outset of *Private Romeo* a *mise en scène* that is over-determined by an excess of male homosociality. It was, of course, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who, borrowing it from the social sciences, defined the term homosociality in the way it is used it here: “it describes social bonds between persons of the same sex” (1). As Sedgwick takes great care to make clear in her groundbreaking work, however, homosociality is not to be understood as synonymous with homosexuality; nevertheless, homosociality is almost always “potentially erotic” because, hypothetically speaking at least, homosociality and homosexuality exist on a “continuum” that links these two ontologies in the realm of

experiential possibility (1). Hence, at a macro level, the eight male cadets remaining at the McKinley Military Academy are bound together socially by virtue of their attendance at such an institution and by their participation in its rituals. At a micro level, this homosocial association extends to include the cadets' individual and collective relationships with each other. Invoking Sedgwick's always potentially erotic hypothetical at this point allows for the understanding that homoeroticism, whether in the form of unrequited or requited desire and out-and-out homosexuality, is a constant factor that could be activated at any moment in these particular and specific circumstances.

Another, and perhaps even more significant, way that Brown queers *Romeo and Juliet* in *Private Romeo* is by using his all-male cast to portray Shakespeare's male and female characters as part of their comprehensive study of the tragedy. Thus it is that Brown deliberately and unapologetically transgresses the traditional rigid gender binary that continues to haunt humanity as the second decade of the 21st century unfolds. In her famous deconstruction of gender, Judith Butler argues that, while the biological sexes of male and female are natural anatomical formations individuals have little control over, at least in their original bodily manifestation, the genders of masculine and feminine are not natural occurrences; gender, in other words, does not follow automatically from biological sex. Gender is, rather, something that is learned over time and performed by real people – actual material bodies – again and again on the social stages of everyday life. On this key point, Butler writes that “*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*” (716, emphasis in the original text cited here). She adds that “heterosexuality must be understood as a compulsive and compulsory repetition that can only produce the *effect of its own originality,*” which therefore must mean that “compulsory heterosexual

identities, those ontologically consolidated phantasms of ‘man’ and ‘woman,’ are theatrically produced effects that posture as grounds, origins, the normative measure of the real” (716). Hence, among a nexus of intricately related items, gender encompasses things like the kind of clothes a boy/girl or a man/woman wears, how a boy/girl or a man/woman acts towards and around others of the same or opposite sex, and how a boy/girl or a man/woman talks to his or her fellow human beings. These are all things that most people, conditioned as they are from birth by the absolute strictures of heterosexism, believe occur naturally, as if they are predestined, rather than learned, behaviors.

Applying Butler’s supple conception of gender being a mutable performance instead of an unchanging natural characteristic universal to all humans to Brown’s *Private Romeo* allows for the understanding that the young men charged with reading the lines of Capulet’s Wife, Juliet, and the Nurse are, by the use of mere words and motions, enacting the female gender despite their obvious masculinity, a masculinity that is almost impossible to ignore given their short, high-and-tight service haircuts, their khaki military-style clothing, the lower register of their voices, and the absence of protruding breasts on their bodies. They still look, in other words, very much like young men even as they are attempting to bring to life three women of varying ages and equally varying experience through the combined magic of language and gesture. Even so, borrowing Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s proscription for the “willing suspension of disbelief”⁵ is hardly necessary to succumb to the idea that, even if only for a number of moments within the length of a ninety-eight minute film, the three young men under discussion here are indeed the female characters of Capulet’s Wife, Juliet, and the Nurse that

Shakespeare created in *Romeo and Juliet*. Such is the power of even the most unlikely, impromptu, and amateur performance of a dramatic fiction on the imagination of the viewer or the spectator.

It is not that gender does not matter in *Private Romeo*; it is that gender matters in a different way in the film. It is, thus, significant that the characters of *Romeo and Juliet* – played by an actor and an actress, respectively, in the majority of productions since the late-17th century when the theatres were re-opened in England following the Puritans' closure of them in 1642 – are instead portrayed in *Private Romeo* by two young men. Why? Because two young men are not supposed to fall in love with one another like *Romeo and Juliet* do in the fiercely heterosexist world all have inhabited since, according to Foucault, the mid-19th century⁶ when the male homosexual was first categorized as a species and thereafter demonized mercilessly well into the present day. Yet, mirroring their characters in many ways, falling in love with each other is exactly what cadets Sam Singleton (Seth Numrich) and Glenn Mangan (Matt Doyle) – the student actors who play, respectively, *Romeo and Juliet* at McKinley Military Academy – do in *Private Romeo*. In fact, it is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that provides the means by which Sam and Glenn discover their romantic interest in one another. To this end, Brown transforms the Capulet ball into a typical clandestine teenage party that includes a game of for-stakes poker, a fair amount of beer drinking, and copious amounts of masculine braggadocio in the McKinley Military Academy Commons. Feeling uncomfortable once his tormentor, Cadet Neff (Hale Appleman), arrives, Glenn wanders away from the crowd to be by himself on the far side of the room next to the floor-to-ceiling windows. Sam notices Glenn in his isolation and, as *Romeo*, asks Benvolio/Gus, "What lady's that which doth

enrich the hand / Of yonder knight?" (1.5.41-42). While he makes this inquiry of his friend, the camera focuses on Juliet/Glenn, who is staring at nothing in particular with a pensive expression on his face. Once Benvolio/Gus insists that he does not know the person whom Romeo/Sam is referring to, Romeo/Sam proceeds to extol upon his/her (Juliet/Glenn's) virtues in verse:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright.

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear,

Beauty too rich for use, for earth to dear.

So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows

As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.

The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand

And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand. (1.5.43-50)

Having uttered this speech, Romeo/Sam walks toward Juliet/Glenn, leaving Benvolio/Gus behind. While doing so, he stares at Juliet/Glenn with a newfound intensity and says, "Did my heart love till now? Forswear it, sight, / For I ne'er saw true beauty till this night" (1.5.51-52). This is where Brown's inspired blurring of gender and character names in *Private Romeo* starts to mean something unique and important, particularly in a queer context. It is, after all, the first time that Sam, via the medium of the characters of Romeo and his Juliet, has admitted out loud that he is in love with someone who is of the same gender as himself. Despite Romeo/Sam's use of the pronouns she and hers, as well as the noun lady in this brief speech, it is always never less than clear that Juliet/Glenn is a young man, again because Brown does not force his actors to cross-dress in female garb

when they are portraying a female character. Furthermore, in a patriarchal, heterosexist society, there really is no language for one man to remark upon the beauty of another young man. Shakespeare's words thus allow Romeo/Sam to say something about another young man that he could not otherwise say without opening himself to the wrath of institutional and societal disapprobation.

A short while later, using the deceptive physical/rhetorical maneuver of, "What is that on your shirt?," Romeo/Sam taps Glenn/Juliet on the chin with his right hand after Glenn/Juliet looks down to see what it was that Romeo/Sam was pointing at. Although Glenn/Juliet seems to be annoyed with himself for being taken in by such a puerile ruse, it soon becomes clear that Romeo/Sam's real intent was to touch Glenn/Juliet in a way that would get the other young man's attention – and pave the way for something more intimate to occur between them. To apologize, Romeo/Sam turns to the text of *Romeo and Juliet* and explains,

If I profane with my unwortheiest hand

This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss. (1.5.92-95)

With the last line he speaks here, Romeo/Sam leans in and tries to kiss Juliet/Glenn on the cheek; however, rather flummoxed by Romeo/Sam's actions, Juliet/Glenn pulls away from him. In the aftermath of these moments, Romeo/Sam's gaze darts from one direction to another in an endearing mixture of shyness, embarrassment, and hope. Romeo/Sam's palpable vulnerability is touching, and it shows that the experience of discovering love crosses the lines associated with sexual identity. Also, when one human

being is attracted to another human being, as Romeo/Sam is to Juliet/Glenn, one of the next logical steps is for that person to seek to extend that attraction in a physical manner by initiating a kiss – something our species has done to demonstrate interest and desire since it first appeared on the evolutionary scene. But, just like one young man is not supposed to notice or remark upon the beauty of another young man in our heterosexist society, one young man is not supposed to want, much less to actually attempt, to kiss another young man as Romeo/Sam does here. Because it is non-normative, male-male kissing, even in the context of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, qualifies as queer behavior that threatens the supremacy of heterosexuality by virtue of its very existence and its concrete representation in cinematic form.

Having managed to reach an initial level of intimacy, Juliet/Glenn steps close to Romeo/Sam and – continuing the saint and sinner conceit evident in Shakespeare's text – says,

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this,
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss. (1.5.96-99)

By this point, overcoming his initial astonishment, Juliet/Glenn reaches out with his right hand and takes Romeo/Sam's left hand in his own so that their palms are, in fact, touching. The closeness of the moment is palpable. And, suddenly, there is not the slightest doubt that these are two people – two young men – who are mutually attracted to one another. Then, like their Shakespearean counterparts in *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo/Sam and Juliet/Glenn continue to flirt playfully and verbally with one another:

Romeo/Sam: Have not saints lips and holy palmers too?

Juliet/Glenn: Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

Romeo/Sam: Why then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do –

They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

Juliet/Glenn: Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

Romeo/Sam: Then move not while my prayer's effect I take. (1.5.100-105)



Figure 20: Juliet/Glenn (left) and Romeo/Sam (right) sharing their first kiss in *Private Romeo* (dir. Alan Brown, 2011), DVD screengrab.

Romeo/Sam then kisses Juliet/Glenn full on the lips (see Figure 20). When they separate, both young men are rather surprised by what they have just done. “Thus from my lips by thine my sin is purged,” Romeo/Sam offers as an apology for being so forward as to kiss Juliet/Glenn without being invited to do so (1.5.106). But Juliet/Glenn smiles broadly at Romeo/Sam, steps closer to him, and says evenly, “Then have my lips the sin that they have took,” (1.5.107). Emboldened by this response, Romeo/Sam says, “Sin from my lips? O trespass sweetly urged! / Give me my sin again” (1.5.108-109), then he reaches out and takes Juliet/Glenn’s face between his hands and kisses him again – this time even

more passionately. And Juliet/Glenn responds in kind by kissing Romeo/Sam back with just as much ardor. That two young men can and do kiss one another, and that there is nothing sick or disgusting or untoward about them doing so as those in increasingly isolated quarters of the heterosexist regime believe; that it is just as natural for them to do so as it is for a man and a woman to kiss one another are parts of the larger message that is conveyed so powerfully by this sequence of images in *Private Romeo*. Indeed, in this context, it is not a stretch to assert that two young men kissing each other is no more of a sin than it is for Romeo and Juliet to kiss each other at this moment in Shakespeare's play. This is queerness at its most visceral and its most transformative.

Having created an entirely believable fictional realm in which male same-sex desire and love are paramount in *Private Romeo*, Brown also manages to generate a significant amount of suspense for those audience members who have become invested in Sam and Glenn's characters and the outcome of their romance. This is because, of course, of the well-known fact that Romeo and Juliet are doomed to death from the opening lines of Shakespeare's play. Indeed, the tension over what will ultimately happen to Sam and Glenn – which has been steadily increasing since they each recognized their feelings for the other – continues until almost the very last moments of *Private Romeo*. Brown stages the portion of 5.3 of *Romeo and Juliet* that takes place in the Capulet monument in a large lecture hall with amphitheater seating. There, Romeo/Sam rushes in to find his beloved Juliet/Glenn seemingly dead and sprawled on the instructors' table-length podium. His anguish is immediate and heartbreaking to witness. Thus it is totally understandable when Romeo/Sam drinks the last of the drugged water that Juliet/Glenn left in her/his canteen, is quickly overcome, and dies while spooning Juliet/Glenn in his

arms in an all-encompassing embrace that epitomizes Romeo/Sam's love for, and devotion to, Juliet/Glenn. Moments later, Juliet/Glenn wakes to find Friar Laurence (Adam Barrie) hovering nearby and urging her/him to leave immediately before they are discovered in the tomb. Juliet/Glenn sends him away, insisting that she/he will not part from her/his beloved Romeo/Sam. When Friar Laurence is gone, Juliet/Glenn says, "I



Figure 21: Glenn (on top) and Sam (on bottom) smiling and very much in love after their performance of Romeo and Juliet's death scene (5.3) in *Private Romeo* (dir. Alan Brown, 2011), DVD screengrab.

will kiss thy lips. / Haply some poison yet doth hang on them / To make me die with a restorative" (5.3.163-166), and then she/he kisses him. What happens next calls to mind Nahum Tate's famous re-interpretation of *King Lear* in the late 17th century that ends with the survival of the characters of King Lear and Cordelia and Cordelia's marriage to Edgar, someone whom she never even associates with in Shakespeare's original text. As Juliet/Glenn is kissing Romeo/Sam, Romeo/Sam starts to kiss Juliet/Glenn back as his eyes flutter open (see Figure 21). The spell of performance is broken and *Private Romeo* leaves us with Sam and Glenn, two young men who are alive and well and who are in love with one another. This is, perhaps, the most significant moment of queering in the

entirety of Brown's film because it features the triumph and the exaltation of homosexual love instead of the repeated reification of its heterosexual counterpart.

In a world where gay people have been subject to outright disdain, medical and mental proscription, and criminalization for far too long, and in which their love stories have been discounted as little more than the result of unnatural lusts and thus erased almost entirely, it is more than a minor miracle that, in *Private Romeo*, Brown appropriates Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* – perhaps one of the most heterosexual of heterosexual love stories in all of Western literature – and transforms it into a story that treats the love of two young men with as much candor, passion, explicitness, and beauty as is evident in its original source. Along the way he makes an eloquent plea for the tolerance and understanding of sexual minorities while simultaneously arguing for the right of gays and lesbians to serve in the U.S. military without institutional, societal, or governmental hindrance and to marry the person of their choice just like their heterosexual counterparts have been able to do since time immemorial. And that warrants critical attention of the highest order and sophistication on the part of scholars, teachers, students, and aficionados of Shakespeare and Shakespeare on film worldwide.

Notes

¹ All citations from *Romeo and Juliet* in this chapter are keyed to the recent Arden Shakespeare, Third Series, edition of the play edited by René Weis (London: Methuen Drama / Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012), and are noted parenthetically in the text of the essay according to the standard act, scene, and line number convention.

² On the Chamberlain's Men and Elizabethan/Jacobean theatres, see Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), and *The Shakespeare Company, 1594-1642* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³ See Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

⁴ See <www.privateromeothemovie.com>. The site was still live as of this writing.

⁵ See Chapter 14 of Part II of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, where he writes: "In this idea originated the plan of the 'Lyrical Ballads;' in which it was agreed, that my endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic; yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith" (677).

⁶ See *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*: "As defined by the ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts, their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology" (43).

CHAPTER 7

EPILOGUE: THE PRESENCE OF THE QUEER IN ANGLOPHONE

SHAKESPEARE FILM

To comment on the overall arc of the presence of the queer in Anglophone Shakespeare sound film in the period from 1935 to 2011, it proves instructive to consider the state of cinema as a cultural industry that produced entertainment for the masses following the advent of “talking pictures” in the early 20th century. Though it may seem otherwise, the purveyors of film did not have free reign to present any kind of content. Indeed, on the topic of censorship and the cinema, Gregory D. Black claims that “most film history is written as if the code and the PCA did not exist” (100). PCA is an abbreviation for the Production Code Administration, a no longer extant, semi-autonomous agency within the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) – later to become the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) – trade association that was, as of 1930, empowered to regulate the content of any film made and/or screened in the United States. The code Black refers to is known as the Motion Picture Production Code, or, more colloquially, as the Hays Code – so named after one of the PCA’s early heads. As a result of reactionary conservative and religious (mostly Catholic) pressure, Hollywood was forced to adopt and conform to the dictates of the Hays Code until near the end of the 1960s.

The production code, and all those who enforced it, either passively or aggressively, were guided by the overarching conviction – written into the preamble of the code itself – that the “MORAL IMPORTANCE of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women . . .

it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours; and ultimately touches the whole of their lives. A man may be judged by his standard of entertainment as easily as by the standard of his work” (*Movies and Mass Culture* 142). The code’s particular applications addressed such items as: crimes against the law, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, costume, dances, religion, locations, national feelings, titles, repellant subjects, and, of course, sex. Two proscriptions in the last category warrant quotation in the present context. The first of these states that the “sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing,” while the second insists that “[s]ex *perversion* or any inference to it is forbidden” in film (*Movies and Mass Culture* 139, 140). There can be no doubt that homosexuality qualified as one type of “sex perversion,” or as a specific kind of “low form of sex relationship,” that the Hays Code prohibited depiction of in the cinema for nearly four decades.

In a number of respects, the Hays Code betrays a rather Platonic ethos. Just like, for Plato, poetry must contribute to the benefit of the state and its citizens or it risked being banished from the ideal republic, film, at least during the reign of the production code in the United States, had to engender tangible, wholly positive effects as regards the presumed morals of its viewers, or it risked suppression at the hands of those who had deemed themselves the authorities on such matters. Where male homoeroticism in the Shakespeare film is concerned, the production code is what initially stood in the way of creating honest representations of such subject matter – even when the filmmakers themselves were members of the GLBTQQI community – during the early-to-mid part of the last millennium. There is, then, a certain teleological symmetry in the fact that

depictions of male homoeroticism in the Shakespeare film became possible along with the demise of the code in 1968 and the advent of the gay liberation movement in 1969, and the fact that such images are now flourishing – comparatively speaking – as the second decade of the 21st century continues to unfold.

But Black’s assertion that “most film history is written as if the code and the PCA did not exist,” may be quibbled with. Histories of film that encompass the gay and lesbian – and, later, the queer – perspective, either in terms of subject matter, author affiliation, or, in many cases, both, have directed a great deal of attention to the PCA and the production code. For example, Vito Russo, who published the first contemporary history of gay and lesbian cinema, *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*, in 1981, deals repeatedly with the PCA and the production code as he charts the widespread impact of both on the (re)presentation of homosexuality in American film. Others, such as Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, authors of the more recent volume, *Queer Images: A History of Gay and Lesbian Film in America*, also comment often on the PCA and its code as they extend and update the work of Russo, taking it forward from the mid-1980s to the early 2000s. What Russo, Benshoff and Griffin, and their colleagues have effected, then, is the bringing to light that which has been previously hidden from “official” film history as regards the GLBTQQI community in the cinema.

“Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama” seeks to complement, as Foucault described it, the particular “moving forward of history” – something that can be accomplished only through the struggle for the control of memory between oppositional groups like homosexuals and those that attempt to oppress them – Russo, Benshoff and Griffin, et al have set in motion (124). “[I]f one control’s people’s

memory,” Foucault claims, “one controls their dynamism. And one also controls their experience, their knowledge of previous struggles . . . It is vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, to administer it, tell it what it must contain” (124). This is because, as Vincent Pérez writes, cultural or collective memory “provides a set of categories through which a nation, group, or community makes sense of its existence, giving meaning to its past and present and projecting that meaning as a shared identity into the future” (15). Like any other minority constituency that has suffered the slings and arrows of persecution, oppression, and historical erasure, the GLBTQQI community must continue the project of recovering its past – inclusive of endeavors like remembering the queer in the Shakespeare film – in order radically to transform its present and to secure its future. For example, Kenneth Branagh’s *Henry V* (1989) and *As You Like It* (2006), Richard Loncraine and Ian McKellan’s *Richard III* (1995), and Ralph Fiennes’s *Coriolanus* (2011) are cinematic texts might well be interpreted in accord with the interventions suggested in “Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama.” Other areas that seem apropos for this kind of criticism include representations of male homoeroticism in the silent Shakespeare film and in Shakespearean world cinema, as well as representations of female homoeroticism in the Shakespeare film in all forms. Television productions of Shakespearean drama also present themselves as the subjects of future inquiry within the overall context of this study. Thus, at the end of “Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama,” lies the beginning of further criticism.

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