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INTRODUCTION: THE PRESENCE OF THE QUEER IN THE SHAKESPEARE FILM

It seems fitting that the Shakespeare film was born not in Hollywood but, rather, in England, albeit in London as opposed to Stratford-upon-Avon. As Judith Buchanan details, the perhaps inevitable development of Shakespearean drama moving from the stage to the screen came about in 1899 when the British Mutoscope and Biograph Company (BMBC) – a subsidiary of its American counterpart, a leading innovator in the earliest days of the film industry – produced a very short, silent cinematic rendering of excerpts from *King John*, starring Herbert Beerbohm Tree. This 'constituted the first film ever made on a Shakespearean subject'.[1] At the time the hope was 'that the mere fact of a Shakespeare film would function as a sanitising and legitimising influence on the questionable reputation of the industry as a whole and the BMBC in particular'.[2] In other words, it was Shakespeare to the rescue of the BMBC and the then fledgling movie business as a whole, which, not unlike the early modern theatre of which Shakespeare was such an integral part, was not very highly regarded by the moral, ethical, cultural, philosophical, governmental and religious authorities of the day. It was also not the first time, nor would it be the last, that Shakespeare was called on to play such a redemptive role in an artistic and commercial medium other than the theatre given the fact that his cultural capital was writ so large in the human consciousness.

Russell Jackson adds to this necessarily brief history of the genesis of the Shakespeare film by pointing out that 'Shakespeare's plays played an honourable but hardly dominant role in the development of the medium.'[3] He proceeds to note that '[s]ome fifty sound films have been made of Shakespearean plays to date [the years 2000–4], but it has been estimated that during the "silent" era … there were more than 400 films on Shakespearean subjects.'[4] While *in toto* 450 may seem like a large number, Jackson provides the sobering reminder that 'Shakespearean films and other "classics" were hardly a staple of the new and burgeoning cinema business: it was comedy, melodrama, the Western and the exotic historical romance that were regarded as bankable' marketplace commodities.[5] In addition, as the case of the 1899 silent film of *King John* suggests, '[i]t was their prestige value or the power of a particular personality that recommended Shakespearean projects to film companies, or at least overcame their reluctance' to produce what was, and still is for the most part, considered esoteric material for the moviegoing masses.[6] Alas, even with taking into account the valiant efforts of directors and actors like Laurence Olivier, Franco Zeffirelli, Kenneth Branagh, Baz Luhrmann, Julie Taymor and many others, producing the Shakespeare film remains a likely money-losing, albeit an esteem-enhancing, venture for all concerned well over century after the works of Shakespeare first made their debut on the silver screen.

With the strong links between the cinema and Shakespearean drama, studies of Shakespeare's plays on film have not been lacking. These works can be broken down, roughly, into four main categories: guides and encyclopaedias, histories and surveys, topical collections of essays, and more idiosyncratic monographs with a particular analytical thrust. There is a fair amount of overlap between these generic groupings, but they remain useful for delineating the larger trends in this extensive field of study. However, considering the plethora of texts that comment on the Shakespeare film, it is striking that, comparatively speaking, there seems to be a dearth of scholarship on

Shakespearean cinema that addresses the subject from a queer perspective. Whereas volumes of the former number in the dozens, the latter has been limited (with one exception) to only book chapters and journal articles, and those critique only a few Shakespeare films as opposed to a more comprehensive array of examples. This set of circumstances is even more conspicuous when, taking into account that, starting with Joseph Pequigney's *Such Is My Love: A Study of Shakespeare's Sonnets* and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, both of which were published in 1985, and continuing all the way to the appearance of Madhavi Menon's 2011 collection, *Shakesqueer: A Queer Companion to the Complete Works of Shakespeare* and beyond, queer studies, in the form of monographs and anthologies of essays, of Shakespeare's plays and poetry as written texts have seemingly proliferated.

In any case, since the early 1990s, a cluster of discrete articles, book chapters and a single monograph – all focused on only a pair of Shakespeare films: Derek Jarman's *The Tempest* (1979) and Gus Van Sant's appropriation of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V* plays, *My Own Private Idaho* (1991) – have made it into print and qualify as queer critical interventions on these cinematic texts. These include: Kate Chedgzoy's '"The Past is Our Mirror": Marlowe, Shakespeare, Jarman', Chapter 5 from her book *Shakespeare's Queer Children: Sexual Politics and Contemporary Culture*; Jim Ellis's 'Conjuring *The Tempest*: Derek Jarman and the Spectacle of Redemption'; Joon-Taek Jun's 'Thus Comes a Black Queer Shakespeare: The Postmodern Confrontation of Zeffirelli, Jarman, and Luhrmann'; and Chantal Zabus's 'Against the Straightgeist: Queer Artists, "Shakespeare's England", and "Today's London"'; as well as David Román's 'Shakespeare Out in Portland: Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, Homoneurotics, and Boy Actors'; Richard Burt's 'Baroque Down: The Trauma of Censorship in Psychoanalysis and Queer Film Re-Visions of Shakespeare and Marlowe'; Jonathan Goldberg's 'Hal's Desire, Shakespeare's Idaho'; Matt

Bergbusch's 'Additional Dialogue: William Shakespeare, Queer Allegory, and *My Own Private Idaho*'; and Vincent Lobrutto's *Gus Van Sant: His Own Private Cinema*. Each of these studies offers an idiosyncratic look at Jarman's and Van Sant's films from outside the straightjacket of compulsory heterosexuality. Chedgzoy, for example, analyses *The Tempest* as emblematic of Jarman's 'search for the cultural traces of a queer past' in Shakespeare,[7] while Lubrotto examines the tropes of, among others, hustlers, gay sex and loneliness as they are represented in Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* in ways that may well resonate on a queer level with audiences.

Meanwhile, Richard Loncraine and Ian McKellen's 1995 adaptation of *Richard III* has garnered similar critical attention to that generated by Jarman's *The Tempest* and Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*. In 'Camp *Richard III* and the Burdens of (Stage/Film) History', Stephen M. Buhler's contribution to Mark Thornton Burnett's edited collection, *Shakespeare, Film, and Fin de Siècle*, the decidedly queer notion of camp is used as a lens through which Loncraine and McKellen's *Richard III* is interrogated as a work that plays subversively with historiography and calls attention to the homoeroticism attendant upon fascism. Michael D. Friedman's 'Horror, Homosexuality, and Homiciphilia in McKellen's *Richard III* and Jarman's *Edward II*', on the other hand, claims that both films depict rather grotesque male characters who derive sexual pleasure through the act of murder (hence Friedman's coinage of the term 'homociphilia'). And Robert McRuer's 'Fuck the Disabled: The Prequel', which appears in Menon's *Shakesqueer* collection, reads Loncraine and McKellen's Richard III as a sexy, queer, disabled figure that manages to give the cinematic equivalent of the middle finger to all things heterosexual and able-bodied.

Other articles or book chapters that warrant mention here include: Peter S. Donaldson's '"Let Lips Do What Hands Do": Male Bonding, Eros and Loss in Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*', Chapter 6 of his book *Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors*; William Van Watson's 'Shakespeare, Zeffirelli,

and the Homosexual Gaze'; Maria F. Magro and Mark Douglas's 'Reflections on Sex, Shakespeare, and Nostalgia in Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night*';" Daniel Juan Gil's 'Avant-garde Technique and the Visual Grammar of Sexuality in Orson Welles's Shakespeare Films'; Laury Magnus's 'Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* and the Vexed Question of Performance'; and Anthony Guy Patricia's '"Through the Eyes of the Present": Screening the Male Homoerotics of Shakespearean Drama'. Each of these pieces is concerned in some way with the poetics of representations queerness in films ranging from Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* to Michael Radford's 2004 *The Merchant of Venice*. In addition, Richard Burt, in 'The Love That Dare Not Speak Shakespeare's Name: New Shakesqueer Cinema', Chapter 1 of his eclectic *Unspeakable ShaXXXspeares: Queer Theory and American Kiddie Culture*, glances at the queer moments in a wide range of Shakespeare film adaptations and appropriations (including pornographic versions) to make his case that they are emblematic of Shakespeare's texts having become, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, 'signifier[s] of queer sex *and* of popular culture'[8] in ways that do and do not succeed at, in accord with one of the guiding paradigms of queer theory, posing a sustained challenge to proscriptive heteronormativity. Finally, Madhavi Menon's *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Queer Theory in Shakespearean Literature and Film* directs queer attention to Bollywood film appropriations of *Much Ado About Nothing* and to the smash worldwide hit *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

In terms of numbers, then, the selective review above catalogues only twenty titles that consider the Shakespeare film from a queer perspective as having been published in the last three decades, and twelve – more than half – of those are concerned with just three movies: Jarman's *The Tempest*, Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho* and Loncraine/McKellen's *Richard III*. Given the fact that these films have been so thoroughly critiqued from a queer perspective elsewhere, they will not be considered in *Queering the Shakespeare*

Film. Furthermore, space limitations prevent an encyclopaedic approach to the topic at hand; as such, no slight is intended to those who champion particular productions that are not covered in the analyses that follow. However, even with its necessarily limited breadth and depth, this book does attempt to extend the discussion of queer Shakespeare film that has thus far taken place. It does so through close readings of ten mainstream and independent Anglophone movie productions from the sound era of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello*. The films used as exemplars in this book have been chosen specifically because they correspond with the Shakespeare plays that, as written texts, have been subjected to a great deal of productive interpretation from a queer perspective since the instantiation of queer theory at the outset of the 1990s. Hence secondarily this study seeks to link the currently ongoing queer conversation about these playtexts with the burgeoning queer conversation involving their counterpart cinematic texts. Overall, this study critiques the various representations of the queer – broadly understood as that which is at odds with what has been deemed to be the normal, the legitimate and the dominant – particularly (but not exclusively) as regards sexual matters in the Shakespeare film. It is concerned with such concepts as gender and gender trouble, compulsory heterosexuality, the discourses of sodomy, marriage and masculinity, male homoeroticism, gay spectatorship and queer self-fashioning. As such, it embraces the insights, ideologies and explicative strategies authorized by feminism, gay and lesbian studies, queer theory and the 'new kid on the Shakespeare block',[9] presentism.

Chapter 1 of the book begins with the premise that, as opposed to being only a recent development, the queer has always been a presence in the Shakespeare film. This overarching idea is explored using Max Reinhardt and William Dieterle's 1935 production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, a movie that, ironically, seems to have no queer content whatsoever. However, when the definition of queer is expanded

to encompass things aside from either the homoerotic or the homosexual, the queerness of Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsummer* becomes legible. It can be discerned, for example, in the directors' representation of Hippolyta early in the film, who is led into Athens by a triumphant Theseus and appears every bit the unhappy but chaste, silent and obedient woman she must be in a well-ordered patriarchal society. As in Shakespeare's original playtext, the discord evident in the relationship between Theseus and Hippolyta is mirrored in that which exists between Oberon and Titania in the fairy kingdom. For her recalcitrance in bending to his will, Titania is punished in queer fashion by Oberon when she is made to fall in love with the ass-headed Bottom, thereby raising the spectre of bestiality, a crime indelibly linked with sodomy – an act equated almost exclusively with male homosexuality today – in early modern England. The queer also manifests in Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsummer* through its subtle but unmistakable intimations of parent–child eroticism as well as in the questionable masculinities of the quarrelling suitors, Lysander and Demetrius.

Exploring the presence of the queer in early Shakespeare film continues in the first part of Chapter 2. Here attention turns to George Cukor's 1936 production of *Romeo and Juliet*, a movie that, like Reinhardt and Dieterle's *Midsummer*, seems to have no obvious queer content. Once again, however, under the pressure of interpretation the queerness of Cukor's film reveals itself in its treatment of age (all of the principal roles are played not by teenagers, but by middle-aged actors) in relation to love; its exaggeratedly effeminate Mercutio; and the fact that its director, writer, set designer and at least one of its music composers were all gay or bisexual – something that, even if only on a subliminal level, impacted the picture that resulted. Jumping forward thirty-two years, the chapter takes up Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* (1968), a film that from the first was recognized as being avowedly homoerotic even as it told the most well-known, if not the greatest, heterosexual love story in all of literature. One particular instance of

this explicit homoeroticism is readily apparent in the camera's treatment of star Leonard Whiting as Romeo, who is made into an object of voyeuristic attention that is queerly and never less than tastefully provocative that invites gay spectatorship. Following up on the considerations of Cukor's and Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*s, the chapter goes on to study *Private Romeo*, director Alan Brown's 2011 independent appropriation of Shakespeare's play. Though not by any means Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Private Romeo* nevertheless earnestly tells the story of two young male military cadets who, despite society's heteronormative imperatives, fall in love with one another as they act out the lead roles of the tragedy. Aside from the fact that the film, in a way that is somewhat analogous to the conventions of early modern English theatre (there is no male to female cross-dressing), features an all-male cast, the queerest aspect of *Private Romeo* may well be that it ends with a happy ending for the gay couple.

The queer concept of gender trouble – the fact that gender is not an immutable biological characteristic but, rather, a continuously changing performance that all human beings engage in – is the focus of Chapter 3. Gender trouble appears in Trevor Nunn's *Twelfth Night* (1996) the moment Viola transforms herself into the eunuch/male youth Cesario. Indeed, Viola's acting the part of a young man, a performance facilitated by the cutting of her long hair and her donning masculine clothing, is so successful that both the Countess Olivia and Count Orsino find themselves completely infatuated with him/her. Thus Nunn, like Shakespeare before him, explores the queer consequences of what happens when gender is not rigidly policed in accord with normative paradigms. Baz Lurhmann, meanwhile, embraces gender trouble in *Romeo + Juliet* (1996) by representing Mercutio as an 'in-your-face' drag queen. Reflecting the advances made in gay and lesbian and queer criticism in relation to Shakespeare, Lurhmann's Mercutio is also clearly in love with a Romeo who is unable to return Mercutio's love in kind. Arguably, this is why, no matter how progressive it may seem, Lurhmann's

depiction of a transvestite Mercutio ultimately fails because it ends up doing nothing more than serving an ideology that demands male same-sex relationships must always give way to opposite-sex relationships, even if that means death to the queer. The last instance of gender trouble discussed in this chapter occurs in Michael Hoffman's *William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1999). Here, when Francis Flute is cast by Peter Quince in the role of Thisbe – 'the lady that Pyramus must love' – all of his fellow mechanicals burst into laughter at Flute's expense. In fact, for his fellow players, there seems to be something inordinately funny in the fact that Flute will have to play a woman while wearing a dress. However, since Hoffman chooses not to depict the Pyramus and Thisbe play-within-a-film as a complete farce, as is usually done in cinematic productions, the homophobia that lies at the heart of the mechanicals' laughter at Flute's plight vanishes when Flute, as Thisbe, suddenly and queerly transforms the performance before the Athenian court into one of true pathos.

Chapter 4 engages with the queer topic of male homoeroticism and how it is represented in Michael Radford's *William Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice* (2004) and Nunn's *Twelfth Night*. These productions were chosen for analysis here because both are highly attentive to the fact that, as groundbreaking textual criticism of Shakespeare's original playtexts pointed out in the early 1990s, the Antonio characters in both of them are in love with their male friends, Bassanio and Sebastian respectively. The male homoeroticism that lies at the heart of the Antonio/Bassanio and Antonio/Sebastian relationships is represented in Radford's and Nunn's productions mainly through their physical interactions – for example, both Antonios choose to put themselves in physical danger on behalf of their beloveds; the couples are often shown hugging and, in one instance at least, kissing each other – and in the passionate ways that each character speaks to or about the other. Hearing and watching such utterances performed by actors on screen, rather than merely reading them in a text,

makes their queer inflections all the more apparent. However, Radford falters in his treatment of the male homoerotic at the end of his *Merchant* when Antonio is shown alone and once again descending into melancholy as Bassanio and Portia walk away from him, presumably to consummate their marriage. Nunn (in a sense precipitating Radford, since *Twelfth Night* appeared eight years earlier) also chooses to end his *Twelfth Night* on a heteronormative note. This occurs when Antonio is shown as if he has been cast out of the Countess Olivia's home and into the dreary cold, then walking away from the estate with a grim, melancholic expression on his face. It is reinforced when, as the credits roll, Nunn interjects scenes that show Olivia and Sebastian – as well as Orsino and Viola, the latter garbed in her 'woman's weeds' – in the celebration following their double wedding. The montage is punctuated with a host of images of the two happy heterosexual couples smiling, dancing and kissing passionately. From a queer perspective, it is argued that, for viewers who have invested time watching Radford's *Merchant* and Nunn's *Twelfth Night*, these conclusions are disturbing, especially since, as textual critics have explained, there are other – queer inclusive – ways of ending these works.

In the films of *Othello* by Orson Welles (1952) and Oliver Parker (1995) discussed in Chapter 5, Iago is understood to be a figure of queer self-fashioning. Indeed, he fashions that queer self out of the crucible of forces he is enmeshed in throughout the tragedy in which he plays such a central part. However, the two most prominent forces Iago is subject to are an overpowering feeling of betrayal and an equally overpowering feeling of love, both of which centre on Othello. Welles's *Othello* explores the dynamics that arise from the opposition of these forces through a film noir – a genre that is notorious for its derogatory treatment of homosexuals and homosexuality – *mise-en-scène* that is, in turn, informed by the Freudian idea that male homosexuals are little more than beings filled with utter hatred for others (but particularly for women) because of the fact of their sexuality itself and

because they know intuitively that they will never be able to manifest their queer desires for other men in any kind of a fulfilling way given that the norm for most people in the world is heterosexuality. Parker's *Othello*, in contrast to Welles's, eschews both film noir and Freud in favour of a naturalistic treatment of the tragedy. This representational strategy allows for the queer idea that Iago is not acting out because he is a frustrated homosexual but, rather, that he is acting out simply because it is in human nature to do so when people feel they have been wronged by others.

After reiterating the fact that this book covers a necessarily limited time period in the history of the Shakespeare film – the seventy-six years spanning 1935 and 2011 – and an equally limited selection of cinematic adaptations and appropriations of just five plays from the canon, its collective findings are summarized in the conclusion. The study then ends with an expression of hope that it may inspire more critical work of a similar nature, particularly in those areas that had to be elided from the discussion provided herein.