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3

The visual poetics of gender trouble in Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream*

I

As the numerous available critical studies testify, Shakespearean drama and poetry has taken a prominent place in the overall discourse of gender trouble – the revolutionary notion that gender is a changeable behaviour rather than an immutable characteristic that derives from biological sex. Indeed, gender trouble in relation to Shakespeare and his times has been thoroughly historicized according to the concerns of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century moment. However, the majority of this work focuses on Shakespeare's plays and

poems as written texts. That being the case, the purpose of this chapter is to extend the discussion of gender trouble into the realm of the Shakespeare film. The cinematic texts that will be analysed in this overarching context are Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996), Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) and Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999), each of which deals with gender trouble in ways that are complicated and enlightening from a queer perspective.

II

Whether because of its plot of twins separated by the vicissitudes of fate, its fanciful depiction of romantic courtship or its story of a servant who dares to imagine himself rising above his station in life through marriage to the countess who employs him, *Twelfth Night* has proven to be a triumph ever since its first recorded performance in 1601/2 in the great hall of the Middle Temple, one of the city of London's four prestigious law schools that comprised an educational institution known collectively then and still today as the Inns of Court. That success is reflected in the fact that – as Arden Series 3 editor of the play Keir Elam details – an astounding 120 stage, film and television productions of the play have been mounted in the 402 years between 1602 and 2004.¹ However, focusing on the latter two media, Rothwell identifies a total of only eight film or television adaptations of *Twelfth Night* that were produced in the last 102 years. Leading this short list is a ten-minute black-and-white silent production of the Vitagraph Company of America that appeared in 1910; the last is Trevor Nunn's sumptuous full-length feature film of the play that came to the screen in 1996.² After that, an appropriation of *Twelfth Night* entitled *She's the Man*, aimed at the notoriously fickle American teen movie audience, premiered in 2006. But otherwise filmmakers and television producers

have – oddly, considering what is almost universally agreed to be the play’s overall excellence and appeal – shied away from *Twelfth Night*.

Because of the paucity of screen examples, only Nunn’s cinematic version of *Twelfth Night* will be discussed in this chapter. H. R. Coursen describes Nunn’s production as ‘one of the more straightforward translations of a Shakespeare script to film. It places itself squarely within the genre of Shakespeare film by telling the story pretty much as the First Folio tells it, as opposed to making it an allegory of our times’.³ Yet at the same time Coursen notes that what he terms Nunn’s metaphorical treatment of Viola’s appropriation of male costume begs questions such as ‘what is gender? what are the stereotypes of gender? what are the limits of stereotype? In this sense,’ he claims, ‘the film, for all of its fidelity to “Shakespeare,” speaks directly to us. This is not an “imposition” on the script. Shakespeare was asking the same questions.’⁴ In Coursen’s view, because the playwright himself was concerned about issues with gender that continue to be vexing to audiences in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and because Nunn’s *Twelfth Night* is equally attentive to those exact same issues, the supposed anachronistic folly of imposing present-day anxieties onto the past is totally avoided. Still, gender trouble persists in the film; it is, in fact, most evident in the way it inflects the relationship between the characters of Viola/Cesario and Orsino with a palpable form of queer, male same-sex homoeroticism.

‘What country, friends, is this?’ Viola (Imogen Stubbs) asks in the first scene in which she appears in Shakespeare’s playtext of *Twelfth Night*; she is informed by the Captain (Sid Livingstone) that she is in the land known as Illyria (1.2.1–2).⁵ As their dialogue continues, it is made plain that Viola and the Captain are among the small number of survivors of a shipwreck that as far as they can discern has left Viola’s beloved brother, along with many others, dead, swallowed by the angry sea (1.2.3–19). Nunn, making full use of the visual power of film to show rather than tell, transforms this

bit of exposition into a series of moments that dramatize the chaos and the horror the passengers on the doomed vessel experience, the heartbreaking separation of the twin siblings Viola and Sebastian (Steven Mackintosh) and the eerie aftermath of the disaster in which those who came through it relatively unscathed must start to regain their bearings. Rothwell describes this extended interpolation as being akin to a '*Titanic* trope' that proves effective at conveying to the audience the extraordinary circumstances in which Viola suddenly finds herself.⁶ To ensure her safety – she is, after all, in a place that she is not supposed to be without the protection of her beloved brother – after she is told it is unlikely that she would be able to enter into the service of the Countess Olivia (Helena Bonham Carter) while she remains in Illyria, Viola entreats the Captain to assist her in a rather unorthodox way: 'I prithee be my aid / For such disguise as haply shall become / The form of my intent. I'll serve this Duke' – Count Orsino (Toby Stephens), who rules over Illyria – and she intends to do so by presenting herself as a boy to him (Elam 1.2.49–53; Nunn 12).⁷ When the Captain scoffs at this preposterous idea, Viola insists that 'It may be worth thy pains, for I can sing / And speak to him in many sorts of music / That will allow me very worth his service' (Elam 1.2.54–6; Nunn 12). Viola throws her arms around him and hugs him tightly when the Captain shrugs and smiles, indicating his acquiescence to her plan. Perhaps he realizes that, all things considered, she has no other options and, kind man that he is, decides to help her rather than hinder her.

In the montage that follows his agreement with her understandably necessary plan the Captain supervises Viola's transformation from female to cross-dressed male. In short order Viola allows her long hair to be cut so that what remains falls just above her shoulders; she removes her corset and exchanges it for a pair of naval cadet trousers; she pads her crotch with a folded cloth in order to create the appearance of male genitals; she binds her breasts tightly by wrapping her chest in a lengthy swathe of red fabric as if she

were a living mummy; and she dons a formal military jacket that matches her pants and a pair of black men's boots. She then receives 'on-the-job' instruction from the captain in how to walk with the stride of a man and practises using her voice as a man would by bellowing at the Illyrian sea. Lastly, she places a faux moustache on her upper lip so that, in the end, she looks much like her (presumed) dead twin brother, Sebastian (see Figure 9). Thus Cesario, the young man that Duke Orsino (Toby Stephens) will fall in love with, is born (see Figure 10).

That female characters like Viola were played on the stage by boy actors during the early modern period in England is a matter of well-explored historical fact. As Phyllis Rackin writes, in a theatrical world governed by the convention:

FIGURE 9 *Imogen Stubbs as Viola before her transformation into the boy Cesario in Twelfth Night, dir. Trevor Nunn, 1996.*

FIGURE 10 *Imogen Stubbs as Viola after her transformation into the boy Cesario in Twelfth Night, dir. Trevor Nunn, 1996.*

where female characters were always played by male actors, feminine gender was inevitably a matter of costume; and in plays where the heroines dressed as boys, gender became doubly problematic, the unstable product of roleplaying and costume, not only in the theatrical representation but also within the fiction presented on the stage.⁸

To play a convincing Viola, then, a boy actor would have had to don clothing appropriate to a young woman and effect a feminine voice and mannerisms. To in turn become a convincing Cesario that same boy actor would have had to reassume masculine attire and the corresponding tone and behaviours evocative of a young man. The concept of gender, irrespective of biological sex, can, once again,

be understood, borrowing Butler's paradigm, as a learned performance rather than a natural or innate characteristic that someone is born with and knows intuitively how to present to the world. Specifically, Butler writes that gender 'is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'.⁹ Butler's insight leads to the supposition that it is in the theatre in general and in Shakespeare's and Nunn's *Twelfth Nights* in particular where the concept of gender is exposed as a wholly artificial construction. Viola proves that one is not born a woman, or a man, for that matter, and the implications of that fact are far reaching considering the representation of not only gender, but also of the inevitable resulting homosociality and male homoeroticism evident throughout Nunn's *Twelfth Night*.

Interestingly, little if any anxiety attends the intimate relationship that develops between Duke Orsino and his male servant Cesario. Indeed, it seems entirely acceptable that Orsino desires Cesario because Cesario is really no more than the fictional creation of the female Viola who is in turn the equally female Imogen Stubbs. On this point Maria F. Magro and Mark Douglas remark that viewers of Nunn's production, if they are so inclined, 'can safely indulge in some homoerotic titillation without guilt' where Orsino and Cesario are concerned because that titillation is really heteroerotic rather than homoerotic in nature given the actuality of Viola's, and the actress who plays her, female gender.¹⁰ The attraction Orsino and Cesario feel is therefore at its heart based on essentially normative gender identities and, since audiences are in on the cross-dressing conceit from the outset, they can watch the Duke and his page's romance unfold with total assurance that the traditional man and woman will end up coupled in holy matrimony by the time the end credits roll. But it must also be acknowledged that it is just as possible to understand Nunn's depiction of the Orsino and Cesario relationship as one that is equally indicative of

a substantive, as opposed to a merely titillating or laughable, form of male homoerotic desire given the gender trouble that lies at the heart of the representation. Initial authorization for taking this approach to the story of the Duke and his servant can be found in the available criticism of the film. For instance, two critics describe Orsino and Cesario's association in Nunn's production in what can be considered homoerotic terms. Coursen rather matter-of-factly declares that 'Orsino is very attracted to this boy',¹¹ while Rothwell makes a similar assertion when he comments on 'Orsino's falling in love with a boy'.¹² But the comments of Coursen and Rothwell can be taken further.

Turning back to the film itself, once he has been brought into being by Viola and the Captain, Cesario is next seen in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* after he has been in the service of Duke Orsino for almost three months. David Schalkwyk explains that service was a ubiquitous 'condition in early modern England' that 'tied people to each other'.¹³ He continues by detailing the fact that service was primarily an economic institution whereby servants:

worked for a master or mistress, in jobs ranging from domestic or personal service through crafts and cottage industries. These included weaving or brewing, sowing or harvesting, milking and tending animals, or trade and hospitality, in (ideally) mutually beneficial relationships through which the master or mistress received assistance in return for board, lodging, and wages (which were usually low).¹⁴

But as Schalkwyk also makes clear through the course of his argument, service often created an environment that fostered the development of various kinds of love, including eros, or the kind of romantic love that encompasses everything from infatuation to desire and sexual intercourse. So it is perhaps unsurprising that Shakespeare uses service as a plot device through which the characters of Orsino and Cesario

are brought together in a set of dramatic circumstances that facilitates the evolution of their interpersonal relationship. This is an aspect of *Twelfth Night* that Nunn seems to exploit to the fullest in his cinematic text. Cesario is never seen in the film performing any of the comparatively menial tasks that Schalkwyk lists above and that real people in service in England would have been expected to carry out. Instead Cesario plays the piano for Orsino, functions as his sounding board, acts as an opponent in games of cards and billiards, and accompanies him on horseback on scouting missions in Illyria. Thus it is that Cesario's being in Orsino's service binds them to one another in a pragmatic sense but also, in due course, on an emotional level. Service sets the stage, so to speak, for each of these two men (men insofar as the concept of gender trouble is in play) to court one another in a roundabout way, something that likely could not or would not have occurred otherwise given the social/life stations they occupy in Illyrian society.

Though an affected melancholic because of what he obsessively describes as his unrequited love for the disdainful Countess Olivia, Orsino nevertheless cuts a dashing and masculine figure that many viewers of Nunn's film, in tandem with Cesario, might well find attractive. One morning the imperious Duke, his right arm in a sling for unexplained reasons, seeks Cesario out while Cesario is at fencing practice with the other men that make up Orsino's all-male company. As they leave the gymnasium Orsino unselfconsciously places his good arm around Cesario's shoulders in an action that indicates their intimacy, that embarrasses Cesario, and that, interestingly, does not go unnoticed by the rest of Orsino's people. This gesture also indicates that Cesario has, comparatively quickly, seemingly become Orsino's favourite subordinate. Thus, quite by chance it seems, Cesario occupies a highly privileged and influential position *vis-à-vis* Orsino that is analogous to the so-called 'royal favourite', a problematic figure during Shakespeare's time. For instance, King James I, as is well known, had a series of male favourites – and likely

lovers – that those in his court who did not enjoy such intimate privilege always mistrusted. Curtis Perry explains that many in the period felt that the ‘political intimacies of royal favoritism inhabit[ed] the dark corners of the state – the privy chamber or bedchamber and other sites of restricted access to the body of the monarch’, hence they ‘frequently imagined the influence of royal favorites in eroticized terms’.¹⁵ Although *Twelfth Night* is not in any sense a political play or film, nor is Cesario out to bring down the Illyrian government, it is not difficult to suspect based on Perry’s insights that Orsino’s courtiers, retainers and counsellors might well think badly of Cesario precisely because of the intimate erotic connection they can plainly see exists between the Duke and this upstart who came out of nowhere and, through no fault of their own, managed to supersede them.

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

between these two men that would not be homoerotic if not for the gender trouble Viola's cross-dressing has created.

Orsino's actions toward Cesario become downright aggressive when Cesario still objects to attempting to woo Olivia in his master's stead. Orsino insists that Cesario is the only man for the job and then literally asserts his physical dominance over the frightened boy. While leaning ever closer to him and explaining that Olivia is apt to accept Cesario's entreaties on account of the fact that, being only a boy, he is not in the least threatening, the impassioned Duke suddenly looks at Cesario intently and says, 'Diana's lip / Is not more smooth and rubious' (Elam 1.4.31–2; Nunn 17). As he speaks these words Orsino rubs his thumb across Cesario's upper lip as if he is trying to confirm for himself that what he is saying is, in fact, true. Then, so emboldened, Orsino presses himself even more firmly against Cesario and comments: 'Thy small pipe / Is as the maiden's organ, shrill and sound, / And all is semblative a woman's part' (Elam 1.4.32–4; Nunn 17). It is only following the utterance of these words that Cesario, who has been struggling against Orsino the entire time Orsino has been so persistently forward with him, succeeds at throwing off Orsino. Orsino strikes his already hurt right arm against the rocks of the bluff because Cesario is able to push him away so forcefully. So much for Cesario being merely a non-threatening boy.

The physical homoeroticism evident in the relationship between Orsino and Cesario becomes even more pronounced in a pair of subsequent scenes in Nunn's *Twelfth Night*. In the first of these the director marshals bits of Orsino's and Cesario's dialogue from Acts 1 and 2 in Shakespeare's text; the innovation is the setting in which these lines are spoken and the stage directions that accompany them. After a hard early morning ride on horseback, Orsino beckons Cesario with 'Come hither, boy' (Elam 2.4.15; Nunn 54). At this order Cesario steps gingerly into a large dimly lit room with a fire burning in the fireplace against the far wall. In the centre of the space Orsino is soaking naked in a huge clawfoot tub.

The Duke's well-muscled shoulders and arms glisten in the shafts of light that are filtering in through the windows and falling upon him as if he were the subject of a great master's painting. Though Cesario is discomfited by this unexpected set of circumstances, Orsino exhibits no such concern. He seems in fact to have no problem being nude in the presence of his young male servant. As Cesario sits down in a nearby chair, Orsino waxes poetic about the Countess Olivia. 'How will she love, when the rich golden shaft / Hath killed the flock of all affections else / That live in her,' he muses (Elam 1.1.34–6; Nunn 54). Then he hands Cesario a puffy yellow sponge and leans forward in the bath. Cesario understands the wordless command and begins to wash Orsino's back. Within seconds Cesario becomes lost in his task. The repeated smiles that play upon his face serve to exemplify how one man can take delight in the body of another. That Cesario desires Orsino here is unmistakable in what qualifies as one of the most overtly homoerotic moments in all of Nunn's film.

The scene described above invites if not begs for a non-heteronormative interpretation, and performing such an interpretation involves what Alan Sinfield describes as 'reading against the grain, queering the text', here transformed into 'seeing against the grain, queering the cinematic text' of Nunn's *Twelfth Night*.¹⁶ In other words, though audiences know that Cesario is being played by a female actress, they are nevertheless encouraged to see what is literally right before their eyes: the young male page Cesario – complete with moustache and military uniform – attending to the equally male Orsino's bathing needs. Those needs include being scrubbed with a sponge in a room where Orsino and Cesario are the sole occupants and which is crackling with the homoerotic energy of two characters that are in the process of falling in love with one another regardless of their actual and/or assumed genders. These images are punctuated by highly suggestive language. Orsino muses to Cesario about what kind of an effect his 'rich golden shaft' will have when it finally penetrates his beloved; there can be no mistaking such

a metaphor as a verbal representation of sexual intercourse. A queer reading of the cinematic text lays bare the homoerotic possibilities such a staging and the corresponding dialogue present. With these elements operative queer viewers and their allies are free to indulge in the sensual depiction of one man seeing to the desires of another man in a way that is titillating without being crass. Such viewers may well find themselves giving in to the not unwelcome fantasy of being either Cesario or Orsino and, thus, vicariously experiencing an intimate moment with the object of their desire. They do not, in other words, have to read this bath scene in accord with the usual heteronormative paradigms that would erase the effects of any kind of a queer intervention from legibility.

Later in the film Orsino and Cesario race through the darkness to one of the barns on Orsino's property. There Orsino demands that Feste (Ben Kingsley) perform a solo for the Duke and his servant of a piece he is convinced will relieve his passion for the Countess Olivia (2.4.5). Though not referred to as such in Shakespeare's play, the song could be titled 'Come Away Death', and it is about the fate of an unrequited but defiant lover – a person not unlike Orsino himself. When Feste begins to sing, Orsino and Cesario are some ways apart from one another; Orsino is leaning on a towering stack of straw, while Cesario is across from him, standing with his back against the oversized wheel of a large horsecart. It is clear from the moment Feste launches into 'Come Away Death' that Orsino is deeply affected by the words and the music, but not in any way that accords with relief. Indeed, Orsino seems even more melancholy than ever. The expression on his handsome face morphs from one of joy to one of cynicism. His unhappiness is magnified when he glances over at Cesario and sees his servant in equally pensive thought. It may well be that in this moment Orsino understands that he and Cesario are sharing the same dark feelings about life, love and death, and that he feels a connection to the young man unlike any other he has felt for anyone else before.

Perhaps because he is simply unable to contain himself, or maybe because he is feeling guilty for making Cesario experience any kind of pain, Orsino leaves the haystack to go and stand right next to the young man. Then, as he has done twice before in Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, Orsino once again puts his arm around Cesario's shoulders and holds him firmly against his side. This is a decisive intimate move on Orsino's part and it is redolent with homoeroticism. Because Viola has presented herself as a boy, as Cesario, to Orsino, and the Count has accepted Cesario at face value, Orsino only knows Cesario as his male servant Cesario. At the level of character and narrative, then, what is happening here in the barn is happening between an older and a younger man. And as in the earlier bath scene this is another moment when Orsino seems to be perfectly comfortable being in such close proximity to someone of his own gender. Cesario, perhaps carried away by being held in the arms of the man he already desires so much, allows himself to relax and presses his back into Orsino's chest (see Figure 11). Slowly, he turns his head away from

FIGURE 11 Duke Orsino (Toby Stephens) and his servant, the young man known by one and all as Cesario (Imogen Stubbs), about to kiss one another in *Twelfth Night*, dir. Trevor Nunn, 1996.

the singing Feste and toward Orsino who, obviously content now, too, closes his eyes. By exquisite degrees Cesario moves his lips upward and ever closer to Orsino's. It could not be any more apparent that these two mustached men want to kiss each other in what appears to be an almost achingly homoerotic scene in Nunn's production. Nunn's cinematic text of *Twelfth Night* thus succeeds at conveying something vitally important in the context of the present chapter that Jean E. Howard insists the playtext does not. She claims that in Shakespeare's original, 'Orsino, in contrast to Olivia, shows no overt sexual interest in the crossdressed Viola', who is, after all, his male servant Cesario, and furthermore that 'the text makes his attraction to Cesario' unintelligible.¹⁷ As the scene under consideration here attests, Orsino *does* show his attraction to, and sexual interest in, Cesario, and in a way that epitomizes the intelligibility of the homoerotic. On screen this desire *is* overt rather than oblique as in the written text of *Twelfth Night*. But then Feste's song comes to an end, in the sudden, deafening quiet, Orsino and Cesario realize what they were about to do and quickly pull apart from one another. What lingers, however, and most particularly, perhaps, for queer audience members of *Twelfth Night*, is the visceral memory of the male same-sex kiss that Orsino and Cesario almost shared.

Orsino and Cesario's homoerotic love for each other comes to the fore again in the denouement of Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, and in a way that dramatizes its physical and its romantic aspects. In order to take care of some necessary business associated with Antonio (Nicholas Farrell), who is being held under guard there by his soldiers, Orsino arrives on Olivia's estate. The moment the Countess herself appears Orsino rapturously tells Cesario 'now heaven walks on earth', and goes to greet her with a spring in his step (Elam 5.1.93; Nunn 115). Initially he is solicitous and respectful to Olivia, but when she cruelly rejects him yet again, and this time to his face rather than by Cesario as her proxy, Orsino loses his temper. The Duke's fury is centred on the fact that he knows

that Olivia loves his servant Cesario rather than himself. As he stalks around the courtyard he hurls the following question at the uncivil lady: 'Why should I not – in savage jealousy / Like to th'Egyptian thief at point of death / Kill what I love?' (Elam 5.1.108, 113–15; Nunn 116). Not at all incidentally, Orsino is referring to Cesario in these lines. This is also the very first time Orsino speaks of his love for Cesario. The wonder is that he does so in such a public manner. The homoeroticism apparent here functions in a way that is quite similar to the way Bruce R. Smith describes homoeroticism at work in readings and performances of *Henry V*. Smith considers the Duke of Exeter's report of 'the battlefield deaths of the Duke of York and the Earl of Suffolk', which seem to Smith to be 'more appropriate to Romeo and Juliet than to two soldiers', referring, of course, to the two young lovers who die for each other rather than face the world alone or as the spouses of people they cannot countenance.¹⁸ Significantly, Exeter's account does not even attempt to shy away from repeated mention of York and Suffolk kissing one another in their last moments. In fact Exeter's words both valorize and exalt this kind of same-sex intimacy.¹⁹ For Smith, the 'fact that the expression of such love takes place between two men – and that it is narrated by a third man for the pleasure of several thousand others in the theatre – makes it an instance ... of *homoeroticism*'.²⁰ As in *Henry V*, Orsino's expression of love for Cesario occurs between two male figures – himself and his boy servant – and although it is not narrated by another man the fact that in this instance it happens in a film rather than on a theatre stage means that it is enacted for the pleasure of, potentially, millions of other men who have chosen to screen Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, many of whom might well be gay or queer and predisposed to be receptive to such passionate declarations of love between men.

Of course, Orsino does not stop posing questions to the Countess, who does not, indeed, cannot, love him. He vows with a sneer that he will remove Cesario from Olivia's presence once and for all: 'But this your minion, whom I

know you love, / And whom, by heaven, I swear, I tender dearly, / Him will I tear out of that cruel eye' (Elam 5.1.121–3; Nunn 116). While uttering these words, Orsino stalks over to Cesario and takes Cesario's hand into his own, creating a visual exclamation point as it were of his intentions and his feelings. Meanwhile, the phrase 'tender dearly' could be glossed as another way of saying 'love', as in 'I love him'; it can, as textual editors often note, also be taken to mean that he simply cares deeply about Cesario. Regardless, he neither loves nor cares very much for Olivia, despite his many poetic declarations to the contrary. What Schalkwyk has to say about Orsino in this regard is apropos: the play, in tandem with Nunn's film, reveals the 'qualitative difference between Orsino's *desire* for Olivia and his *love* for Cesario, something which the character himself is deeply unaware' until these key moments in both the written and the cinematic texts.²¹ Thus the punishment that Orsino intends to dole out to Olivia by irrevocably separating her and Cesario actually allows the Duke to secure what he most wants – and has most wanted all along – for himself: an exclusive relationship with Cesario, with someone of his own gender.

Throughout these dramatic moments in the denouement of the film Cesario is observing Orsino with nothing less than adoration animating his face. He is, it seems, beyond content to be claimed in such a physical, public and aggressive way by the man he loves. Echoing his master, he offers his own passionate avowal to Orsino: 'And I most jocund, apt, and willingly / To do you rest, a thousand deaths would die' (Elam 5.1.128–9; Nunn 117). Although Cesario has spoken of his love for Orsino before, his readiness to die again and again for that love, though certainly hyperbolic, nevertheless proves quite extraordinary to witness for queer and queer-allied viewers of Nunn's film. Arguably, this is a depiction of male homoerotic love of the highest order, and it would not have been possible to represent so vividly and so palpably were it not for the filmmakers of this *Twelfth Night*'s engagement with gender trouble.

II

In comparison to the *Romeo and Juliets* of directors George Cukor (1936) and Franco Zeffirelli (1968) analysed in the previous chapter, Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (1996)²² is a wholly postmodern cinematic take on Shakespeare's original text that often verges on the psychedelic and the schizophrenic. Following its debut, a number of reviewers in the popular press complained about *Romeo + Juliet* being derivative, not Shakespearean enough despite the appearance of Shakespeare's name in the movie's title and, ultimately, more flamboyant style than substantive Shakespearean cinema. Academics were – and remain so today – just as divided in their opinions of the production. Rothwell, for example, offers the following equivocal response: 'This is watching Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* under strobe lights. It has been filtered through John Woo's Hong Kong action movies, and the hiphop and gangsta rap of MTV, yet the characters speak in Elizabethan English. The verbal runs against the grain of the visual semiotics.'²³ And so it does.

Yet at the same time Rothwell finds a method to Luhrmann's madness in his *Romeo + Juliet*. He writes: 'The interplay between the crude actualities of television newscasts and MTV fantasies generates the film's *raison d'être*, which is the displacement into contemporary idiom the oxymorons of Shakespeare's oppositions of womb and tomb, love and death, youth and age, and so forth.'²⁴ *Romeo + Juliet* was, in other words, designed to appeal to the sensibilities of the young of the late twentieth century. On this subject Nicholas F. Radel points out, too, that Luhrmann's film 'does not interpret Shakespeare in a traditional way, representing his play's historical difference from modern concerns; instead, it focuses on seemingly anachronistic, modern social fantasies about race and sex, interpreting the famous "star-crossed" lovers within the social and sexual divisions of our own society'.²⁵ The irony of this reception history is that, within

the larger project of critiquing Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, Zeffirelli's and even Cukor's *Romeo and Juliets* were idealized as exemplars of cinematic fidelity to Shakespeare's original, although, in both of their respective historical moments, each was criticized just as harshly, albeit for different reasons.

While problematic and delightful on many different levels, if there is one thing that Luhrmann stumbles over in his *Romeo + Juliet* it is the simultaneous queering of the character of Mercutio (Harold Perrineau) and the homoeroticizing of Mercutio's relationship with Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio); this failure can be attributed to the director's conventional treatment of gender in the film. A number of critics have touched on this aspect of the production, but have not otherwise explored it in detail. Rothwell asserts that the actor who plays 'a splendid Mercutio ... performs a virtuoso Queen Mab speech' and notes that his 'friendship [with Romeo] hints at a streak of homoeroticism'.²⁶ He then goes on to point out specifically the fact that '[f]or the Capulet ball, Mercutio cross-dresses in a mini-skirt'.²⁷ Similarly, James N. Loehlin explains that Mercutio 'vogues through a glitzy camp performance of "Young Hearts Run Free" that combines Busby Berkeley with *Paris is Burning*' before claiming that this 'memorable performance, atop a brightly lit staircase, in high heels, spangled bra and Jean Harlow wig, serves the structural function of the Mab speech, encapsulating the brilliancy, imaginative energy and homosocial bonding of Mercutio's world, just before Romeo meets the woman who will draw him away from it'.²⁸ Finally Lehmann states: 'Luhrmann's Mercutio is a black-skinned, white-sequined, drag queen who seems desperately disturbed by Romeo's heterosexual awakening'.²⁹ These critical assessments, individually and collectively, make the same empirical observations about the fact that Luhrmann's Mercutio is an impossible to ignore – Radel describes him as the 'most brilliant and attractive of Romeo's friends'³⁰ – black, gay drag queen, but they do not proceed to consider the larger implications of their summations. That being the case the purpose of this section of this chapter is to examine the

significance of Mercutio's transvestitism and the homoerotic nature of his association with Romeo in *Romeo + Juliet* from a queer perspective – in this case a perspective that does not automatically accept representations at face value. The overarching argument is that gender trouble ultimately trumps the seemingly progressive nature of the interpretation of Mercutio that Luhrmann puts forth in the film.

The opening of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* is a slick montage of gritty and frantic images that tell the backstory of the Capulet and Montague feud. This sequence includes a visual representation of the film's dramatis personae. When Harold Perrineau appears as Mercutio his title card includes the following tag – 'Romeo's best friend' (see Figure 12). This is something of a cinematic elaboration on the lists of dramatis personae that appear in print versions of the play, most of which describe Mercutio as either Romeo's or Prince Escalus's kinsman and only as Romeo's friend rather than best friend. The concern here centres on the whys and wherefores of Luhrmann's decision to call specific attention to Mercutio's relational status to Romeo by using the superlative 'best' to

FIGURE 12 *Romeo's best friend* Mercutio's (Harold Perrineau) title card. William Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet*, dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1996.

modify 'friend'. Certainly doing so signifies that Romeo and Mercutio's friendship is more special and more important to them than their respective friendships with anyone else. At the same time, however, attaching such a modifier to 'friend' in this context seems like a not-so-subtle attempt to insist that Mercutio and Romeo are just best friends and nothing more. Put in another way, it seems like a not-so-subtle attempt to remove from the interpretive equation the mere idea that there is anything romantic, homoerotic or sexual between Mercutio and Romeo. Perhaps this is Luhrmann's way of circumventing the intertextual connotations that suggest otherwise (inclusive of, in particular, Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, which establishes the fact of homoerotic intimacy as part and parcel of Romeo and Mercutio's relationship, as well as Porter's commentary on this aspect of Zeffirelli's film) with the visual rhetorical equivalent of a preemptive first strike. The effect of such a move seems to be to keep Romeo safely untouchable in the reified realm of the absolute heterosexual. Mercutio may not be straight, but Romeo is, and that is what matters most within the overall ideology of Luhrmann's production. As Radel writes, though, Luhrmann 'doesn't suggest that there is anything perverse about Mercutio's being gay. Rather he seems to be repeating what has become almost a cliché of modern interpretations of *Romeo and Juliet*' starting with Zeffirelli's 1968 production, which was the first to manifest a gay Mercutio.³¹ Nevertheless, in 'both Zeffirelli's film and Luhrmann's, Mercutio definitely seems hung up on Romeo, even though – and this is crucial – his physical desire is apparently not returned'.³² Still, these Romeos, it can be said in twenty-first-century colloquial terms, are just not that 'into' their respective Mercutios in Zeffirelli's and Luhrmann's adaptations.

Luhrmann's Mercutio is not just Romeo's best friend – he is also, significantly in the context of a visual poetics of gender trouble, a black, gay man who likes to dress up in women's clothing. Burt thoroughly describes one of Mercutio's appearances as follows:

In the spectacular, Las Vegas-style Capulet ball sequence in Baz Luhrmann's *William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet* (1996), a bearded Mercutio, played by black actor Harold Perrineau, is the 'very pink of courtesy,' performing in full drag on a staircase in front of a huge painting of the Virgin Mary and baby Jesus, surrounded by six male dancers (who flash their star-crossed buns to the camera) and flanked by two male go-go dancers. Shot as if he's in an MTV music video sequence in quickly paced zooms, zips, and pans, Mercutio wears a matching sequined cape, necklace, bodice, and miniskirt with exposed garters, stockings, and panties; white, long-sleeved, satin gloves; pumps; false eyelashes; heavy mascara and eyeshadow; bright red lipstick; and a large white fright wig. While dancing a showgirl number complete with above-the-head alternating leg kicks, Mercutio lip-synchs a pumping, Latin disco song entitled 'Young Hearts Run Free' (sung by Kym Mazell) and, extending his tongue at certain moments, makes a striptease-like address to the camera as well as to Romeo.³³

In terms of imagery saturation, this is about as excessive and cinematically 'in-your-face' as it gets when it comes to non-normative gender representation. On one level, of course, the choice to present Mercutio as a drag queen seems both progressive and trendy. This aspect of *Romeo + Juliet* comes at a time in history when the cinematic and cultural zeitgeist brought such representations into vogue, as evidenced by films like *The Crying Game* (1992), *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert* (1994), *To Wong Foo, Thanks For Everything, Julie Newmar* (1995) and *The Birdcage* (1996) – all very popular movies that took the figure of the (gay) male cross-dresser from the margins of Western society and placed him at its mainstream centre in what qualifies as, perhaps, the most accessible way possible in the period: via the medium of film.

But part of the problem with Luhrmann's transvestite Mercutio is that the director provides his viewers with no

corresponding context that is intrinsic to *Romeo + Juliet* itself that allows for informed interpretation of this iteration of the character. They are in other words left to their own devices, and in that fact there is the potential for difficulty. This is because, as Butler revealed, 'gender is an identity constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.'³⁴ The material representation of gender is therefore a set of performative acts having nothing at all to do with the biological sex of actual individuals. The concept of gender is strictly – even ruthlessly – policed along the masculine/feminine divide in the present historical epoch; as such, it only seems natural and unchanging. The very idea of cross-dressing, like the character of Mercutio does in Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, once again exposes gender as a fiction rather than a reality. And that, inevitably perhaps, creates trouble.

Of course, no one within the world of *Romeo + Juliet* reacts to Mercutio's penchant for cross-dressing in either a negative or a positive way; Mercutio is accepted by one and all with an admirable level of neutrality. Yet whether or not some, let alone all, of Luhrmann's viewers are capable of such equanimity is questionable – and this applies to viewers who span the sexual identity spectrum, from straight to gay or queer, transgender, intersexual, bisexual and beyond. Garber helps to contextualize these dynamics: '[i]n mainstream culture', she writes 'it thus appears just as unlikely that a gay man will be pictured in non-transvestite terms as it is that a transvestite man will be pictured in non-gay terms.'³⁵ Put in a slightly different way, Garber is arguing that, to many, gay men, simply because they are attracted to members of their own gender, are just like women, all of whom, from this perspective, are only ever attracted to men, too; hence it is no surprise that (some) gay men dress up like women. Furthermore, any man who enjoys donning women's clothes *must be* gay given his fetish for a

certain kind of apparel even if his actual erotic and romantic interests involve people of the opposite sex. 'It is as though', Garber remarks, 'the hegemonic cultural imaginary is saying to itself: if there is a difference (between gay and straight), we want to be able to *see* it, and if we see a difference (a man in women's clothes), we want to be able to *interpret* it.'³⁶ In Foucauldian terms this is one way that the institution of heterosexuality seeks to contain anything that would attempt to subvert its various paradigms and proscriptions and, thereby, attempts to perpetuate itself ad infinitum. For individuals who are part of the material world – gay, straight or anywhere in between – this set of circumstances is equivalent to an ideological catch-22.

Significantly, what is also operative in this environment, as Garber explains, is the

desire to *tell the difference*, to guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position in question. (If people who dress like me might be gay, then someone might think I'm gay, or I might get too close to someone I don't recognize as gay; if someone who is heterosexual like me dresses in women's clothes, what is heterosexuality? etc.) Both the energies of conflation and the energies of clarification and differentiation between transvestism and homosexuality thus mobilize and problematize, under the twin anxieties of *visibility* and *difference*, all of the culture's assumptions about normative sex and gender roles.³⁷

Hence being neither as truly innovative nor as truly subversive as it pretends to be, Luhrmann's representation of Mercutio as a drag queen serves to reinforce the strictest of binaries between straight men and gay and/or queer men. Mercutio's transvestite appearance also only feeds into mainstream society's fears about its ability to differentiate itself from the Big Bad Wolf of the gay or homosexual Other. And because Mercutio is marked as a deviant cross-dresser on the very

first instant he struts through the cinematic frame wearing what can be considered outlandish women's clothes, his difference from the norm(al) becomes an albatross around his neck from which he can never escape. While watching *Romeo + Juliet* some audience members may be encouraged by the subliminal effects of film to, as Garber puts it, *tell the difference* between what they can all too easily perceive to be a heterosexual Mercutio and a homosexual Mercutio, with the latter almost completely obliterating the former the second Mercutio appears onscreen for the first time in a glittering sequined dress. Such is the derogatory and ultimately destructive power of stereotypes where homosexuality and cross-dressing are concerned. Having said that, it must also be noted, however, that not even all gay, queer, or bisexual men in Lurhmann's audiences are off the hook. Those that are not would also include the legions of such people who have so internalized Western society's homophobia that they resolutely identify themselves as 'straight-acting' – with all of the attendant baggage such a phrase carries – and seek to distance themselves from their cross-dressing brethren.

All of what has been detailed here so far is why Lurhmann's *Romeo + Juliet* must be critiqued for its unmediated inclusion of a transvestite Mercutio. With no disrespect meant toward Perrineau – who really does give a virtuoso performance in the part – the Mercutio that emerges from the interpretive pressure applied in this analysis is not the, albeit qualified, celebratory figure that Rothwell, Loehlin and other critics identify in their commentaries on the film. Rather the Mercutio that emerges conforms totally to still pervasive stereotypes about the sad, unhappy and angry gay man who is the way he is because he is caught in the trap of forever pining over what he can never have: a true emotional, romantic, affectionate and sexual relationship with the straight man – in this case, of course, Romeo, who will always remain out of Mercutio's reach because he is unable to return Mercutio's feelings in kind. Lurhmann, it warrants adding, represents Mercutio as little

more than the feminine gay foil for the straight, but problematically masculine, Romeo. Radel explains:

A weak and vacillating character in the early part of Shakespeare's play and later a man made seemingly irrational by his love for Juliet, he [Romeo] hardly constitutes an ideal of early modern masculinity. That he grows to manhood in the play is arguable, but the fact that masculinity in our time is often (and homophobically) posited around heterosexuality provides a convenient type of cinematic shorthand for ... Luhrmann, who displace[s] homosexual desire onto Mercutio alone ... Mercutio's seeming homosexuality then, is used to mark by contrast the otherwise questionable sexuality of one of Shakespeare's most famous lovers.³⁸

This overarching heteronormative ethos in turn colours what had the potential to be one of the most homoerotic parts of Luhrmann's production: Mercutio's death and Romeo's response to that irrevocable loss, which exemplifies Butler's insistence that 'gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what "humanizes" individuals within contemporary culture; indeed we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender right.'³⁹ Luhrmann's Mercutio, as a representative of all men who 'fail to do their gender right' in the realm of the cinema and the realm of the material, is punished by death for his unforgiveable transgression. The moral of Luhrmann's treatment of the tale could not be made more apparent.

The circumstances that lead to Mercutio's death begin when an already worried Benvolio states, after seeing them arrive at a park on the shore of Verona Beach, 'By my head, here comes the Capulets' (3.1.34).⁴⁰ Nonplussed, Mercutio places his feet on the table and proclaims 'By my heel, I care not' (3.1.35). This is a show of bravado on the part of Mercutio – foolhardy bravado perhaps, but bravado nonetheless. It is also the kind of action mixed with words that would be expected from a man

who is spoiling for a fight. And that is just what he gets when the Capulets, led by the fiery Tybalt, walk up to the assembled Montagues. 'Gentlemen,' Tybalt says, 'a word with one of you' (3.1.37). Employing a mocking smile, Mercutio responds with, 'And but one word with one of us? Couple it / with something, make it a word and a blow' (3.1.38–9). As Weis points out in the footnote that accompanies these lines in his Arden 3 edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, the phrase 'a word and a blow' was proverbial in Shakespeare's day indicating how easy it was for words to morph into fisticuffs.⁴¹ The problem is with the interpretive licence Luhrmann takes with the lines in *Romeo + Juliet*. The way Mercutio delivers them is deliberately provocative. The stage directions in Craig Pearce and Lurhmann's screenplay provide the following instructions: 'Leaning close to Tybalt' in the seconds before the last word, 'blow', is uttered, 'he [Mercutio] camps it up'.⁴² Perrineau does not miss a beat as he delivers the word 'blow', after an ad-libbed dramatic pause, in a breathy falsetto voice that is dripping with bitchy sarcasm.

Word and gesture thus combine to make the bawdy meaning obvious – this Mercutio means 'blow' in its twentieth-/twenty-first-century sense of the performance of the sex act known as fellatio. But what remains unclear is if Mercutio is suggesting that Tybalt ought to 'blow' Mercutio along with the exchange of words Tybalt has requested or if, on the other hand, Mercutio is suggesting that Tybalt ought to allow Mercutio to 'blow' Tybalt in exchange for having words with him. The concern with Luhrmann's representation of the Mercutio/Tybalt dialogue here has everything to do with anachronism. Sources such as the *OED* reveal that 'blow' did not acquire the meaning of fellatio until the 1930s;⁴³ it would not have meant the same thing in Elizabethan or Jacobean parlance. Be that as it may, Mercutio's razor-sharp wit meets with success as evidenced by the laughter it generates from the Montagues and those of their surrounding allies. Tybalt, however, is enraged, presumably because Mercutio has triumphed at making fun of Tybalt in a public forum. At the same time, though, Tybalt could be upset because of the homosexual/

homoerotic implications inherent in the very idea of one man performing fellatio on another. It is also quite likely that both attitudes are influencing Tybalt. That being the case, Tybalt's explosive anger makes him seem like the stereotypical homophobic man who is so insecure with his own sexual identity that he must deal accordingly with any such threat to that identity in order to protect his reputation as a 'real' – not a gay, queer or bisexual – man.

Things go from bad to worse the moment Tybalt blurts out contemptuously: 'Mercutio, thou consortest with Romeo' (3.1.44). At that point all bets are off between the two men as Mercutio charges after Tybalt like an enraged bull, his anger matching if not exceeding Tybalt's in intensity. Mercutio demands to know if Tybalt dares to compare Mercutio and Romeo to minstrels. Once again drawing on Weis's footnotes in the Arden 3 edition of *Romeo and Juliet*, it becomes apparent that in the early modern period in England minstrels – not, ironically, unlike actors – were viewed by certain segments of the population as unsavoury figures with a penchant for both effeminacy and sodomy. Mercutio's rage over the accusation Tybalt may or may not be making about the nature of Mercutio and Romeo's relationship proves difficult to interpret within the overall context of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*. Certainly, on a homosocial level, Mercutio is looking out for Romeo and trying to defend his friend from being impugned in any way by Tybalt. But is Mercutio upset because Tybalt is denigrating both Mercutio and Romeo in general? Or is Mercutio upset because Tybalt is suggesting that Mercutio and Romeo have the kind of intimate relationship with one another that is undeserving of contempt? Or is Mercutio upset because Tybalt is implying that he knows Mercutio and Romeo do not have the kind of love relationship with each other that Mercutio longs for so desperately? The answers to these questions remain open-ended and thus a matter of interpretation, although all three lend themselves well to queer readings.

Luhrmann sets Mercutio's final battle with Tybalt on a dazzling open-air stage that is itself located on Verona Beach

and bears the name Sycamore Grove Theatre. Though it may seem a heavy-handed sort of symbolism, it also has the effect of underscoring the fact that the story of *Romeo + Juliet*, like its source text, suddenly veers at this point from comedy to tragedy with Mercutio's death at Tybalt's hands, and that this is drama at its most theatrical *and* its most cinematic. Mercutio's evident desire to protect Romeo from Tybalt – inspired in no small part because of Romeo's pacifism where Tybalt's verbal and physical abuse of Romeo is concerned – signifies how deeply Mercutio feels about Romeo. It is not overstating the case to claim that Mercutio loves Romeo. But once again Mercutio's homoerotic longing for Romeo can only be viewed through the haze of the unrequited. Romeo may care just as much about Mercutio, and he may even love Mercutio, but in Luhrmann's vision Romeo's desire for Mercutio never crosses the line between the homosocial and the homoerotic. This is made plain the moment Mercutio dies as a result of Tybalt's having impaled him with a lethal shard of glass. Romeo grabs the lifeless body of Mercutio and wails and cries over the loss while he holds Mercutio in his arms (see Figure 13).

The moment is as affecting as it is disturbing; however, viewers of Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* are aware, given the best friend title card flashed at the beginning of the film, that it takes place between two people who were best friends and not ever, even potentially where this Romeo is concerned, lovers. And although Romeo – not unlike Achilles taking vengeance on Hector for Hector's killing of Achilles's beloved Patroclus in Homer's *Iliad* – races after Tybalt and, before long, guns him down, he is only meting out justice because he is, homosocially speaking, one man looking out for another man, no more, no less. As in Shakespeare's play, Mercutio's death in Luhrmann's film, Radel writes, 'evokes a crisis of masculinity in which Romeo realizes that his love for Juliet has made him effeminate ... Revenging the death of his friend becomes a sign of Romeo's emerging masculinity, which is intimately connected in the play with violence, in advance of his consummating his marriage with Juliet', the latter being, of

FIGURE 13: *Romeo (Leonardo DiCaprio) cradling his dead best friend Mercutio (Harrold Perrineau) in his arms. Romeo + Juliet, dir. Baz Luhrmann, 1996.*

course, the most tangible sign of masculinity possible.⁴⁴ Thus it is made apparent yet again that Luhrmann uses the potentiality of the male homoerotic in *Romeo + Juliet* as a spectre that is always denied, that is always contained, in favour of the most adamant form of compulsory heterosexuality. Mercutio's gender trouble-inflected homoerotic desire for Romeo is brought to the fore again and again in Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, and every time this happens that homoerotic desire is suppressed and, finally, is snuffed out of existence entirely with Mercutio's death and his subsequent transformation into 'worms' meat'. All of which serves to reify heterosexuality as the be all and end all of human relationships – with Shakespeare appropriated as the authorizing cultural agent that secures such exaltation.

III

Audiences are made aware from the outset of Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's*

Dream (1999) that it is set in Monte Athena, a village somewhere in the photogenic Tuscan region of northern Italy rather than in Shakespeare's Athens, and in the Victorian era instead of either Antiquity or even the Renaissance.⁶⁴ They are also made aware early on that Bottom (Kevin Kline) has a shrew of a wife (Heather Elizabeth Parisi) who does not understand him and what she considers to be his foolish and irresponsible penchant for acting. Otherwise, the film is a reasonably straightforward cinematic retelling of Shakespeare's *Midsummer*. As is the case with nearly all Shakespeare films, reaction to Hoffman's *Dream* has been mixed. One critic appreciates the director's use of well-known Hollywood stars in the film, particularly Kline, Michelle Pfeiffer, Stanley Tucci and Calista Flockhart, along with his use of equally well-known operatic and symphonic pieces in the film's score, such as 'Brindisi' and Mendelssohn's 'Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', but faults Hoffman for overloading the visuality of the film. But another critic considers the film a visual masterpiece. Still others feel the film is weakened by its too-clever and too-creative use of emotional backstory where Bottom is concerned, but also feel that the performance of Flute/Thisbe is filled with a surprising and unexpected pathos. Yet another hails Hoffman's production as a Shakespearean heritage film in the high-class, cinematic art tradition of such Merchant/Ivory gems as *A Room with a View* (1985), *Maurice* (1987) and *Howard's End* (1992), but insists that it also shows the failure of theatre as a medium of mass entertainment in light of the success of film in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries. However, none of these critics takes up the subject of what can be considered the queerest aspect of Hoffman's *Midsummer*: the filmmaker's novel treatment of Shakespeare's Pyramus and Thisbe play-within-a-play plotline that has delighted audiences since the late sixteenth century. In so doing the director manages to transform the metatheatrical story involving the Rude Mechanicals' performance before the newly married Duke and Duchess from little more than a

ridiculous, albeit funny, farce into a surprisingly poignant set piece that is informed by gender trouble and tinged with an unexpected touch of male homoeroticism.

Hoffman's innovative serious treatment of the Pyramus and Thisbe tale begins when, fairly early in the film, the amateur acting troupe gathers on the steps of a building undergoing refurbishment in the bustling village of Monte Athena. In accord with Shakespeare's playtext of *Midsummer* the company includes Nick Bottom the weaver, Peter Quince the carpenter (Roger Rees), Snug the joiner (Gregory Jbara), Francis Flute the bellows mender (Sam Rockwell), Tom Snout the tinker (Bill Irwin) and Robin Starveling the tailor (Max Wright). Having assembled, Bottom begs of Quince what play it is that they will endeavour to perform as part of the upcoming wedding celebration for Theseus (David Strathairn) and Hippolyta (Sophie Marceau). Quince informs the actors that their play is to be 'The most lamentable comedy and most cruel death of Pyramus and Thisbe', to which the irrepressible Bottom proclaims: 'A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry' (1.2.11–14),⁴⁰ although, in actuality, he has no idea what the Pyramus and Thisbe drama is even about. Nevertheless, Bottom is quickly cast by Quince in the part of Pyramus, the lover that 'kills himself most gallant for love' (1.2.20). The men respond to this description of Pyramus with a collective audible sigh of approval, indicating that playing the part of a man willing to kill himself for the love of a woman is a worthy assignment. Indeed, the impression made here is that any male actor not only would but ought to gladly take on such a *natural* role.

Having cast Bottom as Pyramus the director calls out for Flute. 'Here, Peter Quince' (1.2.39) Flute says in an unmistakably deep and masculine voice. Before responding to Flute Quince whispers something to Snout, who dashes away quickly after hearing whatever it is that Quince has to say. Clearly, viewers of Hoffman's *Midsummer* are meant to understand that Snout and Quince are in something of a conspiracy together against Flute, who is told by Quince 'You

must take Thisbe on you' (1.2.40). With a touching smile (see Figure 14), Flute asks, 'What is Thisbe? A wandering knight?' and Quince, as he steps gingerly away from Flute, informs the man with a noticeable chuckle that Thisbe 'is the lady that Pyramus must love' (1.2.39–40). That Flute will be performing the role of Pyramus's lady love inspires a round of guffawing on the part of all of his fellow actors, with the exception of Bottom, who is too busy trying to figure out a way to convince Quince that he should be allowed to play multiple roles in the production to be at all concerned with Flute's immediate fate as a performer. To most of this group of amateur actors there is something inordinately amusing about the idea of a man playing the part of a woman on stage. A truly masculine, heterosexual male, the further implication

FIGURE 14 *Francis Flute (Sam Rockwell), with a genuinely innocent smile on his face, moments before being cast by Peter Quince (Roger Rees) as Thisbe. William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, dir. Michael Hoffman, 1999.*

is, would never degrade or humiliate himself by agreeing to portray a female character on the stage.

Hearing the role he is to play causes the ingenuous smile to vanish from Flute's face. Meanwhile, the ribbing of Flute by his fellows becomes even more pronounced when the camera turns viewers' attention to the character of Snout who, at Quince's instigation moments earlier, had hopped off the makeshift stage and retrieved the pink dress costume Flute will have to don when he portrays Thisbe. When Snout prances around below with the pink dress held up to his waist, mimicking how ridiculous he and the rest of the male actors think Flute will look wearing the dress as Thisbe, it engenders yet another round of spirited guffaws that become uproarious. Snout's juvenile actions also elicit Quince's non-verbal approval, as evidenced by the grin on his face in tandem with the 'good job' hand gesture he directs to Snout. Even the camera angle Hoffman uses in this shot makes explicit the idea that the dominant heteronormative portion of Western society literally looks down on men who dress up as women no matter the circumstances of such a gender performance. The shot is therefore neither neutral nor innocent. From a visual rhetorical perspective it seems like an attempt to persuade complicit audience members that cross-dressing on the part of a male is worthy of nothing more than scorn and derision.

An obviously disquieted Flute pleads with Quince: 'Nay, faith, let not me play a woman. I have a beard coming' (1.2.38). Bottom jumps into the conversation at this point and says, 'An I may hide my face, let me play Thisbe too. I'll speak in a monstrous little voice: "Thisne, Thisne!" "Ah, Pyramus, my lover dear! Thy Thisbe dear, and lady dear!"' (1.2.41-3). Bottom uses a falsetto voice that gets stronger and stronger as he improvises these lines to their end. Nearby stands Flute who, with each word Bottom speaks, becomes quite animated about the idea of Bottom playing Thisbe rather than taking on the role himself and being ridiculed for 'becoming' a woman in such a way. With a combination of comical eye and facial

gestures Flute tries to convince Quince that Bottom would be the ideal actor for the part of Thisbe. But Quince disagrees: 'No, no,' he says to Bottom with evident asperity, 'you must play Pyramus, and Flute, you Thisbe' (1.2.44). Quince then calls out for Snout and together they lead Flute toward the back of the stage where Snout and Starveling begin fitting Flute into the pink dress with exaggerated coos of 'Thisbe' that make them sound a bit like mother hens fussing over a reluctant child in need of mollifying rather than the 'hard-handed men' (5.1.72) of Athens as the haughty Philostrate (John Sessions) later describes them.

With this particular representation of Flute's casting as Thisbe – and his colleagues' reaction to it – Hoffman is following cinematic tradition. In the *Midsummer* productions of Reinhardt and Dieterle (1935) and Peter Hall (1968), Flute's fellow mechanicals also laugh at him when he is made by Peter Quince to take on the role of Thisbe; they laugh at Flute for the exact same reasons in all three films – to them, there is something inherently funny about the idea of a man, especially, in this case, a comparatively young one like Flute, outfitted in female dress. However, as evidenced by two other screen productions of *Midsummer* by directors Elijah Moshinsky (1981) and Adrian Noble (1996), there is a different, equally viable, way to play the initial sequence involving Flute/Thisbe that is under discussion. Moshinsky's and Noble's Flutes, as well as their amateur-actor compatriots, take Flute's casting as Thisbe in their stride without bursting into mirth as happens in the films of Reinhardt and Dieterle, Hall and Hoffman. They seem in fact to understand that at times stage performance requires males to cross-dress as female characters and, as such, that cross-dressing is really no laughing matter in the world of the theatre that they are trying to enter, even if only temporarily. And thus an analytical crux reveals itself. Which is the correct interpretation? The one put forth by Reinhardt and Dieterle, Hall and Hoffman in which Flute is the butt of a joke? Or the one put forth by Moshinsky and Noble in which Flute's forthcoming

drag performance before the Athenian court is not subject to ridicule? Considering the well-documented and thoroughly historicized fact that young male actors cross-dressing as female characters was a convention of early modern English theatre because of the laws in place that prevented women from working on stage, the extant research on the professionalism and range required of the boy actors of the period in order to portray totally convincing Katherinas, Lady Macbeths or Hermiones, among other female characters, and finally, Renaissance theatregoers' long-standing familiarity with these, to them, normative circumstances, it seems more likely than not that it is Moshinsky's and Noble's treatments of the early *Flute/Thisbe* material that are more authentic and more historically accurate than those of Reinhardt and Dieterle, Hall and Hoffman. Logically, then, the critical focus needs to shift somewhat into a consideration of what the latter set of *Midsummer* directors accomplishes as regards their individual and collective representations that encourage audiences to engage in heteronormative laughter at *Flute/Thisbe*.

Edward Berry explains that the act of laughing 'is deeply equivocal. At times, as when we laugh "with" someone, laughter may be a mechanism by which we identify with another human being, a means of psychological and social bonding. At other times, as when we laugh "at" someone, the same physical reaction may be a form of aggressive self-assertion.'⁴⁷ For Berry, laughing with someone is, in accord with the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, an exercise in the carnivalesque; on the other hand, laughing at someone is, in accord with the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, an exercise in the sharp Hobbesian distinction between the superior and the inferior. 'Both kinds of laughter, curiously, can strengthen certain kinds of social communion: the carnivalesque, by casting wide the net of community, implying that we are all, at some level one; the Hobbesian, by affirming the superiority of one community in opposition to an individual or group outside it.'⁴⁸ Berry proceeds to explain that Hobbesian laughter is often used 'as

a form of social correction. By experiencing the humiliation of being laughed at, so the idea goes, the victim is led to recognize his or her social deviance and [possibly] rejoins the community reformed.⁴⁹ Hence Hobbesian laughter 'works towards limited social communion through exclusion, forging group solidarity among privileged insiders through the mockery of outsiders, whoever they may be'.⁵⁰ In Shakespeare's comedies this mockery is directed at the 'Other', character-figures that were not 'aristocratic, male, white, English, heterosexual Christians'.⁵¹ These 'Others' include Katherina from *The Taming of the Shrew*, Shylock from *The Merchant of Venice*, Jacques from *As You Like It*, Malvolio from *Twelfth Night*, Falstaff from *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and Caliban from *The Tempest*, all of which are mocked, abused, tormented and humiliated in one way or another in the plays they inhabit.⁵² Interestingly, though Shakespeare's female characters like the shrew Katherina were considered 'Others', the boy actors who portrayed them on stage do not seem to have been considered 'Others'. Perhaps this is because, although unlikely to be or to ever become aristocratic, they were nevertheless still male, white, English, heterosexual and Christian.

All of the above information lends a great deal of credence to the notion that it is by no means certain that during the early modern period the mechanicals would have laughed at one of their own simply because he was going to have to perform his role cross-dressed as a woman in the Pyramus and Thisbe story arc as the characters do in Reinhardt and Dieterle's, Hall's and Hoffman's twentieth-century film versions of *Midsummer*. With this supposition in play, Reinhardt and Dieterle's, Hall's and Hoffman's respective depictions of the Pyramus and Thisbe material seem anachronistic in a specific way. Because the laughter directed at Flute is always shown from the point-of-view of his fellow mechanicals save Bottom, Hoffman's *Midsummer* is particularly good at making its audiences complicit in the kind of laughter Berry calls a Hobbesian form of social correction. Hoffman's viewers are thus in concert *with* most of mechanicals, encouraged to laugh *at* Flute because of

the cross-dressing predicament in which, through no fault of his own, he finds himself. Since most men do not normally go around wearing women's clothing in today's world – and those who do are, in most cases, automatically assumed to be homosexual regardless of their actual sexual identity – the mechanicals' laughter (and that of the members of Hoffman's audiences who identify with them) at Flute is deployed in Hoffman's *Midsummer* to make sure everyone involved within and without the film knows that there is something not quite right, that there is something non-heteronormative, that there is something queer, about these circumstances.

As was the case with Nunn's *Twelfth Night* and Lurhmann's *Romeo + Juliet* discussed in the earlier sections of this chapter, gender trouble lies at the heart of Hoffman's representation of Flute/Thisbe. It is worth quoting Garber again on this point. When it comes to gender and sexuality in the late twentieth/early twenty-first centuries, as she explains, Western society is obsessed with the 'desire to *tell the difference*' between men and women and, more especially perhaps, between straight men and gay/queer men, in order 'to guard against a difference that might otherwise put the identity of one's own position in question. (If people who dress like me might be gay, then someone might think I'm gay, or I might get too close to someone I don't recognize as gay; if someone who is heterosexual like me dresses in women's clothes, what is heterosexuality? etc.)', hence 'the energies of conflation and the energies of clarification and differentiation between transvestism and homosexuality thus mobilize and problematize, under the twin anxieties of *visibility* and *difference*, all of the culture's assumptions about normative sex and gender roles'.⁵³ In Hoffman's *Midsummer*, laughing at Flute/Thisbe and making him feel the bitter sting of public humiliation seems to be one way of preserving the heteronormative status quo. But, as it turns out, Hoffman's agenda reaches beyond the simplistic containment of such 'disruptive' gender and sexual forces.

Just prior to the performance before the Duke and the Duchess and their guests, Flute appears for the first time in

Hoffman's *Midsummer* as Thisbe in full drag. The wig he wears provides him with a head of woman's hair that is brown and frizzy and features tangled braids that stretch almost to the ground. His white foundation makes him look almost deathly pale, yet at the same time makes both the pink lipstick and rouge he is wearing stand out prominently. He does not quite seem like a clown, but the overall effect of the make-up is close. In addition, Flute's costume consists of a gold dress, a red shawl, and a number of elaborate gold chains and other jewellery. Looking closely at Flute, however, two things threaten the illusion of femininity: the heavy workman's shoes that can be seen sticking out beneath the hem of his dress and the rather obvious fact that the wig he is wearing is not placed squarely on his head, revealing a bit of the close-cropped hairstyle a young man his age might be expected to wear.

As the actual production of 'The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe' unfolds, Flute as Thisbe arrives on stage only to discover his/her beloved Pyramus lying motionless on the ground. 'Asleep, my love? / What, dead my dove', he/she says using a pronounced falsetto, much to the merriment of the Duke and the Duchess and their courtiers (5.1.304–5). The condescending laughter which Flute/Thisbe bears with stoic equanimity continues as he/she gets stuck on saying the word 'O' (5.1.306). He/she says this one word several times, and each time he/she does so, he/she lowers his voice an octave. But by the time Flute as Thisbe begins to deliver his next lines, he speaks quite clearly and in his own natural voice; that of the young man he is underneath the exaggerated make-up and the multi-layered dress, rather than that of Thisbe, the woman he is attempting to portray. Interestingly, the lower Flute's voice gets as he performs Thisbe, the more emotional, heartfelt and real his words sound. As he continues with 'Speak, speak. Quite dumb? / Dead, dead? A tomb / Must cover thy sweet eyes', the laughter of the audience watching the play-within-the-film fades noticeably (5.1.306–9). First the camera focuses on the expressions of Lysander (Dominic West) and Hermia (Anna

Friel), then those of Helena (Calista Flockhart) and Demetrius (Christian Bale), and shows how they change from delight to seriousness within the space of just a few seconds.

As the scene continues, Flute says, ‘O Sisters Three, / Come, come to me, / With hands as pale as milk’; then, in a surprising and extraordinary move, he pulls the woman’s wig off of his head and flings it aside, exposing the short brown hair of the young man he really is (5.1.316–18). Thus in addition to dealing with the pathos of the moment, audiences of ‘The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe’, and of Hoffman’s *Midsummer*, must somehow reconcile the fact that they are now watching a young man – albeit a young man still in a woman’s dress, but a recognizable young man nonetheless – struggling with the fact that his beloved, Pyramus, another man, is dead (see Figure 15). Not long thereafter, Flute as Thisbe exposed as Flute grabs Pyramus’s sword and stabs himself. ‘And farewell, friends,’ he says, ‘Thus Thisbe ends. / Adieu, adieu, adieu’ (5.1.325–7). Flute’s fingers touch Pyramus’s body lightly as he says his trio of goodbyes, and when he dies his head falls to its final rest on Pyramus’s waist. At this point it is helpful to

FIGURE 15 *Flute as Thisbe (Sam Rockwell), sans wig, preparing to die so that he/she can be with his/her beloved Pyramus (Kevin Kline) in William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, dir. Michael Hoffman, 1999.*

recall that when the group of amateur actors first appeared in Hoffman's film, audiences were told that Pyramus is a lover who dies most gallantly for love. But as his death makes clear, it is actually Flute who is the lover, in this case of another man, who dies most gallantly for that love. What makes the interaction between Flute and Bottom/Pyramus homoerotic is that viewers actually see two men, as opposed to a man and a woman, enacting their passion, the spectacle of one man making good on his willingness to kill himself for another man with whom he happens to be in love, as a palpable reality on screen.

Hoffman's transformation of 'The Most Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe' from farce to serious, indeed, almost tragic, drama was an inspired choice on his part. Given the cross-dressing aspect of this part of the film, which demands a young man to don female apparel in an illusion that fools no one in the audience about the real gender of Flute/Thisbe, the sequence has homoerotic potential. This potential morphs into vivid actuality the moment Flute removes his wig and begins speaking as one recognizable man to another of love, of mourning and of death. Nevertheless, the homoeroticism of this portrayal seems an accidental rather than a deliberate effect on the part of the filmmakers. Although they may appear in the final shooting script, the published version of Hoffman's screenplay for his *Midsummer* evidences no stage directions that indicate either Flute's removal of the wig or the lowering of his voice from a falsetto to a normal masculine tone, the two key factors that allow for the latent homoeroticism between Flute as Thisbe and Pyramus to manifest most noticeably on screen.⁵⁴ This suggests of course that these occurrences were spontaneous, in-the-moment, decisions on the part of either the director or Sam Rockwell, the actor responsible for bringing Flute/Thisbe to life. Whatever the case, it can be argued that these decisions work beautifully in the overall context of Hoffman's movie because they seem organic rather than contrived. They also serve to infuse this unique cinematic performance of

the Pyramus and Thisbe play – a play-within-a-film that, as is the situation with earlier productions of *Midsummer* like Reinhardt and Dieterle's, Hall's and Noble's, is presented strictly as heterosexual farce – with a quality that is all the more affecting given this subtle, sophisticated and entirely unexpected emphasis on its homoeroticism.

Two key transformations – one intrinsic, the other extrinsic, to Hoffman's *Midsummer* – occur during the latter part of the Pyramus and Thisbe performance. As they are touched by the genuine emotion the mechanicals manage to effect in playing their roles, it is made plain that Lysander, Hermia, Helena and Demetrius are all brought up short by their reactions to what they are witnessing on stage. The young nobles have in fact been made to see that their original derisive laughter at the mechanicals was uncalled for; they have been chastened, momentarily at least, by suddenly having to confront the fact that even though they are not professional actors, the hard-handed men of Athens are capable of extraordinary things in the theatre. Hoffman's cinematic audiences experience something similar as regards the cross-dressing Flute is required to do in order to transform himself into Thisbe. Meanwhile, in accord with the ideas of Berry on laughter, following the lead of Flute's fellow mechanicals, viewers of Hoffman's *Midsummer* are encouraged to laugh *at* Flute in concert *with* them given that the role he has been chosen to play demands that he disguise his masculinity in order to become a female character. Because of just how much of a threat the figure is in the heteronormative imaginary, the male transvestite must be mocked unmercifully so that he can be made to forego his transgressive behaviour in order to be accepted by society once again. But as surely as the young nobles are chastened by the real emotion Flute manages to engender in his performance as Thisbe, so are Hoffman's cinematic audiences. As human beings, cross-dressers do not deserve to be ridiculed, and love between two people of the same gender can be as affecting and meaningful as love between those of opposite genders – even in, or perhaps especially in, fictional form.

Hoffman's didacticism on these two points is light, but unmistakable in his overall treatment of the Pyramus and Thisbe play-within-a-film.

In their respective considerations of his production of *Midsummer*, scholars have had a great deal to say about Hoffman's obvious cinematic homages to Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsummer* and Kenneth Branagh's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1994), his shifting of the story's setting from Athens to the imaginary town of Monte Athena in Tuscany and his altering of the time period from antiquity to the Victorian era, and, above all, his decision to provide the character of Bottom with a backstory not found, or indeed even hinted at, in Shakespeare's original text. Focused as they seem to be on the details listed here, it is interesting to note that critics have had nothing to say about the homoerotic quality of the final moments of the performance of 'The Most Lamentable Comedy and Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisbe' as detailed above. Samuel Crowl provides one example of this kind of analytical elision:

On screen, less is always more with Shakespeare, which is nowhere made more evident than in Sam Rockwell's brilliant, moving Flute ... Rockwell gives us a heartbreaking Thisby, and he makes his delivery of 'his eyes were green as leeks' as tragically moving as Juliet's 'thy lips are warm.' ... Rockwell's Thisby genuinely grieves for her Pyramus ...⁵⁵

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

Thisby into a figure whose mourning for the loss of her *male* lover Pyramus is gut-wrenching. Crowl's fastidiousness with the use of masculine proper names and pronouns for Rockwell and Flute in this passage is telling; *in toto*, these grammatical devices never let his readers forget that the only real gender at work in the scene he praises here is male. Given the subject matter at the heart of the scene, forbidden romantic love interrupted by sudden death, and given that it involves two sets of male actors – Rockwell and Kline and Flute and Bottom – the fact that Crowl does not mention male homoeroticism even in passing proves to be a curious oversight that the queer reading attempted here seeks to address in a way that yields an equally valuable interpretation informed by the deconstruction of the visual poetics of gender trouble.

IV

It is interesting that the three Shakespeare films analysed in this chapter – Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, Lurhmann's *Romeo + Juliet* and Hoffman's *Midsummer* – were made in the last years of the twentieth century. By this time in history the concept of gender was already in serious trouble; it was well on its way to being thoroughly queered by the forces of deconstruction, feminism, gay and lesbian studies, and queer theory. That being the case, it cannot be a coincidence that each of the movies studied features a character that expresses a gender identity that does not accord with traditional hetero-normative expectations, from the winsomeness of Nunn's Viola/Cesario to the angry cross-dressing of Lurhmann's Mercutio and, finally, to the chameleon-like gender bending of Hoffman's Flute/Thisbe. Individually and collectively, these directors/characters attempt to make sense (and encourage their audiences to do the same) out of the idea that gender is neither a natural nor a predictable result of biological sex as was thought to be the case for the preceding millennia. If that

understanding seems a bit muddled rather than unified in the films of Nunn, Luhrmann and Hoffman, that should come as no surprise; every paradigm shift in human consciousness happens in fits and starts rather than in one clean sweep. Even so, the *Twelfth Night*, *Romeo + Juliet* and *Midsummer* productions discussed above all seem to indicate that there is every reason to look forward to the day that might well be coming when gender is no longer trouble in the Shakespeare film.