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2

The queer director, gay spectatorship and three cinematic productions of Shakespeare's 'straightest' play – *Romeo and Juliet*

I

Since the early to mid-1590s, when it made its debut on the stages of Elizabethan London, *Romeo and Juliet* has been an enormously successful play. Not surprisingly, its success is reflected in the play's fortunes in the cinema. According to Kenneth S. Rothwell, *Romeo and Juliet* has been brought to the screen in various forms some twenty-five times since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ The first of these productions was Vitagraph's fifteen-minute silent black-and-white version in 1908; one of the more recent films was penned by Julian Fellowes, directed by Carlo Carlei and appeared in 2013. Because they were made by, broadly speaking, queer directors, this chapter focuses critical attention on George

Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and Alan Brown's *Private Romeo* (2011).² In fact, given their directorial provenance, it is not unreasonable to infer that these movies approach the Shakespearean source material from some kind of a demonstrable queer perspective. Beyond that idea, the guiding principle here is that, even though received knowledge holds firmly to the notion that *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the most well-known and universally admired stories of thwarted *heterosexual* love in the world's archive of cultural, artistic, literary and theatrical inheritances, it still has a great deal to offer its queer viewers and their allies, particularly in its various cinematic forms. This has everything to do with the fact that *Romeo and Juliet*, out of all of Shakespeare's plays, repeatedly shows that heterosexual love is often imbricated in male homosexual love and vice versa.

II

From the moment of its premiere and well into the present era the response to George Cukor's lavish 1936 film of *Romeo and Juliet* has been rather mixed.³ There can be little doubt that this is not the kind of history the studio, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), had in mind to make when it set out to bring *Romeo and Juliet* and Shakespeare to the screen in the wake of Warner Brothers' release of Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsummer* the year before. For instance, though he finds much to admire in it, in the end, Rothwell describes the film as 'a reverential but not warm and vibrant *Romeo and Juliet*, received respectfully but not lovingly by the critics, and ultimately too wrapped up in a high mimetic bardolatry for either Shakespeare's or Hollywood's own good'.⁴ Meanwhile, Courtney Lehmann explains that '[f]rom its acclaimed director and Tchaikovskian score to its all-star cast, multi-million dollar financing, distinguished screenwriter (Talbot Jennings)

and, above all, its visionary producer Irving Thalberg – the watchmaker who oversaw every aspect of the film’, this particular *Romeo and Juliet* ‘seemed predestined to make history as the Hollywood studio system’s first “legitimate” Shakespearean masterpiece of the sound era’.⁵ Alas, this decidedly lofty ambition was not, for the most part, attained. It seems that the main problem with the film was not with the myriad technical and artistic elements that went into its production, which were uniformly of the highest quality, but with the age of its actors who portrayed the key characters, all of whom are young teenagers in the original source text, with, focusing on the two most prominent examples, Romeo aged sixteen and Juliet not quite aged fourteen respectively. Even so, Lehmann writes, ‘Norma Shearer played Juliet at thirty-seven while Leslie Howard played Romeo at forty-two’ and, similarly, a ‘fifty-five-year-old John Barrymore supplied the role of Mercutio while Basil Rathbone performed Tybalt at forty-four’.⁶ Given the specificity of this information, Lehmann is left to conclude in what comes across, no doubt unintentionally, as a somewhat ageist assessment, that the ‘film was a geriatric adaptation of Shakespeare’s tale of teenage lovers; despite the garish sets, gorgeous costumes, and Tchaikovskian musical accompaniment, nothing could turn back time for these would-be youngsters’.⁷ Stephen Orgel is perhaps even more blunt in his remarks about the film, which he considers to have been woefully ‘miscast ... with a preposterously mature pair of lovers in Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer, and an elderly John Barrymore as a stagey Mercutio decades out of date’.⁸

But another point of view on this matter of age in Cukor’s *Romeo and Juliet* is to be found in the work of Richard Burt, who speculates that the ‘film’s gayness [i.e. its queerness, insofar as Burt conflates the two] is also marked, one could argue, by the casting of actors much too old for their parts, most obviously a middle-aged Leslie Howard’ as Romeo.⁹ From a perspective that demands more or less complete fidelity to Shakespeare’s text, the casting of Shearer, Howard,

Barrymore and several other mature actors in Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* is anachronistic and remains so for contemporary viewers of the film. It seems however, that Burt's hypothesis can be pushed a bit further since he does not articulate exactly why the age of the actors in the principal parts of the movie signifies, in one respect at least, its 'gayness'. The only larger implication that makes sense is that love is just for the young and older people should not be engaging in the kind of romantic antics Romeo and Juliet engage in simply because they ought to know better after having experienced more of life – its arbitrary vicissitudes, its triumphs and defeats, its joys and its miseries – than mere teenagers have. Love between older people then becomes as forbidden as the love between the teenaged Romeo and Juliet and, much more significantly in the context of this book, as forbidden as the love between two people of the same gender. In this case age itself is the agent that brings forth the queerness, or the not quite (hetero) normativeness, of Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Moving just beyond the critical assessments and debates touched on above, Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin note that '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 Though none of its lead actors or actresses, its scriptwriter, or its producer fall into this category, by all accounts Cukor, the director of MGM's *Romeo and Juliet*, was gay. Patrick McGilligan, one of Cukor's major (if not always sympathetic) biographers, explains that in the early part of the twentieth century 'Hollywood was a haven for all sorts of artistic people, but for those among them who happened to be homosexual it was a vaguely hospitable oasis in a distinctly antagonistic world'.¹¹ It is all the more remarkable then that Cukor was able to carve out a career for himself in such a milieu. McGilligan goes on to point out, though, that what

needs to be understood is that Cukor's standing in this context was unique. There were certain pockets of the

movie business where homosexuality thrived; among the creative crafts – sketch and design, decoration and sets, costume and makeup – it was almost ghettoized. However, at the top of everything in Hollywood, in creative authority, stood the director, among whose first rank there was only one homosexual ...¹²

That first-rank director who also happened to be homosexual was Cukor. As such, McGilligan speculates that ‘Cukor must have felt that he had to protect his stature among the first echelon.’¹³ He adds that the resulting ‘secretiveness had to be partly shame. Even among the most enlightened Hollywood people, the liberal opinion of the era – an opinion that to some extent prevails today – held that homosexuality was a kind of psychological deficiency, an abnormal, perhaps “curable” condition.’¹⁴ In other words, acceptance of homosexuality at this time and place in history was tainted by a thoroughly homophobic stigma that men like Cukor internalized as embarrassment and acted accordingly in order to survive. However, Emanuel Levy, another of Cukor’s biographers, offers what seems like a more measured take on these circumstances: ‘Working in a highly conservative setting,’ he writes, ‘Hollywood of the studio era, Cukor was extremely careful (“discreet” was the word he liked) about his gayness. But he didn’t have a double life; everybody in Hollywood knew he was gay, and he was never ashamed of it.’¹⁵ To support this assertion, Levy quotes Cukor himself as saying ‘I never had any problems accepting myself.’¹⁶ This suggests that Cukor was apparently savvy enough about the effect the mere idea of homosexuality had on at least some of those who were not so affectively, erotically or romantically inclined of his era to make the appropriate accommodations without sacrificing either his integrity or his basic sense of self.

Given these circumstances, Burt explains that the ‘usual approach to a film like Cukor’s [*Romeo and Juliet*] would be to read it either as closeted or as (perhaps obliquely) marked as gay’.¹⁷ He later suggests provisionally that ‘Cukor might

be regarded as so closeted ... that his *Romeo and Juliet* might seem not to be marked by gayness at all.¹⁸ It seems then that Benschhoff and Griffin's idealistic assertion that it is possible to queer films on the sole basis of a queer person's involvement in a production proves fruitless where Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* is concerned in every sense but, perhaps, the anecdotal. Though certainly queer in that this kind of a strategy does not engender anything productive in terms of new knowledge, that is not really very satisfying in the larger critical/analytical context of this study. But Burt later suggests that gayness is evident in Cukor's production in three ways. One of these is the already discussed mature age of the actors cast in the lead and a number of the supporting roles. The other two involve the film's set design and portions of its musical score. Burt proceeds to note that the 'English and gay design consultant Oliver Messel was brought over to Hollywood at considerable expense to give the production a gauzy revue look' and the 'consummation [of *Romeo and Juliet*] scene is accompanied by the music of a gay composer, the famous opening theme from Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique" (Symphony No. 6 in B Minor, Op. 74)'.¹⁹ Thus as a film directed by a queer man (Cukor), adapted from a play by a queer man (Shakespeare), with sets crafted by a queer man (Messel) and featuring music by a queer man (Tchaikovsky), Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* can be considered quadruple queer(ed). The problem with the 'marks of gayness' that Burt identifies in Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* is that such esoteric information is not necessarily readily available to average film viewers, queer and non-queer alike. Though accessible in the archives, interested audience members would need to know what to look for, where to look for it, and how to interpret it in relation to Cukor's movie. So for all but the specialist, then, the information Burt discusses here seems to have value only at, yet again, the anecdotal rather than the critical level given its unintelligibility in the film itself.

Where the cachet of a film subject like *Romeo and Juliet* itself is concerned, McGilligan and Levy appear to be in

agreement as Cukor's biographers. McGilligan reveals that although 'he was regarded as the studio's most "cultural" director, in fact Cukor had no experience with, or special claim on, Shakespearean literature'.²⁰ He adds that if Cukor was 'going to direct Shakespeare, probably something such as the acid-etched *Taming of the Shrew*, a battle royal of the sexes, would have better piqued his sensibility'.²¹ Levy concurs: 'A grand-scale production, *Romeo and Juliet* was Cukor's biggest assignment to date, and he took great care in planning the medieval sets and costumes. But the prestige of the literary source – the first and only Shakespeare Cukor ever directed – made him nervous.'²² Shakespeare awed Cukor as a cinema director, in other words, and not, evidently, in a good way. Furthermore, if Cukor was drawn to *Romeo and Juliet* because it was a tale of forbidden love – something queer folk might well be apt to identify with considering, until very recently, the disapprobation with which they and their relationships have been subjected to in the modern era – no (auto)biographical record exists to confirm that fact. This does not mean, however, that the project of queering Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* is a lost cause. One of the keys to pursuing this line of enquiry further lies in a set of observations put forth by McGilligan about the director and his work on Shakespeare: 'Whatever his own instincts might have been, Cukor seemed overwhelmed by the swollen prestige of it all. The sets tended to dwarf the actors, and in any case Cukor was not one to let his camera linger on scenery; he preferred the architecture of the human body.'²³ It can be argued that Cukor's preference for the architecture of the human body – particularly the male body – is apparent in a number of places throughout his *Romeo and Juliet*, though, in keeping with what seems to have been his almost obsessive-compulsive penchant for discretion where his homosexuality was concerned, the director is never anything less than subtle in his representation of the male body.

In his commentary on the costuming of Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* Jackson notes that '[s]ome of the younger men

wear small fringed sporrans – not quite cod-pieces – that decorate their lower abdomen without covering the genital area. Their outline is the smoothed-out and idealized one of the male ballet dancer.²⁴ In addition, citing a 16 February 1936 piece that ran in the *Boston Globe*, Jackson reveals that Leslie Howard was selected to play Romeo on account of the shapeliness of his legs; it seems, in fact, that none of his competitors for the role filled out the tights the actor would be required to wear throughout the film as well as Howard.²⁵ What Jackson remains silent on is the male homoerotic appeal these masculine outfits have on those in *Romeo and Juliet*'s audience who recognize and appreciate such a quality. That male homoerotic appeal is evident in the image below (see Figure 3). In the near centre stands Romeo with his sword drawn; to the extreme right of him is Tybalt, who is jousting with Mercutio; and to the left of Romeo is

FIGURE 3 From left to right, Mercutio (John Barrymore), Benvolio (Reginald Denny) with strategically placed sporrان at his waist, Romeo (Leslie Howard) and Tybalt (Basil Rathbone) brawling in the streets of Verona. *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. George Cukor, 1936.

Benvolio (Reginald Denny) and Mercutio, the latter being the initiator of the attack on Tybalt. Benvolio is the only character clad in the type of sporran Jackson mentions, but otherwise all four men in the forefront of the shot are wearing form-fitting tights that emphasize the musculature of their thighs, calves and knees. For aficionados of the male body, of which Cukor was one, such a composition – punctuated as it is by the testosterone-charged drama of a bitter fight – is redolent with homoeroticism since only males are shown in the screen capture, and since it depicts a riotous physicality punctuated by the use of swords, which have long been interpreted as symbols of men's, in this case unseen, penises. In tandem these elements coalesce at this point into what can be described as an overdetermined homoerotic masculine tableau. Queer viewers of Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* are thus encouraged by the means of artful and suggestive costuming and stage fight choreography, if they are so inclined, to engage in the transgressive act of imagining exposed male flesh being presented to them for their pleasure here and throughout the film.

Interestingly, Burt also claims that Cukor's Mercutio 'is pointedly made heterosexual: he regularly flirts with the local single women' featured in *Romeo and Juliet*.²⁶ From a queer perspective, there is reason to challenge this assertion. The way to begin doing so is by observing Mercutio's style of dress closely. Early in the film Mercutio wears a large, pearl teardrop earring in his left ear; later, he wears a prominent gold hoop earring in the same ear (see Figure 4). Though inconsequential in and of themselves, these accessories are significant given the gender of the wearer because of the earring's long-standing and problematic association with homosexuality. 'Earlobes, necks, wrists and fingers', Shirley Bury writes, 'are among the chief parts of the human anatomy which lend themselves to applied decoration.'²⁷ She goes on to explain that, like 'so many innovations in the field of jewellery, the practice of piercing the fleshy protuberances of the ears for the attachment of ornaments symbolic of race, tribe and status seems to have originated in Western Asia. A sculptured

FIGURE 4 Mercutio (John Barrymore), centre, with a large gold hoop earring clearly visible in his left ear. *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. George Cukor, 1936.

slab from the palace of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC)’ – a well-known male ruler of Ancient Assyria famous for having had constructed a library at his Nineveh palace – that sits ‘in the British Museum depicts the king in profile wearing a long earring with an acorn-shaped terminal’.²⁸ Throughout the ages, Bury details, ‘men, women and children have been subjected to the ordeal of ear-piercing, though the male fashion for earrings has been mysteriously intermittent and sometimes a national rather than a cultural phenomenon’.²⁹ One of the key points Bury makes in her brief summary of the history of earrings as a fashion item is that from their earliest appearance earrings were not solely for women – men wore them, too.

Ronald D. Steinbach adds to the history of the earring when he notes that they ‘were very fashionable for men in Europe and to a lesser extent in the United States during certain periods of time extending from the 1500s to the early 1800s.’³⁰ Though not, in Steinbach’s view, always reliable,

much of the evidence regarding the male penchant for wearing earrings in the early modern period comes from surveys of the portraiture of the time. These images reveal that prominent English figures like King Charles I, Sir Walter Raleigh, the first Duke of Buckingham – and particular romantic favourite of King James I – George Villiers and, finally, Shakespeare himself all wore an earring in the left ear as a matter of course. At the time such a fashion item was not unusual for men; it did not as would be the case later in history cause anxiety as far as the demarcations between masculinity and femininity were concerned. In any case, Cukor's costume designers were likely aware of the fashion trends of the period they were asked to depict in *Romeo and Juliet*. This is enough to explain why Mercutio wears either the pearl teardrop or the gold hoop earrings in all of the scenes he appears. Nevertheless, the queerness of such a representation is not mitigated entirely by this concession because, as Steinbach details, earrings became, by the 1970s and onward, and not incidentally in the aftermath of the Stonewall Riots and the emergence of the modern gay rights movement, a signifier of homosexuality for those males who chose to wear them, regardless of individuals' actual sexual identity.³¹ Earrings, like pantyhose, make-up and so forth, were for women only; individually and collectively, all three of these items were tangible identifiers that allowed for the necessary differentiation between males and females that society demanded of its members.

In many respects, of course, it does not really matter whether or not Barrymore wore earrings in Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet*. If viewers and critics thought about the subject of earrings appearing on a man – on an actor, for that matter – at all, they likely considered it no more than part of Hollywood's attempt to be accurate in its portrayal of sixteenth-century Veronese men. Today, however, the historically contingent baggage associated with what gender can and, perhaps more importantly, what gender cannot don earrings maps directly on to Barrymore as the gold hoop- and pearl teardrop-wearing Mercutio. Alas, Barrymore's

subpar performance is prone to hyperbolic affectation and overacting, neither of which makes for a very compelling character. Beyond that, Barrymore's Mercutio does not come across, as Burt claims, as being particularly heterosexual. Yes, he does regularly flirt with the local women of Verona, and he even goes so far as to bestow a lengthy kiss on at least one of them during the movie. But this flirting and kissing is thoroughly unconvincing. Joseph A. Porter describes Barrymore's Mercutio as one whose 'gestures and wide-eyed manners are exaggeratedly effeminate' and later asserts that the actor's/character's 'persistent eye for the ladies is itself subverted by the conspicuous effeminacy of all his flirtatiousness'.³² The Mercutio that emerges from these cumulative representations and interpretations is more like a gay man with a large coterie of devoted female followers – a bevy of 'fag hags' to put it more colloquially – rather than a randy, red-blooded, heterosexual playboy eager to conquer the opposite sex with his amorous prowess.

Beyond handsome men to gaze at (though that is not, of course, the absolute limit of queerness), it would seem that Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* does not have much to offer its viewers who are queer or queer-allied. Burt points out, however, that 'what is more interesting about Cukor's film than whether it tries to mark itself as gay or disavow the marks of its (perhaps unconscious) gayness is the way the film passes as straight so that any knowledge of gay desire that it secretes comes as a surprise to its audiences'.³³ Burt's 'gay desire', in its broadest form, encompasses everything from the mature actors chosen for the roles of the young characters in Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* to the fact that Cukor managed to provide at least one unbilled and silent cameo appearance in the film for a young man he had a brief romantic/sexual liaison with at some point, as well as all of the other things touched on thus far in this chapter. These are details that Rothwell, Lehmann, Orgel and Jackson do not comment on in their studies of the movie. By now, however, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, contra Burt, such

knowledge should not come 'as a surprise to its [Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet*] audiences'. It should be out of the closet and in the open. Indeed, armed with such information, the experience of the picture might be inflected quite differently for all of its audience members. Yet, at the same time, therein lies the value of a queer reading of the film like that attempted here from the remove of almost eighty years. Queer and queer-allied audiences of Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* in the second decade of the twenty-first century have the ability, indeed, the privilege if not the imperative, of claiming the film as a part of their history – a history that has all too often been elided in modern times by the myriad forces of suppression. Watching a film like Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* from a queer position is in itself a powerful act of what Jonathan Dollimore has called sexual dissidence.³⁴ Furthermore, crafting the interpretive response that follows into a piece of discourse that extends that act of sexual dissidence into the public realm, where it can effect real change – particularly in ways of thinking, being, and understanding – by virtue of its very existence, is also a worthy endeavour.

III

Franco Zeffirelli's career as a film director proper was launched with the 1967 production of *The Taming of the Shrew*, starring then-acting giants and off-screen married couple with a decidedly stormy relationship Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor. The movie was a success financially and was also generally well liked by both cinema and Shakespeare critics. A year later, Zeffirelli would turn his directorial attentions to *Romeo and Juliet*.³⁵ The resulting film, starring – significantly from cultural, aesthetic and critical perspectives – the age-appropriate Leonard Whiting and Olivia Hussey in the lead roles, proved to be, and remains, one of the most successful Shakespeare movies of all time. It also

made Zeffirelli a household name and gave him the power as a director to pick and choose the projects he wanted to work on from that point forward. In later decades Zeffirelli would adapt and appropriate Shakespearean source material two more times and craft what Rothwell calls 'a dazzling Verdi's *Otello* (1986), and a thoughtful *Hamlet* (1990)', the latter featuring Mel Gibson in the title role and a host of other late-twentieth century movie stars of the highest calibre in most of the play's other parts, too.³⁶ Thus whereas Shakespeare intimidated Cukor, the dramas of the celebrated Elizabethan/Jacobean playwright were more than a worthy challenge for Zeffirelli, who rose to each occasion with both panache and a sensibility that appealed – and continues to appeal – to multitudes.

Colour is perhaps the first thing a contemporary viewer might notice when comparing Cukor's and Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliets*. In accord with the respective technologies available to their directors, where black-and-white defines the first film, glorious colour animates the second. Indeed, it is not overstating the case to claim that colour 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 look as if they were made of richly luxurious velvets, silks and other similarly sumptuous materials. Everywhere the eye looks as it drinks in the myriad delights of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* it is greeted by a panoply of colour. In the context of this book, the obvious correlation regarding this aspect of the film is that colour sheds a multivalent kind of light on things that were once considered in only black and white binaric terms. Two of those things are desire and sexuality, which had been constructed within the strict-gay-versus straight dichotomy for at least as far back as the identification of the homosexual in the nineteenth century. In light of the circumstances with Cukor's sexuality and how it relates to his 1936 production, there is no small amount of irony in the fact that this wildly successful late 1960s adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* was

directed by a queer – a bisexual as opposed to a strictly homosexual – man, too.³⁷ In addition, given the thirty-two years between their respective films, it is not surprising that Zeffirelli was able to direct what can be considered, arguably, a queerer version of *Romeo and Juliet* than Cukor had been able to do in the earlier part of the twentieth century.

It is significant too that Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* appeared at the height of the Sexual Revolution. Peter S. Donaldson explains that the 'film participates in the general loosening of restrictions on the representation of sexuality on film of the period, and it seemed to endorse a number of the values of the international youth movement: pacifism, distrust of elders, and sexual liberation'.³⁸ Meanwhile, 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'.³⁹ 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'.⁴⁰ Coming from a movie 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'.⁴¹ This enigmatic and apropos remark was for its time an astonishing observation to make and to put into print in what was contemporaneously one of the most well-known and highly regarded newspapers in the world.⁴² That being said, it is important to note that Adler does not develop this idea further. The task of doing that necessary work would fall to scholars like Donaldson, Porter and William Van Watson, each of whom fleshed out the notion of the 'softly homosexual cast', or ethos, of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* in a trio of important articles and book chapters that complement the queer reading of the film attempted here.

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'.⁴³ 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'.⁴⁴ This was because

[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.⁴⁵

It is important to realize though that Donaldson's assertion rests on a not unreasonably limited view of 'homosexual desire' and its expression in visual form. Certainly, mainstream films of the late 1960s could not show explicit images of men being intimate or affectionate, much less having out-and-out sex, with one another. But there are multiple ways to represent desire aside from depicting sex acts themselves; as such, it can be argued that just the opposite from what Donaldson posits is evidenced in a highly visceral way throughout Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. In other words, the homoerotic does indeed break the surface of the film; it does not merely hover at the edges. The homoerotic is, in fact, a blatant and palpable force throughout its 138 minutes' running time. This is apparent, for example, when the male gender and the attractiveness of the bulk of the cast; the specifics of the masculine costuming; the physical intimacy in which the male characters are often depicted engaging; the famous male nudity of Romeo in the morning-after-the-wedding-night, or the aubade, scene; and, finally, when the desires of viewers are all taken into account in a queer critique of the film.

As evidenced in part by the image below, there can be no question but that Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* is populated by a literal host of beautiful 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’;⁴⁶ to Michael York, the actor who plays Tybalt; to Keith Skinner, the actor who plays Romeo’s man, Balthazar; and many more besides. All are lean and in the bloom of health; are 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 blessed with shapely physiques that epitomize masculine strength, grace and appeal (see Figure 5). 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”.’⁴⁷ Indeed, they are particularly swoon-worthy examples of the male form that many audience members, regardless of where they fall in terms of sexual and gender identity, may take great delight in observing in this film.

FIGURE 5 Romeo (Leonard Whiting), in tights, attempting to reason with Tybalt (Michael York), in tights and with his back to the audience/camera. Both are surrounded by a cadre of Montagues and Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet*, dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1968.

Donaldson's somewhat casual invocation of Mulvey's notion of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' belies the specificities associated with this important concept. Drawing on psycho-analytic theory, Mulvey details that one of the ways the cinema creates a particular kind of enjoyment is 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'⁴⁸ on the subconscious level. Thus scopophilia is an active function that provides the 'erotic basis for pleasure in looking at another person as object'.⁴⁹ More problematically, though, Mulvey claims that:

[i]n 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*.⁵⁰

From this perspective, film can be seen in its 'proper' light as a simulacrum of the masculine, heterosexual 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 heroes or the anti-heroes – in the visual narrative being presented to him and to assume that their bond with one another is unassailable. On a symbolic level, then, the male spectator of film is able to identify so fully with the film's male characters, the figures that direct the action and, more to the point, make women do their bidding, that he inhabits the exact same psychic position. In other words, the male spectator of film and the male characters in film are for all intents one in the same and they wield the same kind of directorial power over women.

Taking all of this theorizing into account, Mulvey goes on to insist that the 'male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like.'⁵¹ But it is crucially important to be aware of the fact that what Mulvey does not claim here is that man's exhibitionist like – the male equivalent to the female who always already occupies the representational space of *to-be-looked-at-ness* because that is where man has consigned her to be – 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 likely stems from the homoerotic implications such a gaze signifies. It is difficult to imagine, however, that a gay or queer person would experience such inhibitions when it comes to where he chooses to direct his attention in the pursuit of the kind of scopophilic 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 then warrants adding that the 'male figure *can indeed* bear the burden of sexual objectification'. Donaldson's appropriation of the concept of *to-be-looked-at-ness* into his homoerotic reading of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* then succeeds at disrupting the dominant patriarchal order as surely as Mulvey's intervention into visual pleasure and narrative cinema did in its originary moment. And that in itself opens up more queer interpretive possibilities in relation to the film than Donaldson allows for in his important study.

The work of Brett Farmer, who has extended Mulvey's insights exponentially in a number of queer directions, helps to move the analysis attempted here forward in a productive way. Farmer explains that '[t]oo often the "anatomical fact" of gay and straight men's shared corporeality is used as the

grounds for all manner of theoretical conflations. I argue that, far from being continuous, gay and straight forms of masculinity are, in many ways, discontinuous.⁵² He goes on to add that even though 'gay male subjectivities intersect dominant forms of masculinity in significant ways, they are frequently a site of a thrilling undoing or deconstruction of those forms'.⁵³ For Farmer, as far as film is concerned, it is 'gay subjectivities/spectatorships [that] perform a fantasmatic "ruination" of phallic masculinity, a simultaneous assumption and de(con)struction of its forms and significances'.⁵⁴ Putting all of this in another way, the lived psychological and ontological experience of masculinity is different for gay men compared to straight men. Therefore gay men are, by virtue of their particular ways of understanding it, positioned to critique masculinity – and thereby 'ruin' it – given the concept's inherent mutability, a mutability that is more often than not entirely elided in the discourses that surround and prop masculinity up as a universal and unvarying gender norm. Where gay film spectatorship is concerned, this 'ruinous de(con)struction' is accomplished through engagement with what Farmer calls the 'fantasmatic', or the:

concept that refers to the variable networks of fantasy and desire that subtend and structure subjectivity. Different subjectivities are sites of different fantasmatic organizations. Thus one may speak of the gay male fantasmatic, meaning the various formations of psychocultural fantasy, desire, and identification specific to and constitutive of male homosexual subjectivities.⁵⁵

Building on their idiosyncratic understanding of masculinity, gay men accomplish this feat of fantasmatic spectatorship of movies in two ways. The first involves viewing males in films as sex objects, a role, as Mulvey painstakingly explains, that is traditionally and normatively foisted on women; the second is by imagining themselves as either the active or the passive partners in erotic encounters with male characters and actors

in films. The end results of gay fantasmatic spectatorship are queer to the nth degree insofar as they profoundly challenge what is, often far too uncritically, considered normative in regards to gender, desire and sexuality in all of their respective permutations. Theoretically grounded as such, gay and/or queer men are thus provided with the means to describe their experience of narrative cinema in general and Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* in particular.

Regarding the latter, this extends to how such viewers are invited to gaze at characters like Tybalt and Romeo at various points in the film. Zeffirelli's 'homosexual camera'⁵⁶ encourages a highly charged homoerotic response to the lingering images of these young and attractive males. Where Tybalt is concerned, in his first appearance early 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 perfectly shaped knees, calves and thighs that are themselves 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 that only serves to call particular attention to his penis and testicles – parts of the body in which most if not all gay and/or queer men have what can be thought of as a natural interest. At the same time 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 in fact 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 to expose a patch of smooth sun-kissed skin. His handsome, clean-shaven face bears a grin at, apparently, the mere possibility that a fight is imminent, while the brim of the hat on his head curls up on either side in a way that makes the edges look like little devilish horns. It is difficult not to surmise that gay and/or queer men, not to mention many other kinds of viewers, may take erotic delight in this blatantly sensuous

extended display of the roguish Tybalt's hyper-masculine person.

With Farmer's insights in mind, as he is presented initially in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, Tybalt, in all of his phallic, masculine glory, should be one of the figures male audience members identify with in the film to the point that they wish to emulate him as he asserts himself in and on the world he inhabits. These males thus desire Tybalt, but only in the sense that they seek to learn how to do what he does so that they can mimic his manly acts and behaviours, such as always being ready to engage in a fight. Oedipal male same-sex desire in this case is channelled in platonic, heterosexually normative ways that encompass the idea that straight men need to be taught exactly how to be straight men by other straight men. However, as Farmer explains, 'the gay subject recognizes and takes on the paternal [i.e. the masculine] site' that Tybalt inhabits in the film, 'but then proceeds to subvert it through an aberrant reconfiguration. Like his theoretical heterosexual counterpart, the gay subject is positioned in a network of desire *vis-à-vis* the father [here represented by Tybalt], but unlike the heterosexual male subject he does not translate that desire into an idealizing incorporation'⁵⁷ that results in styling himself in a heteronormative way. Instead the gay subject plays the idealizing incorporation 'out in a transgressive scenario of paternal [masculine] seduction and subversion in which the father's [the man's/Tybalt's] position is undermined through its appropriative reconstitution as a "passive object" of and for the gay subject's erotic desires'.⁵⁸ Through the transformative alchemy of the fantasmatic gay and queer spectators of Zeffirelli's film are thus able to conceive of Tybalt as a welcoming object of their erotic, as opposed to platonic, same-sex desires which in turn robs him of his traditional heteronormative phallic power. Being able to control the figure of Tybalt in such a way can be seen as a very queer thing that encompasses the transgressive and the subversive in ways that are liberating for audience members of all kinds, but most especially perhaps for gay and/or queer male spectators of the movie.

Where the gay spectatorial fantasmatic is concerned that liberation has everything to do with the concept of anality. According to Farmer, anality, '[m]ore than any other "sign" of male homosexuality ... marks the gay subject's flagrant difference in a phallic economy, that which sets him apart from other men'.⁵⁹ In Freudian terms, Farmer continues to point out, the

repression of anality is a vital prerequisite for the successful production of phallic masculinity. In part, this is because male phallic identification requires an unchallenged prioritization of the penis as the sole legitimate site of male erotic organization. It is also because the anus has strong psychosexual associations with a 'feminine' passivity that is anathema to patrocentric masculinity.⁶⁰

This leads to circumstances in which the 'anal zone thus features psychically as a fundamental symbol of sexual passivity, penetrability, and castration, something that must be disavowed and repressed as part of a cast-off femininity of male phallic identification', and the resulting normative heterosexual identity it is supposed to produce 'is to succeed'.⁶¹ Farmer puts all of this in more blunt terms when he writes:

[a]ccording to the logic of (hetero)sexual difference, in which masculinity and femininity are bound to an active/passive division, to be fucked is to be placed in the despised position of femininity and, thus, to lose one's claim to manhood. This is why anal penetration features so prominently in the patriarchal imaginary as the ultimate humiliation of the phallic male subject.⁶²

Hence the gay subject's power lies in the fact that he 'can take the received image of masculinity as active, impenetrable, and phallocentric and submit it to a violent subversion',⁶³ at least within the imaginative bounds of the spectatorial fantasmatic.

Tybalt's status as a sex object rather than a sex subject is also facilitated, at least in part, by the fact that, like nearly all of the young males featured in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, he wears a codpiece. Marjorie Garber describes the codpiece as a 'sign of gender undecidability, since it is the quintessential gender mark of "seeming"' and notes that it 'confounds the question of gender, since it can signify yes or no, full or empty, lack or lack of lack'.⁶⁴ Given its rather dubious specificity, this kind of garment cannot be ignored in the context of this study of queerness in the Shakespeare film. In addition, Will Fisher explains that in England the codpiece became a fashion item near the beginning of the fifteenth century and would remain as such for the next 200 years. Concomitant with the appearance of higher-waisted jackets, something was needed to complement the hose men wore as a matter of routine in the period that would protect and simultaneously conceal men's genital areas.⁶⁵ Thus, as Fisher puts it, in many ways the codpiece 'quite literally helped to fashion manhood' at this time in history.⁶⁶ The codpiece, then, is what made a man a man.

Codpieces were not, though, as Fisher details, without controversy. That they were prosthetic devices that could be worn and removed at will and, as plays of the era indicate, by either gender, was one reason why codpieces were problematic. They were not, in other words, garments that were, as originally intended, exclusive to men. For a society in which the male and female genders were strictly policed codpieces were dangerous because they could not in the end be relied on to signify the absolute truth about the physiology of those who wore them. On the other hand, some felt that wearing codpieces was basically the same thing as wearing nothing at all and, therefore, completely inappropriate as public attire.⁶⁷ Furthermore, drawing on the work of Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, Fisher makes the point that the codpiece appeared at a time when ideas about the nature of masculinity were undergoing a profound shift in early modern England. Prior to this point the marker of masculinity was the

production of sons who would carry on the male patrilineal line. During the Renaissance the marker of masculinity became the number of women a man conquered sexually and without any pretence whatsoever of reproduction or marriage.⁶⁸ It is incredibly ironic then that though the codpiece would, for all intents, disappear by the start of the seventeenth century, the new conception of masculinity – of what made a man a man – lingers well into the present day.⁶⁹ This can be seen in the all-too-common notion that men who bed lots of women are celebrated as ‘studs’ while their female counterparts are derided as ‘sluts’, or worse, if they engage in the same kind of unbridled sexual behaviours. Regardless, with either the pre- or post-Renaissance conceptions of masculinity, men are the only beneficiaries of such constructed ways of thinking and being in terms of agency.

A close contemporary cousin of the codpiece is the jockstrap, a garment made of cloth, leather, rubber or other material(s) that has been, over time, completely fetishized by gay and/or queer men as erotic since they first appeared in the mid-1870s as a form of protective wear for athletes. Even the briefest of forays into the world of beefcake books and magazines, as well as gay pornography, is enough to confirm the widespread extent of the fetishization of the jockstrap-cum-codpiece. In any case, by their very nature, codpieces – in whatever form they take – call attention to themselves and to the crotch areas of those who choose to wear them, whether the wearer is a sixteenth-century figure like England’s King Henry VIII or a twentieth-century actor in a Zeffirelli film of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* like Michael York. What the gay and/or queer spectator brings to the interpretive equation is the ability to disrupt conventional ideas of what the codpiece signifies. He, engaging in the strategies enabled by the fantasmatic, is encouraged to view Zeffirelli’s Tybalt as sexually available to him rather than off limits because of his assumed status as a straight man. Hence, rather than the traditional director of the action who can make women do whatever he wants them to do, Tybalt, under the pressure of

the determining gay male gaze, becomes a man who is fully capable of giving and taking erotic pleasure to/from another man – that man being the gay/queer spectator of this cinematic production of *Romeo and Juliet* who thus ‘ruins’ Tybalt’s heteronormative phallic masculinity by replacing it with a queer imaginative anality in its active and/or passive forms.

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, although no less erotically enticing. 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.’⁷⁰ He is in fact the very epitome of melancholic distress brought about by what he considers to be his romantic misfortune given that Rosaline does not return his love. In his state of repose he evinces an endearing vulnerability as well as a charming, innocence-infused, sexual availability that is only heightened by the fact that he too wears a codpiece. Given the specificities of his overall demeanour here, he occupies what Mulvey would consider the traditional 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.

Meanwhile, the skin of Romeo’s hands looks like it would be soft to the touch; his pretty face betrays the barest beginnings of a beard; his brown hair is delightfully mussed. Furthermore the clothes he wears – grey, form-fitting tights complete with codpiece and a matching, elaborately crafted, grey velvet vest – do little to conceal and everything to accentuate the glories of his masculine form. With what Van Watson describes as ‘some of the most gently romantic theme music in the movie’⁷¹ 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).⁷² At this point in the film many gay and/or queer members of Zeffirelli's audience may find themselves wishing to do everything in their power to comfort Romeo and to ease his sufferings by giving him the 'that' he bemoans lacking. Like Tybalt, then, when placed under the determining gay male gaze, Romeo becomes an object of desire that can be had by any one or all of those spectators in a homoerotic imaginative context. And once again, queer anality trumps phallic masculinity in the operation of the gay fantasmatic.

This queer triumph is rendered indelible in the extended aftermath of Romeo's vengeful slaying of Tybalt on account of Tybalt's killing of Mercutio. Having received an earful and then some wise guidance from Friar Laurence (Milo O'Shea), Romeo goes to his beloved Juliet. Zeffirelli provides his viewers with a close-up of the couple sleeping in bed, each of their bare shoulders visible, facing one another but with their eyes closed, and with Romeo's arm draped protectively over Juliet (see Figure 6). Given the specifics of this tableau there can be no doubt that Romeo and Juliet have consummated

FIGURE 6 *Romeo (Leonard Whiting) and Juliet (Olivia Hussey) in bed after consummating their marriage in Romeo and Juliet, dir. Franco Zeffirelli, 1968.*

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 where does such an ‘instinctive’ assessment – that Romeo and Juliet have indeed had sex and consummated their marriage – come from? For Christine Varnado, the sex that Romeo and Juliet are presumptively assumed to have had in both Shakespeare’s play and Zeffirelli’s cinematic adaptation of it takes place just off the page, off the stage, or off the screen. It must be acknowledged, however, that ‘generations of readers and interpreters of the play have imagined that [sex] act taking place offstage, right before the aubade scene, *because they wanted to* – because that is what *they* would do, what they imagine a generalized “one” or “anyone” would do’ in the same circumstances.⁷³ Varnado goes on to add:

projection is the stubborn anachronism inherent in representations of sex acts, especially the ‘invisible,’ indirectly figured sex acts in early modern plays. The very notion of ‘sex’ can only be conjured in the audience’s or reader’s mind via erotic identification – or disidentification – with acts being suggested, and that fantasmatic act of identification is inevitably structured by the reader’s or viewer’s desire.⁷⁴

It should come as no surprise that this desire on the part of *Romeo and Juliet* readers or viewers Varnado discusses is always constructed and interpreted in heteronormative ways: thus the sex act that emerges is always of the ‘legally significant, penis-in-vagina variety’.⁷⁵ Even so, there are other queer kinds of sex that could have taken place between this Romeo and Juliet. In fact, Varnado points out that ‘*nothing* would have to be different in the text of the play [or in its various cinematic texts] to imagine the invisible sex act ... as something else: some nonpenetrative erotic act of a more diffuse and mutual *jouissance* or some suspended dilation of pleasure that gets cruelly interrupted by the lark’.⁷⁶ The same applies ‘if the unseen act were an unclimactic

fumble, a premature climax, an impossible penetration, or a dysfunctional episode. Nor would anything have to change if Romeo did the same thing (any of the things) with Juliet that he would do with a boy.⁷⁷ There is in sum ‘no textual reason that this offstage act of “sex” (whatever it is) follows the strict phallogentric plot telos that furnishes the patriarchal definition of sex’.⁷⁸ The sheer indeterminacy of the kind of sex Romeo and Juliet have had – indeed, if they have had ‘sex’ at all – transforms what was considered a heteronormative certainty into a queer uncertainty.

In any case, the depiction of assumed heterosexual erotic bliss of Romeo and Juliet is interrupted by what surely qualifies as some of the most obviously homoerotic – and therefore queer – 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 bare backside – including his buttocks and legs – comes into the full view of the audience. What is equally striking about the composition of this shot is the fact that Juliet remains almost entirely covered up by the bedsheets 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 in her work, the conventional expectation for a shot like this demands that Juliet’s nakedness, rather than Romeo’s, be on display for, always presumably, straight males to objectify. With the sound of the morning lark 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, exposing his smooth bare chest, and sits up while swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Upon standing, opening the curtains very nearby and rubbing his eyes, viewers – including gay/queer male viewers – are treated to yet another full shot of Romeo’s bare backside. Granted, Zeffirelli does not present any full-frontal nude shots of Romeo; queer audience members must, perhaps with the memory of the film’s repeated attention to the male characters’ codpieces in mind, resort to imagining what Romeo might look like naked.

But the backside nude shots of Romeo the director does present instead are wonderfully homoerotic without being the least bit prurient and arousing without being salacious. Indeed, it is as if all manner of audience members are invited by Zeffirelli to gaze at Romeo in this sequence as if he were a drawing, painting or sculpture straight out of the Classical era, and the invitation proves to be irresistible.

Considering their prominence in Zeffirelli's production of *Romeo and Juliet* it is important to the larger project of queering the Shakespeare film to also consider the homosocial moments of masculine intimacy characters like Romeo, Mercutio (John McEnery) and Tybalt engage in at various points in the movie. 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, beginning with one that involves Romeo and Mercutio. When, fairly early in the film, 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 excessively fantastical view Queen Mab is the agent that 'gallops night by night / Through lovers' brains' (1.4.70–1) 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; in other words, the kind of love Romeo is about to experience with Juliet. By the time he reaches the end of this powerful speech Mercutio is in a state of obvious distress over these ideas. According to Jorgens, '[t]here is deep friendship, even love, between [Zeffirelli's] Romeo and Mercutio. Mercutio's mercurial showmanship seems aimed at Romeo, and his anger, when Romeo is off sighing for love or making a milksoy of himself before Tybalt, is tinged with jealousy. How could a friend abandon male comradery for "a smock?"'⁷⁹ Indeed, how could a true friend do such a thing? A true friend would not, perhaps, but a lover of someone else would. Mercutio's sense of impending loss – a loss that is

homosocial and possibly homosexual as well – is a palpable force where his ‘friend’ Romeo is concerned.

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’ (1.4.95–6). After several seconds of consideration, Mercutio places his forehead on to 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’ (1.4.96–7). This moment is astonishingly intimate and affectionate and, because it involves two men who are evidently not afraid of being intimate and affectionate with each other, it also qualifies as being homoerotic and queer. 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’⁸⁰ 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 with and produce the next generation. Men’s homoerotic bonds with other men, like those of Romeo and Mercutio, cannot survive the demands of heterosexist, patriarchal culture when put under this kind of pressure. This point is made horrifically clear by Zeffirelli when Mercutio, having been stabbed in the heart by Tybalt, dies cursing the houses of both 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; 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 in each other’s arms 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 a wholly poignant, and wholly queer, homoeroticism.

Horried 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 the blood of 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, too. This homoeroticism reaches its macabre zenith when Tybalt impales himself on Romeo's sword, thereby allowing Romeo to succeed at symbolically penetrating Tybalt sexually – a penetration that, arguably, Tybalt had longed for and deliberately sought out since the very beginning of *Romeo and Juliet*. Heightening the homoeroticism even further is the fact that Tybalt falls into and dies in Romeo's arms, having reached the little death (orgasm) and the big death (end of life) at one and the same time.

What this critical survey of some of the queer 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 much further than Cukor was able to do thirty-two years earlier. In fact, Cukor is on record as saying, taking into account his viewing of Zeffirelli's later effort, '[i]t's one picture that if I had to do over again, I'd know how. I'd get the garlic and the Mediterranean into it.'⁸¹ Apparently Cukor also felt that his *Romeo and Juliet* were too old, too stodgy and not sexy enough considering the actor and actress cast in those roles.⁸² What Cukor does not comment on, however, is whether he would, like Zeffirelli, choose to incorporate any kind of visual male homoeroticism into such a movie. Perhaps, in this regard, Zeffirelli's triumph has everything to do with the moment in history in which his *Romeo*

and Juliet was made versus the moment in history in which Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* was made. For Zeffirelli, of course, the Sexual Revolution was by 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 incipient moment for more honest and open representations of things homoerotic in film had arrived.

IV

Private Romeo is an American independent film by the openly gay writer and director Alan Brown that premiered on screen in 2011 and presents its audiences with an achingly earnest homoerotic version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.⁸³ This production is described at its corresponding website⁸⁴ 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-synced 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 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 is argued here 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 history of the medium. Also considered are some of the larger implications of such an

accomplishment, particularly as it relates to the queerness of the *Romeo and Juliets* of Cukor and Zeffirelli discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter.

The 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 participate 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 senior upper classmen. 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'.⁸⁵ As Sedgwick takes great care to make clear in her work, however, homosociality is not to be understood as being exactly synonymous with homosexuality; nevertheless, homosociality is almost always 'potentially erotic', potentially sexual, because, hypothetically speaking at least, homosociality and homosexuality exist on a 'continuum' that links these two ontologies in the realm of experiential possibility.⁸⁶ 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 mandated participation in its rituals. At a micro level, furthermore, 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 recognition of the fact that homoeroticism, whether in the form of

unrequited or required desire, or out-and-out homosexuality, is a constant factor that could be activated at any moment in these particular 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 twenty-first 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 no control over, at least in their original bodily manifestations, gender is not a natural occurrence; 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 and private stages of everyday life. On this key point Butler writes that '*gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original*'.⁸⁷ 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'.⁸⁸ 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, among countless other interactions and behaviours. 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 behaviours.

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 and acting the parts 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/camouflage 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'⁸⁹ is hardly necessary to succumb to the seductive 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.

Despite the explication provided above it is not that gender does not matter in *Private Romeo*; it is that gender matters in a different way in the film than it would in the so-called 'real' world. It is, in other words, significant that the characters of Romeo and Juliet – played by an actor and an actress, respectively, in the majority of productions since the late-seventeenth 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. This is because two young men are not supposed to fall in love with one another like Romeo and Juliet do in the fiercely heterosexist world that has existed since, according to Foucault, the mid-nineteenth century,⁹⁰ 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 – 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 dining 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 self-imposed isolation and, as Romeo, asks Benvolio/Gus, 'What lady's that which doth enrich the hand / Of yonder knight' (1.5.41–2)? While he makes this enquiry of his friend, the camera focuses on Juliet/Glenn, who is staring at nothing in particular with a pensive expression on her/his face. Once Benvolio/Gus insists that he does not know the person to whom Romeo/Sam is referring, Romeo/Sam proceeds to extol to himself and to the audience upon her/his (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 too 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 short but powerful observation, 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' (1.5.51–2). 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 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 female characters. Furthermore, in a patriarchal, heterosexist society, there really is no unique 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, societal and cultural disapprobation.

A short while later, using the deceptive physical/rhetorical manoeuvre 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 the imaginary thing 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 any 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* again and explains that:

If I profane with my unworthing 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. (1.5.92–5)

With the last line he speaks here, Romeo/Sam leans in and tries to kiss Juliet/Glenn on the neck; 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 gender and 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 heteronormative society, one young man is not supposed to want, much less actually to 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*, definitely qualifies as queer behaviour that threatens the supremacy of heterosexuality by virtue of both its very existence and its representation in cinematic form.

Having reached an initial level of intimacy, Juliet/Glenn steps close to Romeo/Sam and – picking up on 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. (1.5.96–9)

By this point, having overcome 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 gentle intimacy 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.
(1.5.100–5)

Romeo/Sam then kisses Juliet/Glenn full on the lips (see Figure 7). 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 another apology for being so forward as to kiss Juliet/Glenn without

FIGURE 7 Left to right: Juliet/Glenn (Matt Doyle) and Romeo/Sam (Seth Numrich) sharing their first kiss. *Private Romeo*, dir. Alan Brown, 2011.

specifically 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' (1.5.108–9), 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 ardour. 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 some increasingly isolated quarters of Western society 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, at least potentially, its most transformative.

Brown's low-key treatment of the aubade scene opens with a shot of an institutional wardrobe seeming to stand sentinel in the corner of a McKinley Military Academy dorm room. The camera then slowly moves viewers' attention to the left. Two pairs of intertwined and lightly hairy male legs appear. A rumpled white sheet covers the thighs and midsections of the men. Next, a smooth bare back and two nicely muscled right biceps come into view. Finally, two heads with crewcut hairstyles, both turned away from the audience and toward the wall of the room, become visible. As the gentle music of a single piano plays on the soundtrack, Sam/Romeo protectively spoons Glenn/Juliet. The cumulative image is one of tenderness, affection and love; it is (homo)erotic without being pruriently sexual. It is, however, more likely than not that Sam/Romeo and Glenn/Juliet – just like Zeffirelli's Romeo and Juliet – have had sex somewhere off-camera prior to

this moment in their story. Just as Varnado speculated in her work, ‘*nothing* [had] to be different in the text of the play’ in order for the invisible sex act(s) that have probably occurred between Sam/Romeo and Glenn/Juliet to be homo rather than hetero in nature; the words are the same regardless. And the ‘strict phallogentric plot telos that furnishes the patriarchal definition of [heterosexual] sex’ is once again queered in yet another cinematic adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet*. The fact that this particular Romeo/Sam and Juliet/Glenn are in effect a married same-sex couple only adds to the larger, expansively queer-positive resonance of Brown’s interpretation of Shakespeare’s ‘straightest’ play. Indeed, it is a wholly palpable expression of a dream come true for many gay/queer men, especially those who have longed for decades to have equal marriage rights.

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 (Romeo and Juliet’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 McKinley Military Academy lecture hall with amphitheatre seating. There, Romeo/Sam rushes in to find his beloved Juliet/Glenn seemingly dead and sprawled on the instructors’ table. 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 awakes to find Friar Laurence (Adam Barrie) hovering nearby and urging her/him to leave immediately before they are discovered in the tomb/classroom. 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 will kiss thy lips. / Haply some poison yet doth hang on them / To make me die with a restorative' (5.3.163–6), and then she/he kisses him. What happens next calls to mind Nahum Tate's (in) famous re-interpretation of *King Lear* in the late seventeenth century that ends with the survival of the characters of King Lear and Cordelia and Cordelia's marriage to Edgar, someone 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 seconds before his eyes flutter open (see Figure 8). The spell of a performance-within-a-performance is thus 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, seemingly ready to take on the world

FIGURE 8 Glenn (Matt Doyle) on the top, and Sam (Seth Numrich) on the bottom, alive, smiling and very much in love after their performance of *Romeo and Juliet*'s death scene (5.3). *Private Romeo*, dir. Alan Brown, 2011.

as a couple. 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 or queer love instead of the reification of its traditionally triumphant heterosexual counterpart.

V

Where Shakespeare film is concerned Burt is the only critic who has explored in detail the ongoing queer fascination with the various cinematic productions of *Romeo and Juliet* that have appeared over the years since the invention of the medium in the late nineteenth century. After considering an impressive number of straightforward adaptations as well as more radical appropriations of the play that have been directed by or starred queer people, or reference *Romeo and Juliet* intertextually in some queer way, Burt wonders: 'How are we to account for this rather extensive gay and lesbian performance history of *Romeo and Juliet*?'⁹¹ He goes on to point out that 'while we might expect *Romeo and Juliet* to have been of interest to gays and lesbians when same-sex desire was still closeted or when it was still, as in Oscar Wilde's case, a practice that could not yet speak the name "homosexual," we might wonder why the gay and lesbian romance' with *Romeo and Juliet* 'has persisted well after the need for a masked way of expressing gay and lesbian desire has significantly dissipated, at least when it comes to an increasingly queer-positive, mass-marketed cinema, theater, and fiction.'⁹² Burt then proceeds to read the unabated queer investment in cinematic *Romeo and Juliets* as a

same-sex utopian impulse, a dream of what I call *homonormativity*. Far from mimicking heteronormative norms in order to resignify and possibly subvert them, these replays of *Romeo and Juliet* give expression to a gay utopian

fantasy whereby a no longer forbidden practice of gay male or lesbian sex is represented as 'normal,' heterosexualized, that is, according to the (queer) conventions of the genre of romance fiction.⁹³

For Burt, the concept of homonormativity allows queer Shakespeare film to evade 'the categories by which gay and straight sexuality are [made] legible' in one of two ways: 'either by seeking to be unlegible as gay or by designifying gender difference'.⁹⁴ Both of these strategies that homonormativity makes possible 'can best be understood as a way of addressing the fact that gay and lesbian desire will always be read, insofar as it is signified and read at all, through the lens of heteronormativity'.⁹⁵

Earlier in this chapter, Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* was shown to be unlegible as gay, at least at a surface level. But if the, comparatively speaking, advanced ages of the actors/actresses – particularly Leslie Howard and Norma Shearer in the lead roles – can be read as gay as discussed here and in Burt's article, then a certain kind of queerness emerges and cannot be dismissed out of hand. That queerness is only extended further, is made even more apparent, when the fact that the film's director, one of its design consultants, one of its music composers and its originary writer were all gay/queer men is taken into account in the interpretive discourse that surrounds the production. In a very real sense where Cukor's movie is concerned, then, it is the queer that enables the heteronormative love between Romeo and Juliet to manifest fully. This specific example of heteronormativity cannot, in other words, exist without its queer counterpart(s). Meanwhile, the same-sex utopian impulse Burt mentions as part and parcel of the extensive queer reception history of *Romeo and Juliet* in the cinema can be understood as an altruistic impulse in regards to Cukor's adaptation. If gays like Cukor, Messel, Tchaikovsky and Shakespeare, not to mention gay audience members, support straight people – or representations of straight people like Romeo and Juliet – as

they navigate the treacherous waters of forbidden love, then, perhaps, straight people will do the same in return and thereby put homosexual love on something of an equal footing with heterosexual love. Thus homosexual love would be queered in this instance because it would be potentially normalized or, to use Burt's term, heterosexualized, as totally acceptable rather than the opposite.

Though as a rule traditional Shakespeare film criticism does not concern itself with (auto)biographical matters, drawing on such materials as are available is as crucial to a queer reading of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* as it was to Cukor's production. Indeed, there can be no question that Zeffirelli's appreciation of, attraction to, and love for other men infuses his *Romeo and Juliet* with a homoerotic ethos it would not otherwise have; the kind of homoerotic ethos that, in the mid-1930s, Cukor could only gesture at obliquely rather than openly like Zeffirelli was able to do. This queer homoeroticism is most apparent in the way Zeffirelli's camera lavishes extended attention on the male body throughout his *Romeo and Juliet*. This directorial strategy allows for a number of the male characters like Romeo, Tybalt, Mercutio and Benvolio – and the actors who portray them – to be perceived as sex objects, a role that women characters/actresses are, almost by default in patriarchal society, forced into in film. Thus, in one fell cinematic swoop, Zeffirelli manages to queer his *Romeo and Juliet* by subverting traditional heteronormative scopophilic conventions while telling the story of Romeo and Juliet's forbidden love – a forbidden love queer people can all-too easily understand. At the same time, Zeffirelli's directorial focus on the male body encourages, if not compels, a veritable constellation of queer homoerotic responses to the repeated images of young, masculine beauty that are presented to viewers in his film. Arguably, these responses are queer, too, because they challenge critical propriety given that they make plain, rather than shy away from, audience members' (including Shakespeare film critics) observations of and reactions to the attractiveness, the sexiness and/or

the desirability of the male characters/actors that feature so prominently in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*. Thus once again queerness is rendered normal in what Burt characterizes as the impulse toward the creation of a 'gay utopian fantasy' in which nothing, least of all male same-sex relationships, is forbidden.

Finally, presumably Burt's idea of the conventions of the genre of romance fiction has something to do with the following bare-bones plot outline: boy meets girl; boy and girl fall in love; boy and girl get married; boy and girl live happily ever after. Logically, then, the queer attachment to *Romeo and Juliet* in the cinema that Burt discusses in his article must involve the appropriation of this heteronormative master narrative and making it do its representational work in gay-positive contexts. Alan Brown's *Private Romeo* is particularly successful at this kind of appropriation, perhaps because it approaches queerness in *Romeo and Juliet* by designifying gender difference rather than, as is the case with the productions of Cukor and Zeffirelli, by making the gay more or less (un)legible. By using an all-male cast, Brown's film morphs the generic romance plotline evident in *Romeo and Juliet*: boy meets boy; boy and boy fall in love; boy and boy get married; boy and boy live happily ever after. Re-visioning the master heteronormative romance/love narrative and refashioning it into a master homonormative romance/love narrative as Brown does in *Private Romeo* is a significant achievement. It shows that Shakespeare's 'straightest' play may not be so straight after all and, more importantly, it shows that love is not bound by the artificial constraints of gender or sexual identity. It just is. What could be more queer where the Shakespeare film is concerned?