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4

Screening the male homoerotics of Shakespearean romantic comedy on film in Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* and Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*

I

Two groundbreaking articles from 1992 continue to draw attention to the subject of male homoeroticism in Shakespearean romantic comedy, specifically in plays like *The Merchant of Venice* and *Twelfth Night*.¹ In these pieces a fair amount of critical attention is directed to what Joseph Pequigney cleverly referred to as 'the two Antonios', the pair of characters that are linked to one another not only by name, but because both exhibit pronounced homoerotic desire for other male characters in the plays they appear; those

being Bassanio in *Merchant* and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*. Systematically comparing the relationships of these characters, Pequigney argues that the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio in *Merchant* is never anything but platonic and that, conversely, the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night* is romantic and, more significantly, is also requited in some fashion in the space just off the margins of the playtext. Valerie Traub, though she only mentions *Merchant* briefly in her work (she more closely examines *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*) without touching on the characters of Antonio and Bassanio, seems to agree with Pequigney on the matter of the homoeroticism evident in the relationship between Antonio and Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*. However, she does not go as far as Pequigney and does not claim, at least explicitly, that there is any kind of romantic love, much less consummation of that love, apparent in the Antonio and Sebastian pairing. For Traub, the homoerotic part of Antonio and Sebastian's relationship exists only in the realm of the rhetorical rather than the material as exemplified by, most often, what Antonio says to and about his beloved Sebastian as Shakespeare tells their story. Ironically, Pequigney makes a similar claim about Antonio and Bassanio in *Merchant*; in his view their relationship is defined only by what the Antonio of that play says to and about Bassanio rather than by anything he actually does physically or otherwise with the younger man.

Pequigney and Traub also differ in their views on the matter of what exactly happens to the two Antonios by the close of their respective plays. Traub maintains that *Twelfth Night*'s Antonio is marginalized to the point of complete exclusion from the heteronormative utopia that results on account of the marriages between the male/female couples Sebastian and Olivia and Orsino and Viola. Pequigney, on the other hand, adamantly resists all such notions of marginalization for either of the two Antonios in *Merchant* and *Twelfth Night*. 'Why,' he questions rhetorically and with some asperity, 'the nearly universal assent to the mistaken critical view

that both Antonios at the finish are excluded and unhappy? Since the Shakespearean text does not lend support to this view – quite the reverse – it must be imported and imposed by readers.²² According to Pequigney those readers err on the side of assuming that men who never marry women and never father children by their wives – men like the characters of the two Antonios in *Merchant* and *Twelfth Night* – are doomed to nothing but loneliness and despair because of their deviant (i.e. non-heteronormative) love object choices. Such an assumption, he adds, is not in the least justified by the textual evidence in the plays. However, as exhilarating as Pequigney's disavowal of conventional critical thinking about the fate of *Merchant's* and *Twelfth Night's* Antonios is, it is difficult not to wish that he had gone beyond verbal fiat and fleshed out more specifically how he thinks the two Antonios manage to avoid the exclusion and unhappiness that far too many readers, viewers and critics consign them to in the end.

Even after nearly twenty-five years since they were taken up by Pequigney and Traub, the problematics associated with male homoeroticism in Shakespeare's romantic comedies like *Merchant* and *Twelfth Night* have not yet been resolved, at least insofar as literary criticism ever allows for what can be considered definitive resolutions within its sphere of enquiry. These problematics have also not been addressed as fully as possible in extant work on the Shakespeare film. The purpose of this chapter then is to address that gap in the criticism by using Michael Radford's 2004 production of *Merchant* and, once again, Nunn's 1996 *Twelfth Night*, since it is as equally attentive to the homoeroticism of the Antonio/Sebastian relationship as it is to that of the Orsino/Cesario relationship discussed in the previous chapter. As such, this section is situated firmly on the traditional or the originary ground of queer theory with sex and sexuality as the prime markers of difference from the normative. That being the case it will be shown in what follows that, despite the lavish representation of male homoeroticism clearly evident in them, both

Radford's *Merchant* and Nunn's *Twelfth Night* end on strikingly similar notes that seem to serve not, as Pequigney points out, the ends of textual fidelity to Shakespeare's originals, but rather for the sole purpose of re-inscribing the supremacy of compulsory heterosexuality as their combined *raison d'être* in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.³

II

Tempestuous relations between Christians and Jews. The convoluted minutiae of the practice of usury in a Christian-dominated and emergent proto-capitalist society. Female agency and the lack thereof in a patriarchal world. Love, money and family as influences on, as well as the determiners of, marriage choices. Contractual, moral and ethical obligations. True justice versus hypocritical self-righteousness. The state in opposition to the individual; the individual in opposition to the state. The conflicts that propel *Merchant* derive from a potent mixture of all of these dramatic motifs, elements and themes. Though highly troubling in the early twenty-first century because of its pronounced anti-Semitism, especially in the long aftermath of the Holocaust, the play has nevertheless enjoyed popular and critical acclaim since it was originally performed on the London stages in the late sixteenth century. This qualified success continues to be reflected in the various film and television adaptations of the play completed in the present historical epoch. Rothwell lists a total of twelve productions of *Merchant* having been made and shown in movie theatres or broadcast on television since the beginning of the last century, ranging from a ten-minute, silent, black-and-white film made in 1908 by the Vitagraph Studios Film Company to 2004's sumptuous full-length feature, *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice*,⁴ written and directed by Michael Radford and starring an impressive roster of veteran, accomplished and up-and-coming stars like Al Pacino,

Jeremy Irons, Joseph Fiennes and Lynn Collins.⁵ Having been created, distributed, screened, consumed and critiqued in the twenty-first century, Radford's *Merchant* seems to be sympathetic to the male homoerotic potentialities inherent in its source text where the characters of Antonio (Jeremy Irons) and Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes) are concerned. In this regard the movie also seems to be demonstrably aware of the insights of gay and lesbian and queer scholarship that their practitioners have contributed to the study of Shakespearean drama since their advent nearly fifty years ago. Ultimately, however, this *Merchant* seems to abruptly abandon its engagement with male homoeroticism in a way that proves completely jarring to viewers from a queer perspective.

One extended sequence early in the movie is particularly evocative of the overall male homoeroticism Radford depicts in his *Merchant* and, thus, warrants specific attention in the present context. It begins with Antonio's second appearance in the production, which finds the merchant pacing around his Venetian palazzo with a brooding look on his face while Salerio (John Sessions) and Solanio (Gregor Fisher) eat a meal at the dining table set at the centre of the room – a meal that Antonio is unable to touch given his distracted state of mind. 'In sooth I know not why I am so sad', Antonio confides to his companions (1.1.1).⁶ 'It wearies me,' he continues as Salerio and Solanio exchange glances, 'you say it wearies you; / ... and such a want-wit sadness makes of me / That I have much ado to know myself' (1.1.2 and 5–6). Arthur L. Little describes this brief speech as part of what he terms Shakespeare's 'broader challenge to heteronormativity', a challenge that he finds particularly evident in *Merchant*.⁷ He goes on to make the point that Antonio is not merely sad; he is in mourning. The way Irons plays Antonio in Radford's *Merchant* finds accord with Little's insights; he does indeed seem like a man given over entirely to grieving the inevitable separation from someone he holds particularly dear. Antonio, according to Little, 'mourns the impending loss of Bassanio' and he

mourns how his own culturally unsanctioned desires [for Bassanio], those of same-sex intimate friendship, push him outside the presumptions of what increasingly in the early modern culture becomes *the* civil institution, *the* institution of valuation and belonging; he mourns because he sees the institution of heterosexual marriage working not only to displace but to replace same-sex communing.⁸

The broader challenge to heteronormativity Little discerns in Shakespeare, which, given how, in many cases, closely the cinematic text adheres to the playtext, can be extended to Radford's, *Merchant* lies in the very fact of Antonio's 'culturally unsanctioned desires' for Bassanio.

The psychoanalytic work of both Janet Adelman and Coppélia Kahn supports the assertions Little makes about *Merchant's* Antonio. Adelman, for instance, claims, 'Shakespeare explores male identity and friendship felt as necessarily prior to marriage', hence real-world individuals, represented by characters like Bassanio in *Merchant*, 'do not move directly from family bonds to marriage without an intervening period in which friendships with same-sex friends help ... to establish our [their] independent identities'.⁹ Same-sex friendship then proves a, if not the, crucial factor in the early psychological and emotional development of human beings, a development that does not – indeed, cannot in Adelman's view – reach its ultimate manifestation absent a heterosexual marital union. Along similar lines, Kahn writes that in 'Shakespeare's psychology, men first seek to mirror themselves in a homoerotic attachment ... and then to confirm themselves through difference, in a bond with the opposite sex – the marital bond'.¹⁰ The larger point of the insights Little, Adelman and Kahn offer is that, while homoerotic relationships like that which Antonio and Bassanio share with one another are acceptable, eventually they must be set aside in favour of taking a wife and having children in order for either man to reach his full potential. That means, as Little explains, that Antonio's entire world, complete and

fulfilling with same-sex intimate friendship – and love – at its centre, is falling apart around him because of what seems to be Bassanio's complete and unquestioning acceptance of the increasing demands placed on him by the rapid institutionalization of heteronormativity. Yet it warrants pointing out that in both Shakespeare's and Radford's *Merchants* Antonio does not give Bassanio up without the proverbial fight. Indeed, it is arguable whether or not Antonio really lets Bassanio go entirely by the time the last line of Shakespeare's play is uttered and the end credits of Radford's film roll.

Antonio's two business acquaintances speculate that the merchant's sadness is caused by the uncertain status of his various commercial ventures, all of which are dependent on trading ships still at sea and, thus, are subject to the whims of nature and fate. While Salerio and Solanio are discussing this possibility they are oblivious to the fact that Antonio ignores them and stops pacing long enough to look through the large multi-paned windows of the house. Doing so, he spies a gondola with three young men plus the pilot in it making its way through the canal outside. Glancing back at Salerio and Solanio, Antonio shakes his head and says, 'Believe me, no', and thus denies that his cares have anything to do with his ventures in trade (1.1.40). Undeterred, Solanio suggests with undisguised mirth that Antonio is in love and then both he and Salerio erupt into raucous laughter over such a prospect. A now obviously irritated Antonio's response to his friends' intimation is a vehement, 'Fie, fie, fie' (1.1.46). However, this retort comes perhaps a little too quickly from Antonio, indicating that Salerio and Solanio may be closer to the truth with their supposition than Antonio wants to admit, at least not to them. The question becomes then, with whom is Antonio in love? Radford soon makes it clear that it is Bassanio whom Antonio loves. In fact, immediately after denying being in love with anyone, Antonio turns to look out through the glass again only to fix his gaze on the young and dashing Bassanio who, at that moment, happens to be standing in the lead position with his friends Graziano (Kris

Marshall) and Lorenzo (Charlie Cox) in the gondola that is approaching Antonio's residence. Given the cross-cutting shots of the two characters in this part of the film, it is quite obvious that Antonio only has eyes for Bassanio.

Though certainly a logical cinematic move given both the text and the subtext of Shakespeare's *Merchant*, Laury Magnus considers this part of the scene to be the result of what she terms a questionable 'visual oversimplification' on the part of director Radford.¹¹ For her, the manner in which the film presents Antonio's 'glimpse from the casement window of his beloved Bassanio' reveals one of the play's key mysteries – the nature of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio – too early in the film because it explicitly links Antonio's 'sadness and its most likely cause; we see it emanating from what his eyes have lit upon and cannot have', which is Bassanio.¹² It seems that Magnus would prefer audiences to be convinced that Antonio's sadness emanates from nothing more than the everyday travails of the 'Renaissance venture capitalist' she characterizes Antonio as being for a longer period of time than Radford allows in what she considers to be the director's overall 'dumbing down' of the original Shakespearean narrative logic.¹³ Partly because she provides no criteria for her assessment, of equal concern here is Magnus's insistence that Antonio 'cannot have' Bassanio in, it can be presumed, a romantic/sexual sense. This assertion seems to be infused with an all-too casual heteronormative certainty that overlooks historical evidence presented in the work of scholars like Sedgwick, Bray and others who have shown that same-sex male friendships like that represented by Antonio and Bassanio in *Merchant* could very easily involve general affection, intimacy and sexuality on the physical – as opposed to the merely platonic – levels. In addition, as will be explored below, Magnus's assertion elides consideration of the other, even more explicitly homoerotic, aspects in Radford's production that are key to a more complete interpretation of the director's overall representation of Antonio and Bassanio's relationship.

Surrounded as they are by attendants in the house after his arrival, Antonio leads Bassanio from the dining area and into his large bedroom filled with ornate furnishings where they can presumably have the privacy to speak candidly with one another. Each moves to opposite sides of the room of their own accord; an elaborately carved and dressed four-poster bed separates them. Situated as such, Antonio coaxes Bassanio to talk with the words, 'tell me now ... / That you today promised to tell me of' (1.1.119 and 121). At first Bassanio seems reluctant to reveal to Antonio whatever it is he has already agreed to divulge to the merchant prior to this meeting. Bassanio opens his mouth to speak, but no sound escapes from him. Restlessly he takes his gloves off and tosses them onto the bed, still without saying a word. Then Bassanio gives Antonio a brief, rather impish smile. Before long though, he spreads his arms out with his palms up in a gesture of surrender and begins to confess: 'Tis not unknown to you, Antonio, / How much I have disabled mine estate' (1.1.122–3). He goes on to say that his only concern at the moment is 'to come fairly off from the great debts / Wherein my time, something too prodigal, / Hath left me gaged' (1.1.128–30). Bassanio has, as he makes plain to Antonio, spent the bulk of his money and is trying to figure out how he can pay back his obligations to his creditors.

Significantly, while beginning to unburden himself to Antonio, Bassanio removes his cape, tosses it aside, then lies down and stretches his legs out along the length of Antonio's bed as if the bed belongs to him too, and that he has every right to make himself comfortable in it. Antonio, meanwhile, raises no objections whatsoever to Bassanio being in his bed. It is almost as if Bassanio's presence there is a common enough occurrence that it warrants no special comment from either of them. Setting aside the fact that Shakespeare's playtexts are notorious for their lack of stage directions, it must not be overlooked that Radford places this important scene in, specifically, Antonio's bedroom. This is a location that is not indicated in Shakespeare's words that form the conversation

that Antonio and Bassanio have in these moments in the film, so it can only be a deliberate choice on the part of the director. Regardless, the bedroom setting suggests the physically and emotionally intimate nature of the homoerotic relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. Bedrooms have, after all, long been understood as places where couples retire to in order to have the privacy in which to, among other things of course, engage in sexual congress with one another.¹⁴ Just because they are two men does not mean that Antonio and Bassanio would never do the same as their heterosexual counterparts. Indeed, erotic encounters in Antonio's bedroom are very nearly a surety for them given the love, intimacy and desire that they have for each other and that is evidenced by them in their words and actions in this lengthy scene alone.

Antonio smiles at Bassanio with knowing affection when Bassanio continues to castigate himself for the spendthrift ways that have put him in serious financial difficulty. He then tells Antonio, using words that only call specific attention to the depth of the intimacy they share:

... To you, Antonio,
I owe the most in money and love,
And from your love I have a warranty
To unburden all my plots and purposes
How to get clear of all the debts I owe. (1.1.130–4)

Following such a preamble Antonio calmly says, 'I pray you, good Bassanio, let me know it' (1.1.135), meaning he wants to know how Bassanio intends to achieve solvency. Having said this Antonio walks to the head of his bed, fiddles for a moment or two with the door of a tall cabinet situated next to it, turns to Bassanio and adds, '... if it stand as you yourself still do,' then he pauses, reaches out and tenderly cups Bassanio's chin in the palm of his hand before continuing, 'Within the eye of honour, be assured / My purse, my person, my extremest means / Lie all unlocked to your occasions' (1.1.136–9). From Antonio's perspective it seems that Bassanio has not shamed

himself in the least because of his carelessness with money. In fact, Antonio may well enjoy Bassanio's dependence on him. The larger point in any case is that Antonio remains supportive of Bassanio regardless. But it warrants noting too that Antonio's response to Bassanio and the predicament Bassanio has managed to get himself into goes beyond casual acceptance of this reality. Antonio is willing to offer Bassanio all the wealth he has access to via his own assets or his credit, his non-material assistance if it is required, and, above all, his very *self* so that Bassanio can put himself into a better position in life. Borrowing an apropos phrase from elsewhere within both Shakespeare's and Radford's *Merchants*, Antonio is prepared to 'give and hazard all he hath' for Bassanio (2.7.9). Even so, this is a significant commitment for Antonio to make to Bassanio, particularly if their relationship is only a platonic one. If, however, their relationship is a romantic and an intimate one, if they are, indeed, lovers, then what Antonio is willing to sacrifice for Bassanio makes rather more sense.

Encouraged by Antonio's response so far, Bassanio rises to his knees in the(ir) bed and begins to tell Antonio about the rich heiress, Portia. Antonio peers up at and intently watches Bassanio as he speaks. After mentioning the array of suitors who have already travelled to Belmont in order to court Portia, and those who are sure to do so in the future, all of whom he could never hope to compete with given his squandered fortune, Bassanio declares: 'O my Antonio, had I but means / To hold a rival place with one of them, / ... / That I should questionless be fortunate' (1.1.173-4 and 176). The first three words of this pronouncement, 'O my Antonio,' deserve comment since by using them Bassanio lets it be known that, in some vital, tangible way, Antonio belongs to him and him alone. The strong note of possession in this phrase is unmistakable. Furthermore, Antonio registers no problem with being so claimed by Bassanio; he seems, in fact, totally content to be Bassanio's Antonio.

Furthermore, Antonio does not seem to be in the least perturbed or jealous about Bassanio's sudden newfound

interest in Portia. Antonio takes this development in stride and without any undo angst. Seymour Kleinberg offers pertinent insight here with his explanation that during the early modern period all 'upper-class men married. Their duties to property, propriety and posterity demanded an heir. After that, their romantic predilections were less important socially as long as they were reasonably discreet'.¹⁵ There can be no question that Antonio understands the pragmatics of these circumstances and, since Bassanio's marriage to a woman does not necessarily mean that Bassanio will renounce Antonio and their relationship once he has met, or while he is in the process of meeting, his marital, familial and societal obligations, Antonio has no reason to feel threatened. He and Bassanio remain, after all, part of a staunchly homosocial world in which bonds between men are paramount. Thus Little's assertion that Antonio is mourning the impending loss of Bassanio comes into question. Another equally valid possibility is that Antonio's sadness and melancholy stem not from the fact that he is going to lose Bassanio, but rather from the fact that he has been unable to figure out a way to help Bassanio secure a stable future for himself economically and otherwise. Being a Venetian merchant of some repute and success, it is conceivable that Antonio's failure to accomplish such a task on behalf of the man he loves is actually what proves deeply troubling to him on both emotional (apparent in his sadness/melancholy) and physical (apparent in his weariness) levels. It may well be, then, a marked concern over his inability to be innovative rather than his fear of loss that fuels Antonio's profound concern for Bassanio.

With this possibility in play it is only a small wonder that Antonio jumps at the chance to provide Bassanio with the funding he needs in order to go to Belmont to woo Portia despite the considerable personal risk he incurs by putting himself in Shylock's debt. If Antonio was as afraid of losing Bassanio as so many critics believe him to be, it seems that he would do everything in his power to prevent Bassanio from leaving Venice and going to Portia; instead, he does the exact

opposite. Indeed, Antonio starts to consider in earnest what options are available to him as far as how he may best help Bassanio and, in so doing, to keep Bassanio as close to him as possible, at least emotionally if not physically. He swallows deeply before saying with more than a hint of regret in his voice, 'Thou knowst that all my fortunes are at sea'; then he swings his legs over the edge of the bed, stands and slowly begins to walk to the other side of the room (1.1.177). While he is doing so he adds more detail to his initial statement: 'Neither have I money, nor commodity / To raise a present sum' (1.1.178–9). Hearing this, Bassanio, still in Antonio's (and, arguably, his) bed, looks both guilty and dejected at the same time – guilty for having brought up the subject of his interest in pursuing Portia while being unable to sustain such an enterprise by his own means, thus placing Antonio into a difficult position, and dejected because Antonio, Bassanio's last resort, cannot help him on account of Antonio's own trading ventures. But then Antonio, while writing a brief communication of some kind on a piece of parchment, unexpectedly gives Bassanio new hope when he tells him to go out and 'Try what my credit can in Venice do; / That shall be racked even to the uttermost / To furnish thee to Belmont to fair Portia' (1.1.180–2). Given Antonio's current financial situation, the fact that he is willing to go into a significant amount of debt in order to assist Bassanio in Bassanio's hour of need is extraordinary, but only if Antonio and Bassanio's relationship is purely platonic. Few would be comfortable risking so much, particularly when money is involved, for a mere friend. A lover, however, might well do for his beloved what Antonio decides to do for Bassanio in this scene.

Bassanio is completely taken aback by Antonio's decision to help him. He walks open-mouthed from Antonio's bed to stand before Antonio. Without saying a word Bassanio grabs Antonio's right hand, lifts it to his mouth and kisses it with his lips. Bassanio then places his own right hand on Antonio's bearded face so that Antonio's chin lies between Bassanio's thumb and forefinger, while his other fingers rest

on the better part of Antonio's left cheek. Bassanio looks into Antonio's eyes and then proceeds to lean toward the other man; Bassanio is soon kissing Antonio full on the lips. As the kiss occurs, the eyes of both men close while each enjoys the pleasure of their mouths coming together (see Figure 16). Magnus complains that Bassanio bestows the kiss 'somewhat too knowingly upon Antonio.'¹⁶ Perhaps, but, since it was Bassanio who spontaneously initiated the contact, it is clear that he wanted to kiss Antonio and wanted Antonio to kiss him in return. Antonio, furthermore, does not pull away from Bassanio; he appears to welcome Bassanio's kiss. What makes this moment so intriguing in the present context is that, in the early twenty-first century West, at least, men do not normally go around kissing members of their own gender on the lips in the way that Bassanio kisses Antonio here unless such men are capable of and interested in engaging in relationships with other men that transcend mere friendship to encompass the romantic, the erotic and the sexual. In Radford's *Merchant* both Antonio and Bassanio fall into this latter category as evidenced by the palpable display of intimacy and affection this kiss represents. Given the homophobia – the irrational fear and hatred of homosexuals and the behaviours in which

FIGURE 16 Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes) kissing Antonio (Jeremy Irons) in Antonio's bedroom in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, dir. Michael Radford, 2004, DVD screen capture.

their sexuality enables them to engage – that is such a pervasive aspect of society today, men who kiss other men like Bassanio kisses Antonio risk being branded as deviants, with all the negativity that term implies, from the expected heterosexual norm. However, as the work of Bray in particular shows, such physicality between two male friends like Antonio and Bassanio was not only socially acceptable, but also strongly encouraged by Elizabethan and Jacobean culture at large. Indeed, on this point, Bray writes, '[w]hen two men kissed or embraced, the gesture had the same meaning' as that indicated by their sleeping together; being 'someone's "bedfellow" suggested that one had influence' over another.¹⁷ There can be no question but that Antonio has such emotional and romantic influence over Bassanio and vice versa.

Moving briefly to Act 2, Scene 8 of Shakespeare's *Merchant*, Salerio reports to Solanio on Bassanio's departure from Venice for Belmont and fair Portia. Radford, however, shows audiences this leave-taking rather than providing the information secondhand. The scene begins with Bassanio reaching out to embrace Antonio while a heavy rain falls and lightning flashes. After Bassanio jumps aboard his ship Antonio tells him: 'Be merry, and employ your chiefest thoughts / To courtship and such fair displays [ostents] of love / As shall conveniently become you there' (2.8.43–5). Upon receiving such counsel Bassanio blows Antonio a kiss from the boat as it starts to pull away from the dock. Antonio, in turn, 'catches' Bassanio's kiss between his clasped hands and then presses them against his lips (see Figure 17). He closes his eyes tight as if savouring the kiss, opens them again and then raises one hand in farewell to Bassanio as the multi-manned oared craft carrying him pulls away and into the ever-flowing canals of mighty Venice. Once again, no stage directions in Shakespeare's dramatic text call for the exchange of air-kisses on the part of Antonio and Bassanio. Yet, without question, this scene, in all of its particulars, fits perfectly within the context of Radford's cinematic text. It serves, in fact, as nothing less than a pointed reminder of the queer homoerotic nature of Antonio and

FIGURE 17 Antonio (Jeremy Irons) 'catching' Bassanio's (Joseph Fiennes) kiss and holding it to his lips in William Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, dir. Michael Radford, 2004, DVD screen capture.

Bassanio's relationship, even as Bassanio heads off to claim a rich and beautiful heiress for himself in Belmont.

Considering the specific male homoerotic content in the scenes discussed above, Irons' comments on how he as an actor approached the role of Antonio in Radford's *Merchant* are surprising. In '*The Merchant of Venice*: Shakespeare through the Lens,' one of the special features on the DVD version of the cinematic text, Irons states, '[h]e [Antonio] finds himself very happy in the company of young men ... ah, particularly one young man [Bassanio], who is sort of everything he'd like to be'. Not long thereafter Irons insists: 'I didn't play Antonio gay'. Rather, he portrayed Antonio as only a very great friend of Bassanio's – nothing more, nothing less.¹⁸ Irons has something of a reputation for making controversial statements like this. Even so, whether or not Antonio envies Bassanio in the way Irons claims he does is debatable. It is a point of view that seems too dangerously close to the extant

stereotypes about homosexual males being forever unhappy simply because they are not straight and because they are always attracted to often younger men who are unable to respond in kind. Arguably, Antonio wants to be together with Bassanio as a romantic couple is together; he also does not emulate Bassanio out of any kind of jealousy. More importantly, Irons' words belie the images – images that include Antonio kissing and fondling Bassanio, as well as images of Antonio clearly feeling pain and happiness depending on whether or not he is in Bassanio's presence – of the Antonio/Bassanio relationship that made their way into Radford's *Merchant*. These images make it seem that Irons did, in fact, 'play Antonio gay' and they do so in part because of the proscriptions of heteronormativity that attempt, without ever fully succeeding, to circumscribe (un)acceptable homosexual and homosocial behaviours – behaviours that have changed in terms of meaning, of signification, between the sixteenth and the twenty-first centuries. As, once again, Bray and others have made clear, during the early modern period it was perfectly acceptable for men to kiss one other, to hold hands and even to sleep together regardless of their sexual object choices and desires; but in the present, such behaviours are considered bisexual if not homosexual. A queer reading of Radford's *Merchant* must therefore register this interpretive tension.

But what of Bassanio's feelings towards Antonio? Even critics who are willing to grant that Antonio's interest in Bassanio crosses the line that is supposed to separate friendship from romantic affection and sexual desire make haste to assert that, because he marries Portia and therefore must love her, and her only, Bassanio is using Antonio merely for his own purposes and does not really reciprocate Antonio's romantic feelings. In other words, Bassanio does not love Antonio in the same way that Antonio loves Bassanio. However, taking into consideration the feelings Bassanio experiences on account of his love for Antonio – and how those feelings are represented in visual form in Radford's *Merchant* – calls such a hypothesis

into serious question. As the film begins Bassanio is frankly desirous that Antonio will consent to help him pursue Portia; this desire morphs into grave concern fuelled by guilt for Antonio when Antonio agrees to Shylock's pound-of-flesh proviso in order to guarantee his loan. 'You shall not seal to such a bond for me;' Bassanio exclaims, 'I'll rather dwell in my necessity' (1.3.150–1); but Antonio tells the younger man that there is nothing to be worried about since his ships, with all their valuable merchandise, will return to Venice long before the debt to Shylock comes due (1.3.153–5, 177). As such, Bassanio's concern turns into out-and-out horror when, in Belmont, Bassanio learns that all of Antonio's ships have miscarried and Antonio faces death because he cannot afford to make good on the loan from Shylock. With a deeply pained expression on his face Bassanio explains to Portia:

I have engaged myself to a dear friend,
 Engaged my friend to his mere enemy,
 To feed my means. Here is a letter, lady,
 The paper as the body of my friend,
 And every world in it a gaping wound
 Issuing life-blood. (3.2.260–5)

Bassanio's use of the term engaged in this passage proves intriguing. The word can, of course, refer to a bond – legal or otherwise – agreed to by two or more parties. It can also signify a betrothal in the marital sense. Invoking this meaning suggests that Bassanio is as betrothed to Antonio as he now is to Portia; in fact, he was betrothed to Antonio first. In addition, the letter from Antonio may as well be Antonio himself in spectral form. Nevertheless, in its paper form it is not unlike a marriage certificate that symbolizes as well as validates the relationship that exists between Antonio and Bassanio. It is not surprising then that all Bassanio wants to do is to staunch the flow of Antonio's blood.

Portia asks to hear what Antonio has written in his letter to Bassanio. Antonio's words are as poignant as they are

affecting, and Bassanio reads them out loud to Portia and to Graziano, Lorenzo, Jessica and Salerio with no hint of either reluctance or embarrassment. 'Sweet Bassanio', he begins:

my ships have all miscarried, my creditors grow cruel, my estate is very low, my bond to the Jew forfeit, and, since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure; if your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter. (3.2.314–20; italics in the original)

Though not erotic in an overtly sexual sense, Antonio's words are nevertheless intended to seduce Bassanio into leaving Belmont and Portia in order to return to Venice to be with Antonio during what may well be the latter's final hours on earth. Indeed, Antonio's emotional manipulation of Bassanio with his choice of words in this letter echoes the speaker's emotional manipulation of the young man in Sonnet 72, 'O, lest the world should task you to recite'. The third line of this poem presents the following entreaty: 'After my death (dear love) forget me quite'.¹⁹ Of course the last thing the speaker wants is to be forgotten by the young man, and by saying the exact opposite, remembrance on the young man's part is what the speaker hopes to effect. Antonio uses the same rhetorical tactic; if Bassanio's love for Antonio alone does not persuade him to come to Antonio's aid in Venice, may his written communication go unheeded. But, again, it is very apparent that the last thing Antonio wants is for Bassanio to leave Antonio to suffer his fate without him. From a visual as opposed to a textual perspective, it is just as crucial to understand here too that all throughout Bassanio's sombre, heartfelt recitation of Antonio's letter, it is never less than clear from the expression on his face that Bassanio feels responsible for the terrible predicament in which Antonio now finds himself. The strength of their relationship remains unbroken despite the physical distance

between them and the fact that Bassanio is now betrothed to Portia.

With a spirit of generosity that parallels Antonio's generosity to Bassanio earlier in Radford's cinematic narrative of *Merchant*, Portia outright tells Bassanio to, 'Dispatch all business and be gone' (3.2.321). Portia wants, as this instruction makes very clear, Bassanio to leave her and return to Venice with all due haste so that he can attempt to rescue his beloved Antonio from the unyielding Shylock. But then, interestingly enough, Portia makes Bassanio's departure from Belmont and herself dependent on his going to church with her at that very moment and becoming her husband, after which, she insists, he shall 'away to Venice to your friend, / For never shall you lie by Portia's side / With an unquiet soul' (3.2.302–5). In these lines Portia seems to understand that her own happiness rests in large part on Bassanio's peace of mind. And unless Bassanio does everything within his power to save Antonio from the fate to which Shylock intends to hold him, Bassanio will never be able to be truly close to Portia given his 'unquiet soul.' Furthermore, while Portia speaks Radford and his team supply her words with a corresponding set of complementary images. These include: Portia and Nerissa in full bridal dress walking down the aisle of a church side by side; a priest enfolding the joined hands of Portia and Bassanio within his own; Portia and Bassanio standing next to one another as they are joined in holy matrimony; and finally, Bassanio and Graziano waving goodbye to Portia and Nerissa while their boat moves off as it begins the journey to Venice. Of particular interest in this sequence of cross-cut scenes is the pained expression on Bassanio's face as he and Portia are being married to one another by the priest. Distracted, Bassanio does not seem to be in the moment of his marriage. Bassanio's thoughts are undoubtedly with Antonio rather than with Portia, suggesting that – and despite the fact that Portia has just become his wife – Antonio is, and perhaps will always be, more important to Bassanio. On the latter point Sinfield, drawing on the work of Bray, explains that even

though 'marriage was involved in alliances of property and influence, male friendship informed, through complex obligations, networks of extended family, companions, clients, suitors and those influential in high places'.²⁰ The effects of male friendship like that the characters of Antonio and Bassanio share, were, in other words, pervasive and more powerful than the marital bond between a man and a woman.

Antonio and Bassanio are obligated to one another through, among other things, Shylock's bond; arguably, they also form an extended familial unit; they are companions, clients and suitors to each other; in the respective social, cultural and economic arenas they inhabit they are highly influential. No wonder then that Bassanio is not focused on his marriage to Portia at this moment in Radford's *Merchant*. Indeed, Radford's cinematic treatment of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century English exaltation of male friendships like that between Antonio and Bassanio highlights the supremacy of such relationships in the intensely homosocial world of Elizabethan and Jacobean England. Through Antonio and Bassanio, both Shakespeare and Radford offer audiences a highly visceral dramatic representation of one way that the historical practice of homosocially inflected male friendship may have manifested itself in the early modern world. Antonio and Bassanio appear as concerned about each other as two very good friends – or lovers – would be; their relationship operates in a way that is completely understandable as opposed to a way that seems alien or abstract because, even 400 years later, men still act in a similar manner when it comes to other men. What makes their relationship (homo)erotic as opposed to merely homosocial is its intimacy, physicality and affective intensity – all of which, as evidenced in this chapter, Radford does not shy away from representing in his cinematic text.

In Venice itself, not long after his appearance in the crowded judicial chambers, Bassanio comes to Antonio's defence after Shylock tells the court that the reason for his prosecution of the bond involves no more than the 'lodged

hate' and 'certain loathing' he has for Antonio (4.1.59). In response to this declaration Bassanio tells Shylock, 'This is no answer, thou unfeeling man, / To excuse the current of thy cruelty!' (4.1.62–3). Bassanio then goes on to debate the moneylender on the concepts of love and hate and what each would or would not compel a rational man to do. Antonio, though obviously grateful for Bassanio's intervention, remains the epitome of fatalism; he tells Bassanio and the court as a whole not to bother arguing with Shylock. Antonio wants to bring this unpleasant matter to an end since the conclusion is foregone. To him there is no point in prolonging the inevitable. But Bassanio, determined to not give up on the fight for the man he loves, has a pair of men carry a large heavy chest into the centre of the chambers and place it on the floor directly in front of Shylock. 'For thy three thousand ducats', Bassanio spits at Shylock, 'here is six!' (4.1.83). The lid of the trunk is then thrown open, revealing an enormous pile of coins that causes one and all present for the trial to gasp audibly.

With the 6,000 ducats he is offering to give to Shylock on Antonio's behalf, Bassanio is also making it clear that, to him, Antonio is worth at least twice what Antonio originally secured for Bassanio on credit in the spirit of willingly sacrificing his purse, person and his most extreme means for Bassanio. Hence, in a very real sense, Bassanio's putting up the 6,000 ducats for Antonio proves that he, too, is just as willing to risk as much as Antonio was for him prior to Bassanio going off to Belmont. That being the case, the look of astonished anger on Bassanio's face when Shylock refuses to accept the money Bassanio has pledged to give him in order to settle Antonio's bond would whither any other character but Shylock to the bone. Yet Bassanio's protective instincts reach beyond the verbal when Shylock pulls out a long and lethal carving knife from its sheath after insisting that the Duke pronounce his judgement on the case at hand; Bassanio pushes, jostles, pleads and otherwise does everything he can to get past the court guards so that he can defend Antonio, but they do not let him pass.

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

Yes, here I tender it for him in court,
Yea, twice the sum. If that will not suffice,
I will be bound to pay it ten times o'er,
On forfeit of my hands, my head, my heart. (4.1.205–8)

Having made this pronouncement Bassanio finally breaks free of the court guards, races past Antonio, kneels before the Duke and implores him to 'do a great right' even if it means doing a 'little wrong,' by which he means that the Duke should deny Shylock the bloody judgement he is demanding in accord with the terms of the bond and thereby spare Antonio's life (4.1.212). Throughout Bassanio's impassioned entreaty Antonio is both astonished and grateful for the other man's efforts. Bassanio's plea furthermore serves to confirm yet again all that he will put at stake for Antonio; this includes not just 3,000, but the sum of 30,000 ducats and, complementing Antonio's earlier sacrifices for Bassanio, his hands, his head and his heart. It seems that the love Bassanio bears for Antonio knows no bounds as evidenced by these avowals. In fact, this entire episode can be understood as being an extended, thoroughly public declaration of Bassanio's love for Antonio.

When Balthazar/Portia asks if Antonio has anything to communicate before the court's judgement against him is carried out, a totally resigned Antonio answers with, 'But little. I am armed and well prepared' (4.1.260). Though he claims to have little to say, that little proves to be of great import in a queer context. First, Antonio requests that Bassanio give him his hand. Bassanio surges forward and holds out his hand to Antonio; Antonio grabs Bassanio's hand and kisses it as he shudders in fear. This is nothing less than an

intense physical expression of love for Bassanio on Antonio's part. Antonio slowly, almost reluctantly, pulls away from Bassanio's hand then looks up at Bassanio and tells him, 'fare you well', before burying his face in the crook of Bassanio's welcoming shoulder (4.1.261). After having composed himself Antonio continues with, 'Grieve not that I am fall'n to this for you', then adds:

Commend me to your honourable wife;
Tell her the process of Antonio's end,
Say how I loved you, speak me fair in death,
And, when the tale is told, bid her be judge
Whether Bassanio had not once a love.
Repent but you that you shall lose your friend
And he repents not that he pays your debt.
For if the Jew do cut but deep enough
I'll pay it instantly with all my heart. (4.1.262–77)

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

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

Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.

I would lose all, ay, sacrifice them all
 Here to this devil [Shylock], to deliver you. (4.1.278–83)

Again, just as Antonio was willing to give all for Bassanio, Bassanio is willing to give all for Antonio. Indeed, he would forego his wife and marriage, all of his monetary and material possessions *and* his very existence, if necessary, to spare Antonio from Shylock's vengeance. This seems like far too much for a mere friend to sacrifice for another; a lover, on the other hand, would likely sacrifice all this and more. And as Shylock is about to slice into Antonio's breast with his lethal carving knife, Bassanio holds Antonio's head in his hands in order to steady his beloved merchant. With this gesture it seems that Bassanio will see to it that Antonio is able to die within the space between Bassanio's arms – a place that he has likely inhabited many times before in other, happier circumstances – since Bassanio could not by the laws of Venice die in Antonio's stead.

Even Balthazar/Portia can see how much Bassanio and Antonio love each other as the two men exchange words and attempt to comfort one another given what is about to happen. Though Radford, making a more powerful impression with visuals than with words, cuts Balthazar/Portia's lines in which he/she insists in an aside that 'Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make the offer', referring to Bassanio's swearing to give up all for Antonio, the director has Balthazar/Portia drop her eyes to the ground upon hearing Bassanio's vow to Antonio (4.1.284–5). She cannot be unaware that Bassanio's love for Antonio is stronger than his love for her. Such knowledge may well provide her with the motivation she needs to allow, rather sadistically it seems, Antonio's life to hang in the balance until quite literally the very last possible second when she finally screams for Shylock to '[t]arry a little,' thus stopping the moneylender from slicing into Antonio's bosom and very likely killing him in the process (4.1.301). For characters and audiences alike the drama of these moments is beyond intense.

It is also threaded throughout with male homoeroticism. On screen, with Jeremy Irons and Joseph Fiennes bringing the roles of Antonio and Bassanio to vivid, emotionally-charged life, that male homoeroticism is visible – and knowable – in a way that is far more palpable than even Shakespeare's words alone could convey on the page.

III

Though a decidedly melancholy work, *Twelfth Night* is a bit lighter of a play in comparison to *The Merchant of Venice*. This may well be because of its focus on gender and class rather than usury and religion. In any case, Nunn points out in the 'Introduction'²¹ to his screenplay for *Twelfth Night* that both he and Shakespeare were concerned with the related problematics of (homo)eroticism and desire. On this subject the director elaborates with his own set of queries that informed the philosophy of his production: 'how are men in love different from women in love; what is attractive to men about the male in women; what is attractive to women about the female in men; is love between two people of the same gender of the same kind as between people of opposite gender?'²² Throughout most of the film, *Twelfth Night* answers the latter question posed here in the affirmative; same-sex love is equivalent to opposite-sex love. But as is the case with Radford's *Merchant*, it is not until the movie draws to a close that same-sex love is suddenly devalued in a way that ultimately proves disappointing, particularly for queer viewers and their many allies. Rather than Orsino and Cesario, here the analytical focus will be on Nunn's treatment of *Twelfth Night*'s other male couple, Antonio (Nicholas Farrell) and Sebastian (Stephen Mackintosh).

Considering Antonio and Sebastian in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* first requires a look at the prologue that serves as the opening scenes of the film.²³ In these the director dramatizes

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

The fun and games come to an abrupt end when, in the voiced-over words of the film's narrator (Ben Kingsley as Feste), the steamer, having strayed off its course because of a storm, runs into serious trouble when it hits 'upon submerged rocks'. Everyone is thrown into a state of panic; people are being wrenched about as if they were toys, tables and chairs are tipping over, terrified shrieks are heard as the vessel lists violently to and fro. After changing clothes and gathering what they can of their belongings the twins venture to the ship's main deck where, within moments, things go from

bad to worse. Viola is ripped out of her brother's grasp due to the violence of the wind and the rain swirling around them. Having lost hold of her, Sebastian screams in horror as his sister is tossed into the churning sea. He is momentarily stopped from throwing himself off the deck in order to go after Viola by none other than Antonio. But Antonio is only able to keep the younger man secure in his arms for a second or two before Sebastian hurls himself off the side of the ship so that he can try to save what turns out to be his only living family member. Antonio is next seen after having climbed onto the ship's rigging so that he has a better view to look at the roiling sea below. It is obvious that he is hoping against hope to catch a glimpse of the twins and, no doubt, of Sebastian in particular. This also makes it plain that Antonio already – even this early on in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* – has a significant emotional investment in Sebastian, one that would drive him to save the young man's life if he could even at great risk to his own. Furthermore, as the narrative of the homoerotic love these two men share continues to unfold, this motif of self-sacrifice on Antonio's part will be repeated in two other equally dramatic sets of circumstances.

Some forty minutes later in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* the audience learns that both Sebastian and Antonio survived the wreck of the steamer, the former because of the latter's determined efforts. The scene in which this information is revealed opens in an idyllic but unnamed location where, presumably, the two men have spent the better part of the previous three months while Sebastian recovered from the trauma he suffered in the disaster that as far as he knows claimed the life of the sister he tried to rescue. Sebastian is walking toward a quay at the mouth of a river where a group of men are busy building a ship. Hurrying after him Antonio asks, with distress evident in his voice, 'Will you stay no longer?', then he reaches out and grabs Sebastian by the arm, forcing the younger man to stop and face him (Nunn 37; Elam 2.1.1).²⁴ When he is certain that Sebastian is paying attention to him, Antonio pleads: 'Let me yet know of you whither you are bound' (Nunn 37; Elam

2.1.8–9). Pequigney seizes on these lines from Shakespeare's playtext, that Nunn uses without change, in order to argue that Antonio's 'openly amorous language habitual to him whenever he speaks to or about Sebastian – and rarely does his attention turn to anything else – is the foremost clue to the erotic nature of their friendship'.²⁵ As such it supplements the visual evidence of Antonio's desire for Sebastian – signified by Antonio's insistent attendance to Sebastian – that Nunn provides in both the prologue and this particular scene of his *Twelfth Night*. In addition, the way Nicholas Farrell plays him, Antonio's face is almost always a study in longing for Sebastian. Nevertheless, in response to Antonio's entreaty, Sebastian takes his black overcoat from him and says, 'No, sooth, sir,' then he turns his back on Antonio and starts to walk away from him (Nunn 37; Elam 2.1.10). But he only goes so far before practically collapsing in evident frustration or despair on a nearby bench.

Within a moment or two Sebastian turns to Antonio once again; Antonio looks at him with the deepest compassion. It is clear that all Antonio wants to do is to somehow make any and all of the pain Sebastian is feeling go away. For Sebastian, the time has come for him to confess the truth: 'You must know of me then, Antonio, my name is Sebastian. My father was that Sebastian of Messaline whom I know you have heard of' (Nunn 37; Elam 2.1.15–17). Antonio allows himself the briefest of smiles, indicating that he is indeed familiar with Sebastian's father, if only by report than by any other means. Sebastian continues, explaining that his parent 'left behind him myself and a sister, Viola, both born in an hour – would we had so ended! But you, sir, altered that; before you took me from the breach of the sea was my sister drowned' (Nunn 37–8; Elam 2.1.17–21). As he is speaking here, it is obvious that Sebastian is only just able to keep from bursting into tears because he loved his sister so deeply; he likely wishes that he, too, were dead so that he could be with her in the afterlife. The only thing an honestly affected Antonio can say at this point after hearing Sebastian's revelations is, 'Alas, the

day,' but then he sits down right next to the grieving young man (see Figure 18). In a trembling voice, Sebastian continues by describing his sister as a 'lady, sir, though it was said she much resembled me, was yet of many accounted beautiful' (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.23–4). Then, apparently worn out from mourning, Sebastian lets his tears burst forth while simultaneously burying his face in Antonio's chest. Antonio welcomes the chance to comfort Sebastian by wrapping his arms around the young man and holding him tightly.

Sebastian remains in Antonio's arms only until the sound of an approaching carriage being pulled by a team of horses is heard. After drying his eyes with his hands and steadying himself with a deep breath he leaves Antonio who, once again, hurries after him. As Sebastian strides toward the coach with grim determination he attempts to apologize to Antonio by tossing over his shoulder the following words: 'O good

FIGURE 18 A compassionate and adoring Antonio (Nicholas Farrell) attempting to comfort an extremely distraught Sebastian (Stephen Mackintosh) in *Twelfth Night*, dir. Trevor Nunn, 1996, DVD screen capture.

Antonio, forgive me your trouble' (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.31). Antonio will not accept being dismissed in such a way, and yet again grabs Sebastian by the arm and forces the younger man to turn around and face him. 'If you will not murder me for my love', he says, 'let me be your servant' (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.32–3). Here, Antonio longs to be Sebastian's servant in much the same way that Cesario sought out a similar position in the household of Duke Orsino. As Schalkwyk has pointed out, service in the context Antonio uses it here was a fact of life for many during the early modern period in England and it was something Shakespeare often used in his plays as a way of bringing his characters together and into dramatic situations involving courtship and romance. On these lines in *Twelfth Night* in particular he writes that Antonio's:

demand stems from the necessary mutuality that is entailed by the concepts of friendship and service. Sebastian's acknowledgement of Antonio as either friend or servant would necessarily create a mutual bond between them. If he cannot continue to be his friend, service will allow Antonio to prolong intimate contact with Sebastian, and perhaps even gain some affective hold on him.²⁶

There can be no disputing the fact that the dynamics Schalkwyk outlines in this passage in regards to Shakespeare's and Nunn's representation of the Antonio/Sebastian relationship are operative. Antonio does not wish to be parted from Sebastian regardless of the circumstances, even if that means placing himself in a subordinate position to the younger man. And it is more than likely that by so doing he does indeed hope to secure Sebastian's romantic affections. But his plea is, or so it seems, in vain, as Sebastian firmly, though not unkindly, tells Antonio: 'Desire it not. Fare ye well at once' (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.35–6). But after he has boarded the carriage and seated himself he looks down at Antonio, sighs and reveals, 'I am bound to the Count Orsino's court. Farewell' (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.38–9). At this point the only thing Antonio can

do is watch the coach as it takes Sebastian away from him. 'The gentleness of all the gods go with thee,' he says softly to himself, then adds, 'I have many enemies in Orsino's court, / Else would I very shortly see thee there –' (Nunn 38; Elam 2.1.40–2). Thus it appears that a hapless Antonio has been abandoned by his beloved Sebastian. Or does it?

Arguably, this is one instance where Nunn's screenplay of *Twelfth Night* does something of a disservice to those viewers who are familiar with Shakespeare's original. In the source text Antonio utters two additional lines that prove key to any queer study of the male homoerotic aspects of the relationship he has with Sebastian. Following the mention of his Illyrian enemies Antonio goes on to say: 'But come what may I adore thee so / That danger shall seem sport, and I will go' (Elam 2.1.43–4). There can be no mistaking that the words 'I adore thee so' attest to the fact that Antonio, in accord with the insights of Pequigney, desires if not outright loves Sebastian in a romantic and sexual sense by this point in their story proper (i.e. exclusive of Nunn's appended prologue). For audiences, the antidote to this elision lies in remembering that the Antonio who seems to give up here in Nunn's film is the same Antonio who dove into the roiling sea in order to save Sebastian's life despite the risks to his own person. This may alert them to the possibility that, regardless of what he says in this scene about having many enemies in Orsino's court, he will indeed pursue Sebastian. And it is, of course, to the director's credit that he trusts them to recall that information and to speculate on just such a scenario coming to pass. But the excision of the 'I adore thee so' phrase is troubling. Without it viewers of Nunn's production are given too little of an indication of the tenaciousness of the homoerotic nature of Antonio's interest in Sebastian. The filmmaker thus makes it far too easy for them to rest on the assumption that it is simply in most humans' nature to come to the aid of others when they are in danger regardless of where they may fall on the affective spectrum in terms of their love object desires. Put in slightly different terms, the absence of Antonio's 'I adore

thee so' threatens to render any hint of non-normative desire and sexuality where he and Sebastian are concerned almost unintelligible.

Further into Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, Sebastian, with a *Baedeker Guidebook to Illyria* in hand, a detail Rothwell approvingly describes as a nice 'touch of whimsy' on the filmmakers' part,²⁷ is seen making his way through the bustling streets of the market town that sits in the shadow of Duke Orsino's palatial residence. Within seconds it is made clear that Sebastian believes he is being followed and that he is trying to escape from his unknown pursuer. However, Sebastian fails to elude the man, who catches up with him rather quickly. The man happens to be dressed somewhat oddly in the comely garb of a Christian cleric, but as soon as he removes his hat and glasses, he reveals himself to Sebastian to be none other than his savior, Antonio. Indeed, Cynthia Lewis describes Antonio as the ultimate Christian priest: 'If any figure in *Twelfth Night* calls Christ to mind,' she writes, 'it is Antonio', whose role is to be a 'Christ-like giver of love' in the play.²⁸ It is interesting to consider that insofar as Antonio's having usurped the attire of a man of the cloth, Nunn's thinking was on the same wavelength as Lewis's. But it also demands arguing that Antonio's love for Sebastian is far more secular than religious. Indeed, he looks at Sebastian with a sheepish expression and confesses, 'I could not stay behind you', by which he means that he was unable to remain separated from Sebastian (Nunn 71; Elam 3.3.4). Though taken aback by the presence of someone he did not expect to see again so soon, Sebastian is nevertheless thrilled to see Antonio. In point of fact he exclaims, 'My kind Antonio,' then he flings himself into Antonio's arms (Nunn 71; Elam 3.3.13). Caught up in the moment Antonio squeezes his eyes shut and holds Sebastian tightly, indicating how profoundly satisfying being so intimate with Sebastian is for him. This is the reunion of friends ... and of lovers (see Figure 19).

When their hug reaches its end Antonio continues his explanation about why he came in pursuit of Sebastian: 'But

FIGURE 19 A thrilled Sebastian (Stephen Mackintosh) and an equally happy Antonio (Nicholas Farrell) reunited in Illyria in *Twelfth Night*, dir. Trevor Nunn, 1996, DVD screen capture.

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

I am not weary, and ’tis long to night.
 I pray you, let us satisfy our eyes
 With the memorials and the things of fame
 That do renown this city. (Nunn 71, 73; Elam 3.3.21–4)

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

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

I do not without danger walk these streets,
 Once in a seafight 'gainst Orsino's galleys
 I did some service – of such note indeed
 That were I ta'en here, it would scarce be answered. (Nunn
 73; Elam 3.3.25–8)

Awestruck by this revelation Sebastian responds with, 'Belike you slew a great number of his people?' (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.29). Indeed, this line registers the fact that Sebastian is wholly impressed by the notion that Antonio was valorous enough to take on a cadre of Orsino's troops; it seems like this is something he finds attractive about Antonio. Diverging somewhat from Shakespeare's text, Nunn allows Antonio to confirm Sebastian's supposition when he comments, 'For which, if I be lapsed in this place, / I shall pay dear', which causes Sebastian to become immediately concerned for Antonio's welfare: 'Do not then walk too open', he says

as yet another verbal indication that his feelings for Antonio are on a par with the older man's for him and encompass the homoerotic as well the homosocial (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.36–7). At the very least, if Sebastian did not admire and care for Antonio on some level, he would not be so quick to express his wonder at the nature of Antonio's exploits or his worry about Antonio's well-being.

In any case, being in something of a rush to conceal himself from the Illyrian authorities, Antonio goes on to tell Sebastian breathlessly that he shall find him 'at the Elephant,' then he hands the younger man a small black bag that is obviously filled with money (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.39). Understandably, Sebastian is confused about why Antonio has just given him his purse, so Antonio explains: 'Haply your eye shall light upon some toy / You have desired to purchase; and your store, I think, is not for idle markets, sir' (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.43–6).²⁹ Antonio starts to rush off, but stops himself long enough to reiterate excitedly to Sebastian, 'At th'Elephant;' in response Sebastian chuckles and says, 'I do remember' (Nunn 73; Elam 3.3.48). Then the two men part and go their separate ways. But viewers of Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, who, after all, lack the benefit of textual glosses, would do well to pause here and consider in more detail the implications of what they have just witnessed in this exchange between Sebastian and Antonio.

At first it might seem surprising that Antonio would simply hand over his purse containing any of what can be thought of in late twentieth and early twenty-first century colloquial terms as his 'hard-earned money.' But this is the same Antonio who risked his own life to save Sebastian in the shipwreck that brought them together and who has overseen the younger man's three month recovery from nearly drowning in the sea. This is also the same Antonio whose obvious desire for Sebastian extends beyond shared traumatic experience or homosocial camaraderie and into the realm of the affective, the romantic and the homoerotic. Pequigney makes the claim that Antonio does what he does here with his money 'with

the ulterior motive of pleasing if not purchasing the desired youth'.³⁰ Unfortunately, this assessment serves to perpetuate the tiresome notion that the only way an older (gay) man like Antonio can secure the affections of a younger (straight) man like Sebastian is to buy those affections, which does not paint either Antonio or Sebastian in the most flattering of lights. In fact, this rather cynical idea makes their relationship seem both predatory and mercenary when neither adjective seems to describe the truth. In keeping with his generous character, Antonio gives his purse to Sebastian for no other reason than so that the latter will have sufficient funds to purchase a luxury item if he happens to come across one that he fancies during his wanderings in Illyria. And Sebastian seems to accept it in kind.

A great deal more suggestiveness attends on the Elephant, the location Antonio instructs Sebastian to rendezvous with him at after he has completed his sightseeing tour of the Illyrian capital. Uninformed viewers of Nunn's *Twelfth Night* will undoubtedly be content with thinking of the Elephant as roughly equivalent to their contemporary ideas of what a hotel or a motel is: a place to rest for the night. However, citing an essay by Gustave Ungerer in a footnote to Shakespeare's reference to the Elephant and the London suburbs, Arden 3 editor Elam reveals that 'there was indeed an Elephant Inn on Bankside' during the early modern period 'which was in practice "an inn-cum brothel"'.³¹ In any study of the male homoerotics of *Twelfth Night*, textual or cinematic, this bit of information cannot be ignored. Yu Jin Ko considers the subject of the Elephant further than does Elam: 'It is not at all clear what kind of brothel the Oliphant [the Elephant] was, though it does seem clear, as Alan Bray has demonstrated, that Elizabethan London had its share of homosexual brothels'.³² The implications of this insight are unmistakable: the Elephant at which Antonio and Sebastian are going to meet could well be a place where sex between males was not only encouraged but actively sought out. Whether or not such liaisons were little more than financial transactions is, in this specific case

at least, beside the point. Antonio and Sebastian can certainly take a room at the Elephant if they wish without participating in its larger sexual economy. Doing so would, not incidentally, afford them the privacy in which to (re)consummate their relationship on a physical level without fear of interruption or censure. From this perspective, the fact that Sebastian does not outright refuse to meet Antonio at a place like the Elephant proves significant as yet one more indication that his desire for Antonio matches Antonio's desire for him.

In accord with Shakespeare's play, following their night at the Elephant, Antonio makes a dramatic reappearance in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* when he intervenes in the duel that the rascals Sir Toby Belch (Mel Smith) and Fabian (Peter Gunn) have engineered for their amusement between the foppish Sir Andrew Aguecheek (Richard E. Grant) and a clueless Cesario. Given that Cesario looks exactly like him, Antonio thinks he is entering into this manufactured fray in order to protect his beloved Sebastian. Seeing what is taking place between Sir Andrew and Cesario in one of the orchards on the estate of the Countess Olivia, a look of horror spreads across his face and from his perch on the top of an outer wall ringing the grounds he shouts to the utter surprise of one and all, 'Put up your sword' (Nunn 98; Elam 3.4.307). Then, grim-faced, Antonio leaps off the wall and down into the orchard, strides over to the person he is certain is Sebastian, takes Sebastian's sword, and forcefully moves the young man behind him so that he is the one facing Sir Andrew. In a flat, determined voice he says, 'If this young gentleman / Have done offence, I take the fault on me' (Nunn 98; Elam 3.4.307–8). When asked by Sir Toby to explain exactly who he is, Antonio, while making a pointed show of assuring himself that Sebastian's sword will work the way it is intended, tells the crafty man that he is someone 'that for his [Sebastian's] love dares yet do more / Than you have heard him brag to you he will' (Nunn 98; Elam 3.4.311–12). These are the words and actions of high romantic chivalry. Antonio may as well be the fantastical knight in shining armour and Sebastian his 'damsel' in distress. Hyperbole

aside, though, the Antonio defending Sebastian here is the very same Antonio who rescued Sebastian from the sea and followed him to Illyria at equally great peril to himself, both the actions of a man who loves another man so much that he would, quite literally, do anything for him, including die for him if necessary. Again, from a queer perspective, this qualifies as male homoeroticism at its most palpal.

No wonder then that Antonio's sense of betrayal is so intense when 'Sebastian' refuses to help him by returning his purse after he has been apprehended by Duke Orsino's militia and stands in desperate need of his money. 'Will you deny me now?', Antonio roars at the perplexed young man; then, in one swift movement, he pushes him away, causing the coins Cesario was attempting to give to Antonio to go flying every which way (Nunn 100; Elam 3.4.344). Sure that they have a situation on their hands, Orsino's men choose that moment to punch Antonio in the stomach and he doubles over in pain. After he recovers, he looks at 'Sebastian' with barely concealed contempt in his eyes. After saving his life, after coming to be with him and him only in a foreign land, after spending at least one night in which their passion for each other was likely given free reign, and after having placed himself into the middle of a duel not his own on behalf of 'Sebastian,' he is certainly justified in feeling as if he deserves better treatment from him.

Cesario, not surprisingly considering the circumstances, remains mystified by Antonio's behaviour while the soldiers and Sir Toby, Sir Andrew and Fabian could not care less about why Antonio is so upset with 'Sebastian.' When confronted later by Orsino, the count demands to know how Antonio came to be in the predicament in which he now finds himself: as a long sought after prisoner. Once again Antonio looks darkly at 'Sebastian' and claims in a voice tight with emotion, 'A witchcraft drew me hither. / That most ingrateful boy there by your side', then he erupts in total anger when he adds, 'For his sake / Faced the danger of this adverse town' (Nunn 114 and 115; Elam 5.1.78

and 80). For those familiar with Shakespeare's later play *Othello*, the word witchcraft might well resonate when they recall that, according to her incensed father, Brabantio, the only thing that could have made Desdemona fall in love with what she feared to look upon is Othello's spells and enchantments.³³ Othello insists however that stories about himself and his experiences were the only form of witchcraft he used on Desdemona.³⁴ On this point Antonio's feelings are akin to those of Brabantio; the only way he could have been fooled into believing, trusting and, ultimately, caring so deeply for someone as 'ugly' as Sebastian has turned out to be – despite his considerable physical beauty – is through some sort of witchcraft. From his point of view there can be no other explanation. And in the painful moments discussed here, the depth of Antonio's emotion at being so callously cast aside serve, if it is needed, as a final exclamation point in Nunn's *Twelfth Night* to the homoerotic nature of his desire and love for Sebastian.

IV

It is not an overstatement to assert that with *Twelfth Night* in particular, among all his plays, Shakespeare succeeds at blending the melancholic, the vicious, the mirthful and the joyful in a way that uncannily mirrors the human experience of life. So, it can be said, does Nunn in his cinematic adaptation of the play. As Rothwell notes at the conclusion of commentary on the film in relation to the original play, 'Shakespeare created a verbal structure that probes the sadness and sweetness in the mystery of life, and Nunn has gracefully and wittily put that daunting challenge into moving images.'³⁵ True enough; yet where Nunn errs, and Shakespeare does not, at least not in the same way or to the same extent, is at the end of his otherwise outstanding production. Coursen agrees with this assessment:

Where does this film not work? – at the end. But then it often does not work on stage either, where the ending can be crowded. It calls for exquisite blocking. Here, it could have been condensed, with film solving some of the traffic problems and giving us shorthand for some of the language.³⁶

For Coursen though, the reason Nunn's *Twelfth Night* does not succeed at the end is because it is unwieldy, featuring as it does too many characters, too much stage business and too much dialogue all crammed into a few minutes' time. But it is crucial to understand that what Coursen is commenting on here is the movie's denouement – which does follow Shakespeare's text quite closely – not what can be considered its actual finish. For reasons that are not explained in the published screenplay, Nunn includes a coda that serves as the true conclusion to his film, and it is this coda that is quite problematic, at least for queer audiences and their allies, considering all that precedes it.

In the *Twelfth Night* cinematic coda Nunn presents a collage of scenes immediately prior to the scrolling of the credits. Most prominent among these images are those that depict the double wedding celebration of the couples Sebastian and Olivia (Helena Bonham Carter) and Orsino (Toby Stephens) and Viola (Imogen Stubbs). At the same time, audiences are made privy to the silent departures of Feste (Ben Kingsley), Malvolio (Nigel Hawthorne), Sir Toby and Maria (Imelda Staunton) and, finally, Antonio, from the Countess Olivia's residence. When he comes into view Antonio appears utterly alone on the path leading from the estate. Given the evident fog and dampness it cannot but be a raw and inhospitable time of day. He pauses long enough to bundle himself further into his coat as a defence against the cold temperature. Thus fortified, Antonio trudges on his way without looking back at the house where, presumably, his beloved Sebastian remains with Olivia in wedded bliss. In its specificity, such a depiction of Antonio's fate comes across as the cinematic equivalent of

a slap-in-the-face directed toward Nunn's queer viewers. In the playtext of *Twelfth Night* there are no stage directions or verbal mentions of Antonio's departure from Olivia's domain. Magro and Douglas articulate the issues at stake in the close of Nunn's film as follows, 'it rehearses homosexual desire and then disavows it in order to postulate the naturalness and transparency of heterosexual relations'.³⁷ It also exposes the fact that 'it is heterosexuality that is the dependent concept, relying on homosexuality to provide it with its seeming authenticity'.³⁸ The rehearsal of the homosexual desire Magro and Douglas mention in this cogent statement of the problem at hand has, it is to be hoped, been explored as fully as possible in this chapter. As was detailed above, Antonio's interest in, and later devotion to, Sebastian, is a function of his requited love for the young man. So when Nunn shows Antonio stalking away – alone – from Olivia's estate into the cold gray twilight, queer viewers of the movie and their allies have every right to feel betrayed and with a distinct longing for what could have – indeed, should have, been.

Following Pequigney's only partially tongue-in-cheek query about a *ménage à trois* between Antonio, Sebastian and Olivia resulting from the latter's marital union near the end of *Twelfth Night*, Alan Sinfield comments that:

Sebastian's marriage to a stranger heiress need not significantly affect Antonio's relationship with him ... They might all live together in Olivia's house ... So Antonio need not appear at the end of *Twelfth Night* as the defeated and melancholy outsider that critics [and Nunn] have supposed; a director, reading only partly against the grain, might show him delighted with his boyfriend's lucky break.³⁹

While it is a far-fetched idea that the Antonio, Sebastian and Olivia triad would set up permanent housekeeping in the manner Pequigney and Sinfield put forth, Sebastian, though married, was, as Kleinberg revealed, free to do as he pleased given his position as, now, a gentleman of the nobility. He

could in other words elect to prolong his relationship with Antonio indefinitely and without necessarily risking his vows as long as he made at least some effort to keep up normative appearances. But Sinfield is right to point out that there is no reason whatsoever why Antonio would not be happy that Sebastian had managed to secure a living for himself that could when all is said and done benefit both of them in ways neither imagined before. With his penchant for interpolation, as evidenced by the thoroughly imagined prologue, it seems that Nunn could have easily included a scene or a montage at the end of his *Twelfth Night* that shows Antonio and Sebastian embracing as the former prepares to depart, but agreeing to meet in Messaline, perhaps, where they can once again enjoy all of the emotional, affective and erotic pleasures that two men can share with each other if they are so inclined. Still, his queer audiences and their allies will always have the comfort of screening *Twelfth Night* in the way that Sinfield advocates for, 'against the grain, queering the text', and thus in a way that makes perfect sense to them from their unique perspective.

Similarly, with the amount of sustained and sympathetic attention Radford devotes to the male homoerotic subtext that is more than evident in Shakespeare's *Merchant*, it proves more than a little disappointing that the director chooses to finish Antonio and Bassanio's story in a pointedly heteronormative manner. Indeed, Radford's *Merchant* concludes in total, seemingly unquestioned, accord with Bruce Smith's observation that 'all of Shakespeare's comedies and tragicomedies end with male friendship yielding place to heterosexual love'.⁴⁰ This can be seen in that, not long before the closing credits of the film begin to scroll, Portia turns back toward Bassanio before walking out of the room at her estate in Belmont and says in a voice that can only be described as determinedly, even triumphantly, seductive:

It is almost morning,
And yet I am sure you are not satisfied

Of these events in full. Let us go in;

[...]

And I [we] will answer all things faithfully. (5.1.293–7)

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

Moments later, the last time Antonio is seen in the film, he is obviously alone and unsure of what to do with himself now that Bassanio and Portia and Graziano and Nerissa, the male and female couples, have gone off to consummate their marriages. He paces to and fro like he did when he was so consumed by sadness in his palazzo back in Venice prior to Bassanio’s arrival. This demonstrates in cinematic form how, as Little describes it, ‘Shakespeare’s romantic comedies end not only with the reifying and presumed stability of heterosexuality but with Shakespeare’s audience being coerced into witnessing the end of queer desire and queer marriage’.⁴¹ In all fairness, however, it must be remembered that Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, as has been pointed out many times before elsewhere, does not provide any definitive insight about what exactly happens to Antonio by the time the curtain closes or, in this case, as the screen fades to black. Even so, Radford’s choice to depict Antonio in the manner he does serves to perpetuate only negative stereotypes about gay men who are, in this conception, always assumed to be doomed to a life of loneliness and despair because the men they choose to love cannot or will not return that love in either kind or quality.

Given that Radford shares Nunn’s talent for creating scenes that do not technically exist in Shakespeare’s *Merchant*, as well as his facility with depicting stage directions and textual cues in visual form that make logical sense in tandem with the

context – and more particularly, the male homoerotic context – of the original dramatic text, such a pessimistic end to Antonio and Bassanio's relationship seems rather odd. Further scrutiny of Shakespeare's playtext makes it clear that Antonio, and therefore the male homoerotic itself, remain very much a part of its concluding fabric. There is no word from Bassanio, or Portia for that matter, of exiling Antonio from their home in Belmont. It is also mentioned, by Bassanio himself no less, that he foresees absenting himself from Portia at various times in the future. There is more than sufficient reason to suspect that Bassanio will be in Venice, in the arms and the bed of his beloved Antonio. Would that Radford had created a scene or even a montage for the closing of his version of *Merchant* that capitalized on these potentialities and was as attentive to the male homoerotics in these moments as he was in the balance of his otherwise excellent cinematic production of the play. And once again, a queer experience of the film depends on viewers' ability to screen this *Merchant* by watching it 'against the grain' and thereby 'queering the text' to their satisfaction rather than passively accepting the heteronormative status quo it presents.