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CONCLUSION: QUEERING THE SHAKESPEARE FILM IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In order to draw conclusions about queering the Shakespeare film during the period covered in this book, which ranges from 1935 and Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to 2011 and Alan Brown's *Private Romeo*, it proves helpful to begin by calling to mind the idea of cinema being a capitalistic industry that produced entertainment for the masses from the moment of its inception. Although based on the specifics (i.e. plots, characters, themes, directors, actors, producers, musicians, set designers, cinematographers and so on) analysed in the myriad studies of film available in the archive it may seem otherwise, filmmakers did not have free reign to present any kind of content they wished in their movies. Nevertheless, Gregory D. Black points out that 'most film history is written as if the code and the PCA did not exist',¹ fostering the idea that anything was possible in the realm of cinematic representation. That, however, was not the case in the beginning, nor is it the case now in the early twenty-first century. The difference between the two eras can be, at least in part, understood in relation to the presence and

then the absence of the PCA and its code detailing what was acceptable and what was not acceptable for film as a public medium.

PCA is an acronym for the Production Code Administration, a no-longer-extant semi-autonomous agency within the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) – later to become the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) – trade association that was, as of 1930, empowered to regulate the content of any film made and/or screened in the United States. The code Black refers to is known as the Motion Picture Production Code, or, more colloquially, as the Hays Code, so named after one of the early heads of the PCA, William Harrison Hays. Once in place, studios from MGM to Warner Brothers had to ensure that every one of their productions conformed to the dictates of the Hays Code from 1930 until the end of the 1960s. The production code, and all those who enforced it either tacitly or explicitly, embodied the overarching conviction – written into the preamble of the code itself – that the ‘MORAL IMPORTANCE of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women ... it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours; and ultimately touches the whole of their lives. A man may be judged by his standard of entertainment as easily as by the standard of his work.’² The code’s particular applications addressed such items as crimes against the law, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, costume, dances, religion, locations, national feelings, titles, repellant subjects and, of course, sex. The last category features two proscriptions that are of interest here. The first of these states that the ‘sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing’, while the second insists that ‘[s]ex *perversion* or any inference to it is forbidden’ in film.³ There is no doubt that homosexuality qualified as one type of ‘sex perversion’, or as a specific kind of ‘low form of sex relationship’, that the Hays Code prohibited depictions of in the cinema for four decades.

In a number of respects the Hays Code betrays a rather Platonic ethos. Just like for Plato poetry had to contribute to the benefit of the state and the moral and ethical well-being of its citizens or it risked being banished from the ideal republic, film, at least during the reign of the production code in the United States, had to engender tangible, wholly positive effects as regards the presumed morals and ethics of its viewers. If film failed to uphold these lofty ideals, it too risked censorship at the hands of those who had deemed themselves the highest authorities on such matters – conservative factions of the American government that were, in turn, backed by vocal higher-ups in the Catholic Church, both of which succeeded in forcing Hollywood into policing itself and its productions under the auspices of the PCA.

The historical circumstances detailed above are those from which Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsummer* (1935) and George Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* (1936) emerged. Given the censoriousness of this period in film history, especially where matters of (homo)sexuality were concerned, it is unsurprising that neither production comes across as blatantly queer, especially if the concept of queerness is limited to only a well-defined and unambiguously recognizable set of (homo)sexual acts. But as was demonstrated in Chapter 1 and the first part of Chapter 2 of this study, under the pressure of critical interpretation queerness reveals itself in Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsummer* through misogyny, gender trouble, bigamy, implied incest and bestiality and male effeminacy, and in Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* through, among other things, the older actors and actresses cast in the key roles of Romeo, Juliet, Mercutio, Tybalt and Benvolio, and its gay director (Cukor), writer (Shakespeare), set designer (Oliver Messel) and music composer (Tchaikovsky), all of whom can be said to have endowed the film with a latent queer spirit that only wanted for the kind of sensitive, informed and enlightening reading done by Richard Burt nearly two decades ago and also attempted here, hopefully with similar success.

Though it grew out of the multiple countercultural forces at work in the United States by the mid-twentieth century, the Sexual Revolution can be said to have begun in earnest when the pill was approved by the Food and Drug Administration as a safe and effective contraceptive in 1960. It was in that moment, in fact, when sexual permissiveness and experimentation – for everyone, not just straight, white males – became generally acceptable. Indeed, at this point in time sexuality was, at least ostensibly, no longer in thrall to ignorance, fear, religion, repression, the demands of heteronormativity or patriarchal control. By 1968, when Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* made its debut to near universal acclaim, the Sexual Revolution was well underway. It is, quite simply, impossible to imagine a film like Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* even being produced much less screened to such rousing success prior to the wholesale change in thinking about sexual matters the 1960s brought about in a huge swath of the world. As was detailed in the second part of Chapter 2, Zeffirelli's film incorporated the queer via, in particular, the male homoerotic. Indeed, never before in Shakespearean cinema had a director lavished such specific attention on the male form, creating what Renata Adler described as 'the softly homosexual cast over the film'. William Van Watson, on the other hand, went so far as to claim that Zeffirelli used a 'homosexual camera' in his filming of *Romeo and Juliet*. Arguably, that homosexual camera is most apparent in the aubade scene in which the nude Leonard Whiting's Romeo is placed in the *to be looked at* position – a position that, according to Laura Mulvey and others, is most often occupied by women in film instead of men, making Zeffirelli's treatment of Romeo and Juliet's 'morning after' effectively queer – for all of the film's viewers to appreciate, female and male alike, no matter where they fall on the sexual identity spectrum.

The birth of the modern gay rights movement would follow the premiere of Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* by a little more than seven months when the Stonewall Riots erupted on the streets of New York City in June 1969. Since then, GLBTQQIA (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender/sexual,

queer, questioning, intersex, and asexual) people have fought for (and won more than a measure of) acceptance, tolerance and, perhaps above all, the freedom to live their lives with the kind of understanding, dignity and respect that all human beings deserve. Though in mainstream Shakespearean film the struggles of the gay rights movement have not yet been depicted, some of the results of those struggles have appeared on screen. These effects are perhaps most prominent in the discussions 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*, and male homoeroticism in Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* and Nunn's *Twelfth Night* found in Chapters 3 and 4. The fact that gender is a problem because, as Judith Butler revealed at the very beginning of the 1990s, it is always a performance of being and appearing in the world rather than a natural given based on one's biological sex, is brought to life in the Shakespeare films of Nunn, Luhrmann and Hoffman through their representations of, respectively, a woman (Viola) dressed up as a male youth (Cesario) that another man (Orsino) and woman (Olivia) fall in love with; a drag queen Mercutio besotted with a Romeo who is equally besotted with Juliet rather than his friend; and a Francis Flute who refuses to stay in character as Thisbe as she/he laments the death of her/his beloved Pyramus. Nunn and Radford, meanwhile, treat the fact that the two Antonios in *Twelfth Night* and *Merchant* are in love with their friends Sebastian and Bassanio as a matter of course. Radford even goes so far as to show *Merchant's* Bassanio kissing Antonio who, significantly, returns the kiss with equal feeling. Each of these representations, redolent with gender trouble and male homoeroticism as they are, may be considered queer because they can, as is done in this study, be understood as discrete critiques of proscriptive heteronormativity.

Of course, as was made clear in the latter part of Chapter 4, both Nunn and Radford end their films of *Twelfth Night* and *Merchant* on an insistently heteronormative note. Each

makes it a point to include scenes that show both of the Antonios being left behind as their friends/lovers, Sebastian and Bassanio respectively, enthusiastically embrace married life with their spouses Olivia and Portia. It seems that with this representational strategy, Nunn and Radford are trying to overcompensate for the screen time they gave to depicting the male homoeroticism of the relationships between Antonio and Sebastian and Antonio and Bassanio. However, the fact that Shakespeare's original playtexts of *Twelfth Night* or *Merchant* conclude with neither of the two Antonios being banished from Illyria or Belmont suggests the very real possibility that the marriages of Sebastian and Bassanio do not automatically preclude the continuation of the relationships they have with their respective friends/lovers. That makes the directorial choices of Nunn and Radford as regards the ends of their films all the more questionable from a queer perspective. It warrants pointing out too that, historically speaking, it would be more accurate for the relationships between Antonio and Sebastian and Antonio and Bassanio to remain in place following the marriages of the two Antonios given the staunchly male homosocial ethos that held sway in the early modern world.

Perhaps because Iago is and always has been such a queer character, *Othello* is and always has been a queer play. That queerness is evident in both of the twentieth-century film productions of *Othello* explored in Chapter 5. In contrast to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's assertion that Iago chooses to act the way that he does in the aftermath of Othello's promoting Cassio his lieutenant out of a 'motiveless malignancy', the productions of Welles and Parker – in tandem with Shakespeare's original playtext – make it clear that Iago's motivation is simply a powerful sense of betrayal. They also make it equally clear that Iago's feelings for Othello cross the line that separates the homosocial from the homoerotic and the homosexual; his feelings for the general are therefore queer. That queerness, furthermore, is not dependent on nor is it a result of Iago's intrinsic evil. As Shakespeare and, in turn, Welles and Parker present the character, Iago is evil regardless

of whether or not his sexual inclinations tend toward the homo-, the hetero- or the bisexual. Nevertheless, what adds to the disquieting nature of *Othello* in its dramatic and cinematic forms is the fact that, for too long, queerness was automatically equated with evil. Arguably, the character of Iago – on the stage and on the screen – renders such a judgement invalid, at least as far as *Othello* is concerned, and that is a possibility that only queer theory as applied to Shakespeare studies could bring to light.

The overall summation of this book is one that is intuitive: the arc of queering the Shakespeare film seems to follow more or less the arc of history. As Western society became more knowledgeable about and less fearful of, more accepting and less condemnatory of, queerness in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries – particularly queerness in its homosexual forms – the Shakespeare film followed suit. The highly coded and difficult to discern representations of the queer in productions from the 1930s like Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsummer* and Cukor's *Romeo and Juliet* have in the 2000s, in large part because of the queer depictions featured in the Shakespeare films of Zeffirelli, Welles, Parker, Luhrmann, Nunn, Hoffmann and Radford that preceded them, given way to unabashedly queer film productions of Shakespeare like Brown's *Private Romeo*, which features an all-male cast that retells the story of Romeo and Juliet complete with a happy ending for the two young men who fall in love with one another as they play the parts of Shakespeare's immortal 'pair of star-crossed lovers'. That such a queer subversion – exemplified in particular by the triumph, rather than the destruction, of the gay male couple – is now a reality in the Shakespeare film is a remarkable development.

Furthermore, given the limitations of its scope – it is not encyclopaedic and, as such, it examines only a comparatively small subset of mainstream and independent Anglophone Shakespeare films from the sound era – this book ends with a hopeful glance into the future. It looks forward to the other critical interventions in queering the Shakespeare film

that may follow and direct attention to, for example, those films that could not be covered in this volume: the silent Shakespeare film; the television Shakespeare production; the teen Shakespeare film; and the world Shakespeare film. It is in fact a 'consummation devoutly to be wished' that the project of queering the Shakespeare film is only just beginning.