

**QUEERING CANONICAL SHAKESPEARE:
CONTEMPORARY ADAPTATIONS OF *HAMLET* AND *ROMEO AND JULIET***

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INTRODUCTION

The 16th century favored
cross-dressed men
in women's roles,
forging a bond
between our culture
and theater
that endures today.

That era's greatest dramatist,
in sonnets to
his benefactor,
Mr. W. H.,
proclaimed his love
more ringingly
than he portrayed
the ruin of dynasties.

— Alan Moore, *The Mirror of Love*.

As reflected in Alan Moore's poem, Renaissance theatre, and in particular Shakespeare's sonnets, have been popularly linked with homosexual love. Theatre and queerness, and more so Shakespeare and queerness, are indeed historically linked, through the poet's verse and certain of his characters, but also the tradition of male actors cross-dressing for female roles. Those issues have been at the center of numerous studies on queer theatre. In this dissertation, I will be using this existing research to study modern queer adaptations of Shakespeare plays in order to explore what they contribute, both for theatre and for the queer community. Before I delve into the adaptations I have chosen, however, I will give a short overview of the links between theatre and queerness.

Queer is a reclaimed derogatory term that can be defined as an umbrella word for minority sexual and gender identities (Dolan, 10), and the people who identify with these identities, as opposed to heterosexual and cisgender. The word is often synonymous with “LGBT” or “LGBT+”. However, it is generally considered more inclusive of all identities, and a disruption of the normative tied to activism. Theatre is at the core of both queer studies and queer arts for its links to performance and performativity. Theatre circles in the past century have arguably been a refuge for sexual minorities (Dolan, 2). Nonetheless theatre often carried conservative, normative values, which forced artists to remain closeted. In the past century, in drama much like in other genres, playwrights could only create obviously LGBT characters if they met a terrible end, whether death, insanity, or destitution, so that it would not seem that the author or publisher condoned homosexuality, under risk of censorship. As such, even out queer writers wrote stories where characters with non-normative sexualities were damned. For instance, E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* was only published posthumously, in 1971, although he wrote the first draft as early as 1913-14; and Patricia Highsmith’s *The Price of Salt* (1951) was hailed as the first and only positive representation of lesbian life.

However, since the beginning of the civil rights movement, and particularly after the Stonewall riots of 1969, there has been an increase in public visibility, first for gay men and lesbians, and later for the queer community as a whole. The overlapping histories of sexual politics and theatre has led in the last few decades to the creation of plays and dramatic theory with a conscious LGBT+ perspective, as queer studies became prominent in academia with the works of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Playwrights and academics alike started working from the assumption that not all that is presented on stage has to be the norm—that is,

heterosexual and cisgender¹—and started to look into finding diverse queer representation when it is not clearly assigned to a character, or into how to queer a performance by looking at it through this non-normative lens. Work on theatre and sexuality has thus been concerned both with recovery projects, that is to say looking into LGBT+ playwrights who have been neglected, and with interpretative practices. Thus, theatre has for long been a locus of LGBT struggles, whether to criticize its heteronormativity, or as a means of alternative expression for queer people. The representation produced by such adaptations in environments where queer people are often erased is valuable. Politically speaking, adding queer characters or themes to any work of art has an impact, because it participates in reclaiming one's place in the canon. About finding one's place in history, Emma Donoghue explains:

Imagine living in a city where there are no monuments, no buildings from before 1970, no proof that you had grandparents or parents, no history at all. Wouldn't that make you feel like you were just a passing fad, that you could be blown away like leaves? (...) For any community to feel substantial and able to change without losing themselves, a history is absolutely crucial.²

Indeed one argument against LGBT people is often that homosexuality, transgenderism, and other queer identities are merely a trend. Thus, rediscovering their history is important for the queer community, as it allows them to claim their historicity. The scarcity of visible queer people is a similar problem in literature and the media as it is in history. The current labels have only existed for little over a century at most, and the gay rights movement has really only taken off

1

“Cisgender” defines a person whose gender identity matches their gender assigned at birth.
2

Quoted by Alice Lawlor, “Emma Donoghue’s Historical Novels,” *Xtra! Canada’s Gay and Lesbian News* (July 29, 2008). <http://www.dailyxtra.com/canada/news-and-ideas/news/emma-donoghues-historical-novels-53227> Web. 20 March 2017.

after Stonewall (1969). To this day and for most of history, homophobia has prevented queer people from being out of the closet. As such, evidence of queer people in history is sparse and has often been discarded. Historical novels work alongside academic research into same-gender attraction for historical figures to shed light on queer people in the past. Thus, queer artists “remake” the past, or transform works from the past, “to sustain a queer present,” as well as create “an alternative sense of collective identity formation and belonging” in opposition with the narrative of queerness as pathological or criminal (Medd, 167) which persists to this day, especially for more marginalised identities, namely bisexual and transgender people.

These past decades have seen important work done in Early-Modern theatre and Shakespearean studies from a queer perspective, notably on the role of cross-dressing and boy actors. The seminal works of Alan Bray and Jonathan Goldberg have shaped our understanding of Early-Modern sexuality, in particular male homosexuality. Shakespeare has been the focus of many works in queer studies both because of his centrality in the English literary canon, and of his oeuvre's receptivity to queer readings. Adapting Shakespeare's works is arguably a similar undertaking to recovering lost history, or writing historical fiction: the importance of Shakespeare to literature is such that making his characters openly queer gives legitimacy to LGBT people. Chedgzoy thus describes Jarman's adaptations as an attempt to retrieve the queer past (Chedgzoy, 181). That some of these characters are arguably already subtextually queer in the original plays helps to defend such directorial or adaptational decisions. Indeed, one major criticism levelled at politically loaded adaptations is the “betrayal” of the original writer's intent, which I would like to pre-emptively address now. There is, of course, power in reclaiming a part of the canon from which minorities have been excluded, and fidelity to the original is not a

criterion usually taken into account in adaptation studies. It is politically significant however to note that, as far as Shakespeare's sexuality has often been discussed, and the Sonnets and address of the longer poems seem to point to him being queer, as many scholars before me have argued. The strength of queer adaptations of Shakespeare may thus very well lie in the fact that queer people were included in his works in the first place, to an extent limited by the constraints of his time, such as moral and religious condemnation. Recognizing the inherent queerness of these works, which are seminal to the English literary canon, is building a history for queer people that goes further back in time than the inception of the queer rights movement. Indeed, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick wittily points out in *Epistemology of the Closet*,

A short answer [to the question: "has there ever been a gay Shakespeare?"], though a very incomplete one, might be that not only have there been a gay Socrates, Shakespeare and Proust, but that their names are Socrates, Shakespeare and Proust; and, beyond that, legion — dozens or hundreds of the most centrally canonic figures in what the monoculturalists are pleased to consider "our" culture, as indeed, always in different forms and senses, in every other. (52)

Representation itself matters, and seeing positive representation of minority groups is important for both people who belong in these groups, and people who do not. Shakespeare's plays, as central to theatre, are no exception. Indeed,

Representation in the mediated "reality" of our mass culture is in itself power; certainly it is the case that nonrepresentation maintains the powerless status of groups that do not possess significant material or political power bases. (Gross, 143)

Keeping minorities relatively invisible constitutes a form of symbolic annihilation. Secondly, positive representation is not only important to the minorities represented. It allows people to see members of minority groups as sympathetic and relatable. Media and the arts are important in portraying groups of people one would have little occasion of learning about, because "mass media provides the broadest common background of assumptions," and minority groups, like

queer people and people of colour, are by definition far from the views of the majority, and as such the media play an important role in shaping the perception of minorities (Gross, 143). The importance of schemas and pattern recognition in learning is such that with the repetition of narratives and stereotypes in movies, one is likely to make these links between the representation of certain types of characters and similar individuals in real life, which is why diverse and encompassing representation across media matters so much (West, 287). Adding positive representation to plays therefore helps counter the use of queer-coded villains. In addition, I would argue that while TV and movies are the first to be concerned by this argument, because of their wider reach, mainstream theatre's audiences remain mostly white, middle-class and middle-aged despite outreach efforts. Thus the importance of including minorities in mainstream theatre to counter the scarcity of positive representation they might be exposed to, and of developing queer troupes and theatres to provide an alternative to the established ones, such as the Globe and the RSC in the UK, or Broadway in the US.

Among Shakespeare's plays, the comedies have been given particular attention, and they indeed seem to be the most productive in terms of queer interpretations, whether in theory or in productions and adaptations. Queer studies of the tragedies have been sparse, albeit revealing. Characters such as Iago, Mercutio (although he belongs to the comedic aspects of the play), or Hamlet have thus been read and discussed with this approach. Less work still has been done on adaptations. In this dissertation, I aim to look at what productions and adaptations of the plays add to the text, what they try to challenge and how. I focus on available productions and adaptations of the tragedies, in particular *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*. These two tragedies rank amongst the most commonly performed plays by William Shakespeare worldwide. Their central

place in the Shakespearean canon makes them crucial points of entry into the English literary canon itself for directors setting out to give a greater place to queer identities in mainstream theatre. These plays originally present few obvious queer elements, contrary to Shakespeare's comedies, such as *Twelfth Night* or *As You Like It*. Thus they offer more possibilities for the artist's personal take when rewriting or staging the plays. Because they appear both at first glance and in conventional wisdom to be heterosexual and heteronormative, their appropriation by queer or pro-queer artists becomes a political statement. The decision to overtly include LGBT+ identities by building on the existing, but often overshadowed, queerness of the text, effectively affirms queer people's belonging in the central narratives of Western literature and history, of which they are still often erased. Furthermore, *Romeo and Juliet* can be considered the ultimate love story, from its centrality in the canon, its place in popular culture as the reference for forbidden love and the multitude of works it inspired. *Hamlet* on the other hand is arguably Shakespeare's—and the English theatre's—most in-depth psychological study of a character. One of its main themes is identity, and the contrast between seeming and being. The centrality of these themes in the queer community and media may also explain these two plays being favoured for queer adaptations. In this paper, I look at multiple adaptations of these two plays to try and answer the following questions: what does a dialogue between LGBT struggles and Shakespeare's plays—in the form of queer adaptations—bring to said adaptations, and to our understanding of the plays in general? Are there degrees of contribution within this corpus, either to the political commentary or to the plays, and how do the strategies differ in adapting *Hamlet* and in adapting *Romeo and Juliet*? That is to say, can we identify different ways in which Shakespeare is used, and whether some adaptations only appropriate the text for their own

agenda, or whether all can be said to contribute equally to literature? Some adaptations are indeed more subtle and refined than others in their combination of Shakespeare and queer politics, and perhaps we can identify the reasons behind these differences in the creators' agendas. The scope of this work includes both theatrical and cinematographic adaptations and productions of the plays (since the latter offer their own interpretation of the original, I would argue that they can also be considered adaptations in and of themselves). The corpus also spans different media— theatre and film—, which thus offers a wider sample of what is being done in terms of queer adaptations of Shakespeare. My corpus is also deliberately spread out both chronologically and spatially. Taking different media and types of adaptation into account indeed allows for a better idea of the existing landscape of queer adaptations: I can thus study varied examples of the phenomenon as a whole.

The *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations under study are part of a genealogy of works. Joe Calarco's play adaptation, *Shakespeare's R&J*,³ and its production by the Chapel Lane Theatre Company⁴ undeniably form an ensemble. The later movie *Private Romeo*⁵ also takes its inspiration from Calarco's play. As such, we face an interesting genealogy of adaptations. Calarco's play is set in the context of a private, military school, in which four boys start acting out *Romeo and Juliet* for their private enjoyment, and through their reading discover themselves and

3

Joe Calarco, *Shakespeare's R&J*, revised edition (New York: Dramatists' Play Service Inc., 2015 [1999]).

4

Shakespeare's R&J, Chapel Lane Theatre Company, Tabard Theatre, 2015.

5

Private Romeo, dir. Alan Brown (Frameline, 2011).

their sexualities. *Private Romeo* starts with the same concept, but in the setting of an American military academy, to comment on the Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) policy.⁶

Finally, the unrelated short film *Still a Rose* offers a diverse take on the balcony scene, alternating between heterosexual, queer, white and biracial couples. It portrays all kinds of love through this classical scene by filming it between two men, two women, in the original configuration—that is to say a female Juliet and a male Romeo—, and between a male Juliet and a female Romeo. The inclusion of a Black woman for the role of Romeo also intersects questions of racial identity with the issues of queer identity and representation at play here.⁷ It offers a contrast with the genealogy of adaptations starting with Calarco's play, where the actors are male and for the most part white.

Regarding *Hamlet*, I will be predominantly studying two adaptations. First is the 1921 German silent film starring Asta Nielsen as Hamlet,⁸ which presents the Shakespearean hero as a woman in disguise for political purposes. This adaptation inscribes itself in the great tradition of women playing Hamlet, from Sarah Siddons in the 1780s (Weis, 100) to

6

The directive, issued in 1994 under the Clinton administration, prohibited discrimination against closeted queer people in the military, but also barred openly queer people from serving, and prohibited military personnel from disclosing such information, under the supposition that homosexual behaviour in the military would harm its higher standards of moral. Evidence of homosexual behaviour could also give rise to an investigation and an eventual discharge. The act was repealed in 2011, although it should be noted that until 2016 transgender people could be discharged on medical grounds if they did not pass as their assigned gender.

7

Intersectionality refers to the overlapping of social identities when studying systems of oppression, e.g. a Black lesbian faces challenges and discrimination both because of her race and her sexuality, as well as her gender.

8

Hamlet, dir. Svend Gade, Heinz Schall (1921).

contemporary performances. Thus, while the choice of Nielsen as the main actor could be interpreted as merely cross-gender casting and in-play cross-dressing, a case can be made for it being an early example of transgender representation, and it has indeed been reclaimed as such by the queer community, as proven for instance through its screening in queer movie festivals (Grundmann, 50), although no detailed study of the movie from that angle exists. Furthermore, cross-dressing in Shakespeare plays, notably in the comedies, is often associated with the deconstruction of gender essentialism and gender roles, and it also allows homosexual feelings to develop or be hinted at under the guise of heterosexuality. While there is a distinct time gap between this particular adaptation and the others, the study of this example of queer representation in a Shakespearean adaptation from the early days of cinema sheds light on the origins of the movement. Furthermore, it offers a model for—as well as a contrast to—more recent works that were created with a different understanding of transgender issues.

The second *Hamlet* adaptation under consideration is the production of the play directed by Sarah Frankcom (2015).⁹ In it, Maxine Peake plays Hamlet, following in the tradition of “genderblind casting,” that is, the casting of a role without trying to match the gender of the actor with that of their character, without changing the pronouns referring to the character either. As a counterpoint which attracts attention to Hamlet's gender, Polonius's name was changed to Polonia, with matching feminine pronouns, to correspond to the actress's gender. Furthermore, while Peake is not the first woman to play Hamlet on stage, director Sarah Frankcom made a point to specify in the programme and teacher resource pack for the play that this particular

9

Hamlet, dir. Sarah Frankcom. Screen director: Margaret Williams. Royal Exchange Theatre, 2015.

Hamlet was transgender. As such, even if, contrary to the earlier movie, the play itself makes no use of Hamlet's body to hint at this decision, the ways in which Peake performs Hamlet's gender, and how it affects the play, are worth taking into account for this study.

It should be noted that the adaptations under consideration here do not necessarily represent the wide array of existing queer adaptations, as the scope of the study had to be circumscribed to a small number of adaptations that were filmed and available to see. This availability shows their wider diffusion compared to such adaptations as may be done for local LGBT communities and festivals, without a recording. While a study of the reception of these plays is hardly possible, the audience is indeed an important data to consider. Here, one can extrapolate that these productions did not only reach a queer or homophile audience, but also a wider range of spectators. We must stay attuned to this difference and allow that our study may not be representative of all queer adaptations of Shakespeare, as the intended audience is a decisive factor in the conception of any medium. Nonetheless, I hope to shed light on strategies common to multiple adaptations, and to provide a grid of analysis that could be applied to others, or further refined by the inclusion of more works.

I have chosen to study the two plays' adaptations separately, as they imply very different means of adaptations, as well as different points of entry into the queer issue—sexuality and gender identity. Thus, I will first look into *Romeo and Juliet*, starting with the different reasons that may make it suitable to queer adaptations, from the themes of the play to the character of Mercutio, moving on to the different strategies employed by the adaptations, and what they bring to the play. Finally, I will look at the ethical problems that they pose and the ways the creators resolve them. In a second part, I will trace the question of transgender identity

in the *Hamlet* adaptations back to the original play, and to nineteenth-century criticism, before studying the two adaptations' handling of the subject and its implications for the narrative. Thus, I will highlight how the plays help the political message, but also how and in what ways these adaptations renew and enhance them.

PART 1: SAME SEX ADAPTATIONS OF *ROMEO AND JULIET*

Romeo and Juliet, first written and performed some time between 1594 and 1597, was first published as a quarto in 1597 (Q1), then in 1599 (Q2) before appearing in the first folio of 1623. The play, which already owed to different texts, the foremost being Brooke's poem *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, has since been the source of numerous and varied adaptations. Most of these combine the political aspects of the play, the two warring factions, with the forbidden and tragic romance, to make a political point. Queer adaptations seem no different, except perhaps that they rely less on the opposition of two groups, as is the case for race-related adaptations, and more on family dynamics and the forbidden.

In my study of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations, I will first demonstrate how artists find ground in the original play for a pertinent queer adaptation, whether in the themes or the characters, before studying the actual strategies used to queer the play: metatheatre, deconstruction, subversion of the traditional all-male cast. Finally, I will delve into the ethical issues linked with the adaptation of a tragedy in a queer context, when the arts have a history of presenting queer stories as tragic.

1.1 : GROUNDINGS OF QUEER ADAPTATIONS IN THE ORIGINAL TEXT

Queer adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* seem to be primarily concerned with same-gender relationships, a fact which can be explained by the themes of the play as they relate to queer issues. *Romeo and Juliet* weaves together questions of forbidden love and family conflicts, while both are also concerned with the problem of suicide. In addition, the play's main characters

are teenagers, and sexual discovery is often seen as a primary teenage issue. Additionally, these adaptations also make use of the inherent queerness of the text, embodied by the character of Mercutio, which they heavily re-employ as a point of reference for the queer perspective.

1.1.1 LOVE, HIDDEN RELATIONSHIPS AND FAMILY CONFLICTS

Romeo and Juliet's central themes of love and sexuality in and of themselves make the play suitable to the development of queer themes, but the plot also revolves on elements that resonate with queer people's lives. Romeo and Juliet go against their relatives' wishes and beliefs to engage in their relationship. The issue of the closet is also echoed in the hidden relationship that the eponymous heroes have to maintain. Finally, the question of suicide driven by the conflict between attraction and family touches a lot of queer people's realities. One could argue that adding a queer element to the play updates it and makes its stakes more believable and relatable to a contemporary Western audience. Jan Kott indeed argues that a good production of a Shakespeare play balances Shakespeare and the contemporary experience, and that “what matters is that through Shakespeare's text we ought to get at our modern experience, anxiety and sensibility” (Kott, 197). This is not to say that the text must be co-opted to serve contemporary political messages, but that, as we tend to see Shakespeare as universal, the words used to convey feelings about an issue typical of the Renaissance, which has little to do with our contemporary Western society—here forced marriage—can still be relatable to the audience if the issue in question is displaced. Andrew Gurr indeed argues that:

Romeo and Juliet was radical in its own time, setting young love above what has in the last few years become known in British law as ‘forced marriage.’ If there is any Shakespeare work that can be seen as directly prompting a total reversal in social attitudes it is there. (Gurr, 7)

Their love “transgresses the roles imposed by their families” by resisting patriarchal authority (Lloyd, 45), and while star-crossed love has become a topos of romance stories, it remains that the issue at hand can be reduced to that conflict with patriarchy, and that can be extended beyond forced marriages. Indeed, by opposing the marriage arranged for her and marrying Romeo without her family's approval, Juliet goes against her family, and especially against her father's wishes for her, as demonstrated in 3.5.107-204. In this scene, Capulet calls Juliet “unworthy” (144), “mistress minion” (151), “green-sickness carrion”, “baggage” (156), “tallow-face” (157), “disobedient wretch” (160), “a wretched puling fool, a whining mammet” (184-5). Thus, in a show of verbal (and in some productions physical) violence, he threatens to throw her out if she does not marry Paris as he wishes. He asserts his authority by the repeated use of the imperative: “Look to't, think on't” (190) and in particular combined with an accumulation: “hang, beg, starve, die in the streets” (193), to emphasize his threats. He also dismisses Juliet's refusal to marry by repeating her words (149-151). Thus he not only has control over the verbal exchange through his rhetoric, but he seizes control of Juliet's own words, and therefore of her self-expression and agency. He thus imposes this marriage on Juliet, even as she is still mourning her cousin's death. While the topos of the overbearing parent is a staple of comedy, and especially the later comedy of manners, where the parent's disapproval has to be overcome in order for the marriage to take place, and its unusual use in a tragedy could provide levity to the scene. But Capulet's words, which in other contexts could have comedic results, are here to be taken in all seriousness, especially in light of the ending suggested by the prologue. This scene is where patriarchy and misogyny culminate. Juliet has no say in her future, and the three main female characters together cannot oppose Lord Capulet, as he also refuses to listen to his wife's pleas, as well as to Juliet's

Nurse's (168-176). What is more, Capulet's wife also participates in the abuse when she declares, "I would the fool were married to her grave" (140). This is tragic irony, since the audience knows, from the prologue if not from popular culture, that Juliet will indeed die: the gravity of her words is heightened by the very real death that follows. Shakespeare thus exposes the violence of forced marriages, as well as the abuses that family can go to when their child does not do what they want them to. Capulet demeans his daughter by insulting her, especially by questioning her virtue. Being disowned would also have rendered her destitute and condemned her to live on the streets, a threat he makes good use of to influence her (188-196). The opposition from the family that arises from "undesirable" relationships, as it is portrayed here, can echo, though not exclusively, the problems members of the queer community face, such as a high level of homelessness from being kicked out by parents and family members, and thus losing one's support network. Capulet's and his wife's words also echo homophobic people's expressed wishes that they'd prefer their children to be dead rather than queer, and the distinct possibility that they are not exaggerating, considering the frequent denial of sex education, protection against HIV, isolation from queer adults, and invalidation of gender or orientation differences children are subjected to (Sedgwick, 1994: 2). We can also recall that homophobic people can subject their queer children to conversion therapy, a practice still legal in the US, the UK and France amongst other Western countries, even though it proves unsuccessful and exposes the victim to higher risks of "depression, anxiety, and self-destructive behavior" (APA, 2000). Thus, Juliet's struggles may easily convey those of today's queer teenagers. That is not to say that the scene is inherently queer, but that, independently of Shakespeare's intent, the content of the play resonates with the experiences of queer audiences more acutely—just as it also evokes the

matter of inter-faith and inter-racial relationships, which explains an important number of *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations focused on the Irish or Israelo-Palestinian conflicts. Familial rejection during childhood is indeed a common experience in the queer community, as evidenced by the high number of queer teenagers amongst the homeless youth: late 1980s reports on gay youth homelessness indicate that LGBT people represent as many as a quarter of homeless youth in the US (Sedgwick, 1994: 2). While the situation has definitely improved, the US National Alliance to End Homelessness reports that in 2013 12 to 35% of the overall homeless youth identified as LGB, and up to 7% identified as transgender. As such, it may explain why the play gives rise to queer adaptations. Juliet's age upon her marriage would have been frowned upon in Shakespeare's time, and most likely reflected the common ideas Early Moderns had of medieval, Catholic Italy. However, arranged marriages were common in England too, especially among the landed gentry and aristocracy. While forced marriages are still an issue nowadays, even in the West, they are less at the forefront of personal and political concerns for a majority than is for instance same-gender marriage. Thus, Juliet entering a same-gender marriage with Romeo instead of a heterosexual one with Paris symbolically has a similar impact. Additionally, the arranged marriage to Paris symbolises compulsory heterosexuality as expected by the patriarchy, which Juliet escapes by marrying Romeo despite her family and society's wishes for her. This point is of course only valid for adaptations that queer the play by having Juliet and Romeo both be women, while Paris remains a man, for instance the Curio Theatre production (2014).

Additionally, the nature of Romeo and Juliet's involvement with each other also mirrors what some queer people have to go through. Their relationship is hidden from their families by necessity, due to both the rivalry between the two families and the fact that Juliet is

promised to Paris. Queering their relationship adds another level of symbolism to the hidden relationship, with the issue of the closet, which remains a key aspect of queer culture (Dolan, 12). The relationship between love and time in *Romeo and Juliet* is such that their interactions tend to happen at night, while social interactions happen during the day. Their first meeting (1.5), the so-called “balcony” scene (2.2), as well as their last meeting (3.5), both occur at night. The fear of being seen, and the deadly consequences that would follow, recurs throughout these scenes as the characters go from expressing their love for each other to worrying about their lives. The threat to their lives from the ball onwards is embodied by Tybalt, who exclaims: “[t]o strike him dead I hold it not a sin” (1.5.58). The scene between Capulet and the irate Tybalt directly follows Romeo's soliloquy when he first notices Juliet (1.5.43-52). *Romeo and Juliet*'s first meeting thus frames the threat that later precipitates the play into a tragedy; the two plots are intrinsically linked. Romeo's transgression is punished, even though Tybalt has no knowledge of its extent. Juliet's words during the balcony scene,

The orchard walls are high and hard to climb,
And the place death, considering who thou art,
If any of my kinsmen finds thee here (2.2.62-65)

turn prophetic in the latter duel scene, although Tybalt only means to avenge the earlier infraction. Their relationship is disapproved of by their families to the extent that Romeo's presence itself, even at a public event, might result in his death, before romance can even be hinted at. Thus the relationship's illicit nature forces the characters to hide and to lie. Private and public lives are thus separated. As Lloyd explains, “the drama alternates between instants of passion, when time seems to stand still, and inevitable returns to the ongoing rush of events” (Lloyd, 38), and the alternation happens specifically between day and night, with night-time

becoming the lovers' refuge. Darkness, associated with lies and concealment, becomes a protective “cloak to hide [Romeo] from their eyes” (2.2.75). It then takes on positive connotations, and this setting allows Romeo to produce the poetical discourse in which he compares Juliet to celestial bodies (15-22). Furthermore, Juliet is represented as the sun (4),

Her eyes in heaven
Would through the airy region stream so bright
That birds would sing and think it were not night. (20-22)

For Romeo, therefore, Juliet herself suffices to counterbalance the darkness. The metaphor here hints at the possibility to sustain themselves, on their own, without the help of society, which is represented by day-time, as each would suffice to the other. Their relationship evolves in the margins of society, and as such the play engages with concepts of marginalisation. Arguably, the fact that Romeo and Juliet attempt to live their love outside of society, or solely in each other's society, rather than trying to reform the society around them (as for instance Othello and Desdemona) can make their transgression more palatable to a broad audience, since there is seemingly no advocacy for social change coming from the protagonists. That broader appeal may be another point that makes the play interesting for queer adaptations. Their identities also have to be shed if they want to live their love, a fact which they express in their exchange on names (33-50). One of them would have to give up who he or she really is if they were to be accepted as a couple in society. In a queer context, this can be linked to the strategies used by queer women of past centuries to make their union official or to live together in society, by which one of them would dress up as a man, at least for the duration of the ceremony. Hiding one's name and identity takes another significance when discussing the issue of living in the open as a same-gender couple, which is another way in which the play can resonate with queer people.

Furthermore, the marriage scene may take place in the late afternoon or evening, in a liminal space between day and night, as Juliet greets the friar “[g]ood even” (2.6.21). Indeed this scene symbolically takes place partly in the public sphere, since it is in the presence of the friar who, as a representative of the church, also represents an influential institution. The friar also harbours hopes that the marriage will influence Veronese society for the better (2.4.86-88). However, the marriage scene belongs mostly to the private sphere, since the wedding is concealed from their families and takes place with only the friar present. Finally, the duel takes place during the day, in opposition with Romeo and Juliet's wedding night. While the duel has direct consequences on their relationship, night offers a reprieve from the realities of public life, and in particular of Romeo's banishment (3.5). They are however overtaken by daylight and the threat of discovery. Here the possibility of death becomes much more tangible than in 2.2. Romeo exclaims in turns: “I must be gone and live, or stay and die”, and “let me be ta'en, let me be put to death” (3.5.11 and 17). His and Juliet's bargaining against the sunrise only highlights the inevitability of Romeo's departure or execution. The way time is handled in the play gives urgency to their meetings and highlights the need for them to remain hidden, under cover of darkness and away from public life. These dynamics therefore mirror closeted queer people's struggles with maintaining their private life outside of the public sphere, which in some countries really is legally a matter of life or death, while homophobic hate crimes and “gay-bashing” still persist, with sexual orientation representing for instance 17,7% (or 1,263 victims) of hate crimes reported in 2015 in the US (FBI, 2016). The issue of free love at stake in *Romeo and Juliet* is therefore relevant to queer activism, and can be used to convey the struggles of queer people in hostile communities.

It is also perhaps *Romeo and Juliet's* place not only at the centre of the English literary canon, but as a narrative traditionally interpreted as prototypical of heterosexual love, that makes it a perfect work to reclaim. The literary canon (and even scholarship), as a constructed result of a homophobic culture and history, is necessarily loaded (Sedgwick, 1990: 54), and the work of queer scholars and artists is not only to shed light on the queerness that can be found in it, but also to deal with its omissions and erasures of queer identities. Such adaptations also ask the audience to reconsider the plays in light of that queer reading. That is to say, the reading that a production brings to light may have been there all along, but the audience must now consider it. Interrogating the place of queer people in literature and the media is part of queer theory and queer arts' endeavours—what Sedgwick refers to as “the urgencies and pleasures of reading against the visible grain of any influential text” and offering a critical rereading of it (Sedgwick, 1990: 55). Queering the main couple of *Romeo and Juliet* thus gives a more prominent part to queer identities and helps reclaim a story that, while not entirely heteronormative (as I will show below), became the symbol of heterosexual romance in the centuries following its writing, through adaptations, reuse of its plot, and glossing over of the queer aspects. The “balcony scene” for instance is often quoted or mimicked in romances written by other authors, making Romeo and Juliet the prototypical heterosexual couple on which other fictional couples are modelled. Louis Montrose has indeed argued, mostly of the comedies, that Shakespeare both reproduces “legitimizing structures” and challenges them by the very representation of alternatives, even though such alternatives are eliminated by the end. Indeed, in the comedies, the same-gender romances are set aside at the end in favour of legitimate heterosexual marriages. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the two protagonists who opposed the status quo are dead. However, the very

existence of this challenge to the hetero-patriarchy may be what matters, and surely all that can be hoped for in the context of the Renaissance. In queer adaptations, however, the representation is not restricted to the margins, or to one character. On the contrary, these adaptations both bring to light sometimes erased queer characters, such as Mercutio, and queer heterosexual characters, or characters of unspecified sexuality. They embrace the queer elements of the plays, but are also not content to bring the narrative back to the status quo in the end.

1.1.2 MERCUTIO, THE PLAY'S QUEER CHARACTER

In this context, I will now show how *Romeo and Juliet* may already contain definitely queer elements, as opposed to themes relevant to queering. These elements transpire in the character of Mercutio, who is one of those disrupters of the status quo in the play. Mercutio is crucial to our understanding of the subversiveness of the play, and the multiple representations of love that Shakespeare included in his work, as well as the limitations of that representation. I argue that Mercutio also represents an important link between the play and its queer adaptations, as the existence of his character legitimizes them, and allows a real dialogue between the works, rather than a simple cooptation of the play for a political agenda.

1.1.2.1 MERCUTIO IN THE ORIGINAL PLAY

Mercutio represents an important stepping stone into *Romeo and Juliet* for queer adaptations, as he has been historically read and portrayed as queer. While already present in Arthur Brooke's *Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*, the character of Mercutio was heavily expanded by Shakespeare. In his role of “scoffer at love” (Charney, 119), he provides a form of

comic relief that draws heavily on the sexual. This type of character is directly transposed from the comedies, which explains the shift from comedic to tragic after his death. Mercutio's interest in sex is tinted by misogyny, but also by homoerotic undertones, and his wordplay full of sexual innuendos is reminiscent of Shakespeare's early comedies. Thus in the conjuring scene (2.1), Mercutio exhibits what Porter calls "an attitude towards Romeo's phallus that is at once generous and interested. It is as if Mercutio has a personal investment, as we say, in his friend's erection" (Porter, 157). Indeed in his tirade :

(...) My invocation
Is fair and honest. In his mistress' name
I conjure only but to raise up him.
(...)
If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark.
Now will he sit under a medlar tree,
And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit
As maids call medlars, when they laugh alone.
O Romeo, that she were, O, that she were
An open-arse, thou a poperin pear!
Romeo, good night, I'll to my truckle-bed;
This field-bed is too cold for me to sleep. (2.1.27-40)

Mercutio not only puts in parallel Romeo's imagined luck in love with his own solitude, but shows interest in Romeo's sexual success with Rosaline, through sexual innuendos ("to raise up him") and metaphors. "Open-arse", a popular expression for the medlar tree, stands for Rosaline like "poperin pear" stands for Romeo, with both the reference to genitals and penetration implied. However, following Porter's and Goldberg's interpretation according to which Mercutio projects himself in Rosaline's place (Goldberg, 2003: 283), one can see here a reference to anal intercourse. This passage thus reflects Mercutio's latent misogyny (in the objectification and sexualization of Rosaline) and homosexuality. Of course, the term "homosexuality", like other contemporary words referring to sexualities, were coined only much later, and have no direct

point of reference with Renaissance conceptions of sex, which was seen as a series of acts, and not as identities. However, there were clearly same-sex discourses and homoeroticism in the plays, that represent an important aspect of Shakespeare's treatment of love, and cannot be summed up either through "sodomy" or "male friendship". This is where contemporary terms are useful. Rosaline, for Goldberg, is a nonentity who, by her absence, can be replaced by anyone, like the woman in Sonnets 1 to 17 (Goldberg, 2003: 276). Goldberg makes a convoluted but convincing argument when he claims that the "rose" which "by any other word would smell as sweet" (2.2.43-44) is part of a game of substitutions and can at once stand for Romeo, Rosaline (by etymology), and Juliet, at once prisoner of the Capulet garden and Rosaline's replacement. The rose that is Rosaline, replaced by Juliet, is just as sweet to Romeo. However, because Romeo is the tenor of Juliet's metaphor, Goldberg argues that

desire might not be determined by the gender of its object, that the coupling of Romeo and Juliet is not a unique moment of heterosexual perfection and privacy but part of a series whose substitutions do not respect either the uniqueness of individuals or the boundaries of gender difference. (Goldberg, 275)

And indeed Romeo and Juliet are part of a series of couples, including Romeo and Rosaline, but also Romeo and Mercutio, at least insofar as Mercutio's tirade in the previous scene suggests.

What is more, Porter argues that certain similarities can be found between the character of Mercutio, and the Early Modern dramatist and contemporary of Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe. While his interpretation seems far-fetched on some accounts, he is convincing in his queer interpretation of Mercutio:

Mercutio's character resembles Marlowe's in rashness and scornfulness, and there may even be a trace of Marlowe's view of religion in Mercutio's anticlerical picture of the venal parson (1.4.79-81) and in his entirely secular and materialist preview of his own death. (138)

Such a vision of Marlowe is mostly based on what few documents we have left, most of which are libellous, and may not correspond to Shakespeare's own idea of him, as both a competitor and a co-writer. However, it is true that anticlerical sentiment was often associated with sodomy during the early modern era. As demonstrated by Alan Bray, the Elizabethan notion of sodomy, which covered not only homosexual intercourse but all forms of sex that was not procreative, was often linked to both heresy and treason, as it was seen as a political and religious crime (Bray, 40-42). Thus Mercutio's flippant views on the church, similar to those attributed to Marlowe in Richard Baines' note,¹⁰ may also be interpreted as a sign of queerness. Furthermore, Porter argues for a reading of Mercutio in light of 1590s' homoerotic poetry—of which Shakespeare's *Sonnets* would be a prime example—, as well as what he calls Marlowe's “own assertive homosexuality” (Porter, 148), the flaunting of which “seems to serve Marlowe for several not entirely compatible ends, including self-promotion and self-destruction” (Porter, 159). This last argument can be transposed to a queer interpretation of Mercutio: while the argument that Mercutio was Shakespeare’s tribute to Marlowe is questionable, it is interesting that such parallels can be made between those two figures, since Marlowe is perceived nowadays as the example of Renaissance homosexuality par excellence.

Finally, as Carla Freccero points out, before the duel Mercutio interprets Tybalt's “Thou consortest with Romeo” (3.1.44) as an innuendo and an insult. She argues that he objects to it because of the threat of death associated with sodomy (Freccero, 2011-2: 303). However, it

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This note notoriously claims that Marlowe expressed that religion's first purpose “was only to keep men in awe”, that Jesus loved John the Baptist and “used him as the sinners of Sodoma”, and that “all they that love not tobacco and boys were fools” (BL Harley MS.6848 ff.185-6). Sodomy and atheism, two offenses both leading to the death penalty, are thus closely entwined in this report to besmirch Marlowe's reputation, whether they be true or not.

is highly possible, considering Mercutio's propensity for taunts, that this is no defense, but simply an opportunity to provoke Tybalt. Mercutio, despite the Renaissance views on sodomy, does not seem one to be ashamed of his sexual orientation—which is in accordance with Porter's idea that Mercutio's homosexuality leads to his own demise. However, Mercutio's queerness could also simply be part of the bawdy aspect of the play, which is to say that a certain level of obscenity was tolerated there, and therefore created a space for queerness, besides the fact that all actors were male, and therefore all intercourse is implicitly sodomitical.

Recognizing Mercutio's queerness also leads to new and interesting interpretations of the play, the reading against the grain advocated by queer theorists. Mercutio's feelings of alienation in a play centred on heterosexuality are indeed highly symbolic and powerful. His feelings of isolation and exclusion in the summoning scene, while Romeo is focusing on Juliet, are symptomatic of the play's heteronormativity. Queerness has no place in the main relationship, and as such Romeo's relationship with Juliet exists at the expense of Romeo's relationship with Mercutio, and Mercutio himself is eventually eliminated from the play. Symbolically, one could say there is no place for him in this narrative of (however doomed) heterosexual love. He is the outsider, both because he does not belong to either family, and because he deviates too much from the sexual norm, and even from the binary model of attraction. He is, effectively, “in-between”: between the two families, between tragedy and comedy, and not only attracted towards men or women; and it seems that survival in this liminal space is not possible.

1.1.2.2 USE OF MERCUTIO IN ADAPTATIONS

A number of mainstream productions and adaptations have also interpreted Mercutio as a queer man. Porter thus points out that Mercutio in Terry Hands' 1973 production was decried as “aggressively homosexual” by a critic (187). Similarly, Baz Luhrmann in *Romeo + Juliet* chose to present an openly queer Mercutio. Freccero says of such adaptations as Luhrmann's that they set up “in oppositional and asymmetrical (yet equally sacrificial, equally tragic, equally romantic) relations same- and opposite-sex love in the couples Mercutio-Romeo and Romeo-Juliet” (303). If the parallel between the two couples is more subtle than Freccero's interpretation might suggest, what is so particular, and perhaps groundbreaking about Luhrmann's Mercutio is his queer-coding. Indeed, in this adaptation, subtext becomes text, and Mercutio becomes unmistakably queer, whereas other productions have remained more subtle, playing on the absence of certainty.



Fig. 1: Harold Perrineau as Mercutio in 1.5 of *Romeo + Juliet* (1995), dir. Baz Luhrmann.

If this choice can be decried for its simplification of the queer experience to drag queens, it also allows the queer community to see themselves unmistakably represented in a classic play. However, the choice also creates the uncomfortable subtext that queer characters are doomed, a recurring stereotype in queer fiction or for queer characters, which I will address in more depth later on. Mercutio's drag queen costume can also be interpreted as his ironic and self-conscious take on his own queerness, as he wears it for the ball, during which most characters put on outfits symbolical of their personality: Juliet as an angel, Tybalt as a devil, a drunken Lord Capulet as Bacchus. The drag costume can therefore be seen as an exteriorisation of his true character, but also as criticism of the simplification of queerness to drag, from the director but also from the character himself: considering how dramatic and self-aware Mercutio is, one can interpret the choice of costume as ironic; a representation of how people see him, not who he truly is. Furthermore, the context of the masked ball implies that the drag outfit is not simply a symbol of pride for a character who is out, but a mask one puts on to hide one's true self. Masquerading as a drag queen could almost be read as a negation of one's queerness. By putting on a drag costume in the context of a masqued ball, where one is supposed to dress up as someone else, Mercutio could be claiming that he is not queer, just making a visual joke at queer people's expense.

The character's canonical queerness is also used in specifically queer adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. Thus, both *Shakespeare's R&J* and *Private Romeo* take advantage of the play's subtext to work in internalised homophobia and jealousy on the part of the character playing Mercutio. Recognizing the queer potential of characters such as Mercutio is not just important for the sake of representation. Within the topic of queer adaptations, it demonstrates the possibility of

queer characters existing within the canon plays, and therefore legitimises the queering as a whole.

1.1.2.3 MERCUTIO IN *SHAKESPEARE'S R&J*

In *Shakespeare's R&J*, the unnamed Student 3 who plays Mercutio, shows a mixture of jealousy and internalised homophobia towards the two students (Students 1 and 2) playing Romeo and Juliet. Student 3 is himself a victim of the others' mockery when, performing the Queen Mab speech, he kisses Student 1 (Calarco, 23). First, this scene implies that the queer reading of the text would come directly to young people first confronted with it, thus legitimizing that interpretation. Student 3 does not hesitate, upon reading the part of the speech about lovers, to playfully kiss Student 1: thus for this character, Mercutio's attraction to his friend is obvious. Secondly, even though he merely “clamps a hand over [student 1's] mouth, and kisses him” (23), making the kiss only pretend, Students 2 and 4's taunting through the rest of the scene becomes so pressing that Student 3 attempts to leave (24). These taunts, which are not in character, may be seen as simple child's play, with the repetition of a playground song, it also demonstrates the pressure experienced by Student 3 from his peers at the simple hint of intimacy with another boy, and the repetition of the “old childhood song” (23) hints at the fact that this is a learned behaviour. In effect, their behaviour prepares the grounds for Student 3's (as well as Student 4's) later reaction at the intimacy which develops between Students 1 and 2. Tybalt's reaction in the performance is mirrored by the students' reaction in the frame play, and the characters' need for secrecy in the play-within-the-play reflects Student 1 and 2's need to hide. Indeed Student 4 intervenes as Tybalt only after he and Student 3 “notice the intimacy” between Students 1 and 2

as *Romeo and Juliet* (29). They “look on admonishingly”, then “watch in shock” as Students 1 and 2 kiss (29;30). Later, in the balcony scene, both Students 3 and 4 attempt to “pull [students 1 and 2] apart” (36). The hostility faced by Student 3 earlier thus prefigures what is to come for Students 1 and 2, to a higher degree because, where Student 1 was in part being playful, they are both discovering actual feelings. Student 3's flippant, “despondent” behaviour (32) while they play the summoning scene, and his aggressiveness during the wedding scene, as he tears their copy of *Romeo and Juliet* apart to prevent the scene from going on (45-46), can be interpreted as jealousy, thus complicating the issue of homophobia which underlines the play. The violence culminates in Student 3 hitting Student 1 with the book, at which point he relents and quotes Sonnet 116 to Student 1, signifying his acceptance of the “marriage”, but also possibly communicating his own affection, as the final rhyming couplet, spoken in turn by Student 1/Romeo to Student 2/Juliet while they finally play the wedding scene, reads:

If it be error, and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.

Thus this passage can also be read in light of Goldberg's argument of substitution, discussed above, according to which Romeo, Rosaline, Juliet and Mercutio are all part of a series of couples in the play. Indeed the different students take turns speaking the lines of the sonnet to each other, a technique reminiscent of *Romeo and Juliet*'s first meeting, where their dialogue forms a sonnet (1.5.92-105). When the violence escalates again later on, as they play 3.5, it seems as if all students, but especially Student 3, is acting despite himself: “The boys stop and back away, terrified by their own violence”; “Student 3 backs away, refusing to go on”; “Student 3 lets the script fall from his hands” (68-69). He gets carried away by the script, and his own internalised homophobia, to punch and kick his friend, before realising the meaning of his actions, and

becoming scared of himself. I would argue that Calarco tries to show here the power that homophobia holds even on individuals who are queer themselves. He makes it physical in order to reveal the pain it can do to oneself or others, to the point that all but Student 1 eventually seem to act as if it had been a dream, pulling away from him and leaving him alone. Symbolically, they refuse to accept what they have found out about themselves through the play, denying both their own identities and the violence they have committed, in order to fit in the normative, Christian institution they are a part of.

1.2 : QUEERING STRATEGIES

The adaptations I have selected for my study use the thematic relevance and queer characteristics of the original text as a basis for their interpretations, as demonstrated above. However, they also rely on certain key queering strategies in order for the concept to work, such as the repurposing of the traditionally all-male cast, the deconstruction of the text, and the visual medium for films, and the use of metatheatre. While those strategies are differently used from one adaptation to another because of the different medias, they remain similar across adaptations and therefore allow for the use of a similar study grid to criticise them.

1.2.1 ALL-MALE CASTS

1.2.1.1 THE EARLY MODERN TRADITION

All-male casts were central to pre-Restoration English theatre. While it is commonly believed that actresses were outright forbidden on the British stage, no such law has been discovered. However, the system of apprenticeship in the theatre meant that it would have been

difficult for women to be accepted in the milieu. As a result, the female roles were played by cross-dressing actors, usually younger actors whose voices had yet to break, also known as boy actors. The convention seemed widely accepted, although it was part of the criticism heaped at the foot of theatre by puritans, such as Stephen Gosson in the *Schoole of Abuse*, where he criticizes the actors' "effeminate gestures" (Goldberg, 1992: 106). Transvestism and homosexuality were amongst Gosson's reasons to oppose theatre. The links between antitheatrical and antisodomitical discourses have been studied by scholars such as Laura Levine and Stephen Orgel, before Goldberg himself (Goldberg, 1992: 108-10). Indeed, as Michael Shapiro also points out, crossdressing was considered a sexual misdemeanor, or at least a sign of it (Shapiro, 16). However, playwrights also took advantage of all-male casting to play with its implications, which gave rise to "breeches roles", wherein female characters (played by a man) pretend to be men. In Shakespeare's works, this is most famously the case of Portia in *Merchant of Venice*, Viola in *Twelfth Night*, and Rosalind in *As You Like It*. These roles are well-known for playing on gender expectations for both men and women. In itself, the fact that men played female roles draws attention to how gender is a social construct: as the boy actors were trained to offer a theatrical construct of the social construct of femininity (Shapiro, 37). Butler also studied how drag exposes gender's performativity through the performance by a person of one gender, of the other gender's expectations. Gender is a repetition of socially learned behaviours and actions, and for Butler, what is crucial in drag is that it "plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (Butler, 187). A drag queen portrays a "unified picture of 'woman'", but that very performance reveals that womanhood is not naturally built-in. In imitating femininity, drag thus exposes the imitative nature of gender. The same thing can be said

of cross-gender performances, and especially breeches roles, which play on that added level of subversion. Bevington thus argues that “the assigning of women's parts to boy actors gave Shakespeare a rich opportunity to sport dramatically with sexual ambiguity and to interrogate gender differences” (Bevington, 39). Additionally, male actors in female roles regularly play opposite male actors in male roles in the context of a heterosexual relationship between the characters. In such cases, on the metatheatrical level, since the audience is aware that both actors are male, this creates homoerotic undertones, which are often played with too. Bevington argues that Shakespeare could be quite daring in his play, since his audience was more urbane and less puritan than the ones faced by touring companies (Bevington, 17). Breeches roles were not limited to Shakespeare, as Denise Walen counts roughly 30 plays from 1580 to the closing of the theatres in 1642 where cross-dressing was used “to construct scenarios of female homoerotic desire” (Walen, 411). However, the existence of anti-theatre tracts, and perhaps even contemporary reactions to a woman on the English throne, shows that the London society may not have been entirely open to such ideas. Walen also adds that cross-dressing could have been used to justify to the audience that the character did not exhibit guilt over her desire, since their object appeared male, thus shielding the character from the hostility that was directed at homoeroticism, and some references that allowed one to understand the implications of homoeroticism would have only been available to the more educated amongst the audience (Walen, 412). Thus, even if we could argue that the ideologies spread by puritan tracts are limited to a small portion of the population, the resort to such a tactic points to the existence of that hostility, within the theatre-going audiences themselves. In this sense, one can argue that Elizabethan theatre challenged the sexual norms and gender constructs of the time. At the same

time, in multiple instances Shakespeare “tones down” his original material, for instance the extra-marital sex present in the sources for *Taming of the Shrew* and *Twelfth Night* (Bevington, 18-19). Thus, not everything was fair game for the stage, and yet homoeroticism was indeed present, suggesting that it was not seen so negatively, in part perhaps because it seemed to reference male friendship rather than sodomy. The thin line between the two, which I will discuss in Part 2, may have contributed to Shakespeare’s ability to include in his plays elements that nowadays appear queer.

1.2.1.2 SUBVERTING THE TRADITION IN MODERN ADAPTATIONS

In modern productions, however, the conceit of the all-male cast seems more backwards than subversive. Indeed, in his introduction to the script of *Shakespeare's R&J*, Joe Calarco explains that the conceit of the military school in his adaptation, and the queer implications he added to the text as a result, stem directly from the requirement to have an all-male cast:

I was also given the assignment that it had to be a cast of all men, a conceit I wasn't necessarily keen on. It just seemed like there were so many bad ways it could go. (...) First of all, how would I make sense of this single-sex world? What places are inhabited only by men? I made a list. A locker room. A prison. a military barracks. A boys' school. (...) a boys' school was the logical choice—there is nothing quite so rife with the possibility of danger as happening upon a group of teenage boys. (...) In the original published script of the play I wrote:
"This is a play about men. It is about how men interact with other men. Thus it deals with how men view women, sex, sexuality, and violence. This play is not nor should any production of it be strictly about homoeroticism. Nor should it be strictly about homophobia. (...) Of course these issues exist in the piece. The act of two men kissing is by definition homoerotic, and how can you depict a group of boys acting out a play about romantic love without homophobia rearing its head?" (Calarco, 4)

Thus, while his intent was not to make a "strictly" gay play, Calarco acknowledges from the beginning that the concept of an all-male cast itself supposes homoerotic themes, and the setting of a contemporary, restrictive school demands that homophobia be addressed. Thus, he subverts the conceit of the all-male cast, which historically is not acknowledged on stage. Where the all-male cast usually relies on cross-dressing to pretend to be an accurate representation of reality, Calarco acknowledges the abnormality and dispensability of this casting choice in contemporary theatre in the absence of any additional reasons to do it. Calarco acknowledges the many "bad ways" to make an all-male adaptation, presumably referring to the misogynistic issues associated with not giving women a role to play. For him, one cannot justify doing an all-male production without a good reason to, simply because one wants. Furthermore, choosing an all-male setting to go with the casting choice, rather than relying on cross-dressing actors to play the female roles, makes the homoeroticism less incidental, and creates the need to acknowledge and work with it, rather than letting it be part of the subtext. Calarco's play relies on a play within the play, allowing for the context of the school to be developed. Thus, even as it builds up on the tradition of all-male casting, it also criticizes that conceit, which is still used nowadays in some troupes and theatre. One can think, for instance, of the Globe Theatre's *Twelfth Night* production (2013) with Mark Rylance in the role of Olivia. While the Globe Theatre presents itself as a way to reproduce Elizabethan practices on an authentic Elizabethan stage, such productions also go against the general move towards gender equality on stage. Contemporary practices like that of artistic director Emma Rice have involved, besides the use of microphones, electric lights and contemporary music, cross-gender casting and gender bending of characters. However, these practices as a whole have been decried by both a certain part of the audience, and the Globe's

own board of directors, leading to the early end of Emma Rice's run, in spite of an above-usual success of the plays. It has also been noted that Rice was the first female artistic director since the Globe's reopening (although it has now been announced that she will be followed by actress Michelle Terry). One can therefore argue that Elizabethan style all-male castings might not simply be a question of historical reconstitution, but also part of a reactionary vision of theatre, which does not include actresses, people of colour, or queer people. Therefore, while reconstitutions are central to our understanding of history, directors should be careful of the ideologies that surround such casting decisions. I would argue that Calarco's openly stated decision to not have an all-male cast for an all-male cast's sake is a direct criticism of such practices, which he finds no longer justifiable on a regular contemporary stage. Indeed, if the Globe is its own particular exception, and one of the most well-known Shakespeare theatres in Great Britain, the practice is still widespread in the theatre world. Calarco also remarks that teenagers seemed a particularly interesting group to focus on, for the possibility of “danger” involved with teenage boys. This choice also reflects the age of the original protagonists, and shows how adolescence is seen as conducive to explorations of sexuality.

Likewise, *Private Romeo* allows for the scene to be set as a military school before the play *Romeo and Juliet*, which first belongs to the classroom setting, becomes a part of their life. It thus allows for the privates' own personalities to show, before the secondary characters' personalities take over. Like in Calarco's play, the setting seems to justify the choice of an all-male cast. It also forces the movie to deal with the question of masculinity and toxic male environments in a way that all-male productions which do not acknowledge the conceit do not have to. While the pronouns are not changed in the text borrowed from *Romeo and Juliet*, giving

the impression of a classical all-male cast, the effect is rather an erasure of binaries. They are not male actors playing both male and female characters, but male actors playing male characters who in turn embody male and female characters. What is more, if the privates are (arguably) all male characters, associating them with female pronouns is not seen as ironic, or an attack on their masculinity. Rather, it leaves open the possibility of transgender characters, and highlights the fact, which is perhaps the argument of the film, that gender does not matter when love is concerned. It also highlights positively the possibility of femininity in men.

1.2.2 QUEERING THE MEDIUM AND METATHEATRE

Besides the repurposing of the all-male cast tradition, these adaptations also take advantage of their medium, playing with the structure and techniques and making extensive use of metatheatre, effectively queering the media they are working with.

Queer media often consciously reflect on and subvert the conventions of the medium they employ, thus setting themselves in contrast to mainstream naturalistic, traditionally heteronormative theatre in the form itself. The form thus parallels the content and helps carry its arguments. Whether consciously or not, *Private Romeo*, *Shakespeare's R&J*, and *Still a Rose* all play with the traditional codes of their medium.

1.2.2.1 PRIVATE ROMEO

Private Romeo deviates from conventional filmography. Its aesthetic and cinematography take inspiration from New Queer Cinema, a movement in queer-themed independent films from the nineties. The characteristics of such movies are that they are usually radical in form, present sexual or gender identities that challenge the heterosexual norms, offer

positive representation of unrepenting queer characters, while also showing how sexuality can be alienating and draw repression from the dominant, heterosexual power structures. They also came to be described as racially diverse and flamboyant. Monica B. Pearl defines it as

gay independent cinema, made in the midst of the AIDS crisis, that defies cinematic convention. This defiance can take the form of being fragmented, non-narrative, and a-historical. (Pearl, 23).

And while New Queer Cinema is associated with AIDS cinema, and some have argued that queer cinema as it now exists is too commercial to fit with the original definition of the movement as radical and avant-garde (Pidduck, 80), Julianne Pidduck has argued that, through experimental video, some artists “continue to articulate what is ‘singular’, indigestible, strange, ugly and powerful in queer existence”, in opposition with more marketable “queer consumer culture” (Pidduck, 92). I will therefore argue that, while not exactly part of New Queer Cinema if only by its dates, *Private Romeo* can be studied using the codes of that particular genre, as it follows a number of them.

Private Romeo is filmed entirely with hand-held cameras, characteristic of low-budget independent films of the New Queer Cinema, which frees the production from having to look for a bigger budget and therefore possibly have to take more mainstream narrative or aesthetic decisions in order to please a larger audience. This technique also gives the movie its particular cinematography. The linearity is upset both by the cuts to the text of the play, and by the different levels of narration. A visual particularity of *Private Romeo* is that the spoken text does not always match the filmed image. For instance, characters will be talking about a swordfight, while fistfighting. Yet text and image are made to work together. Matt Doyle, who plays Glenn/Juliet, mentions in the commentary an instance where this bothered the actors. In the

scene from 1:09:30-1:12:30, Josh as Capulet and Gus as Capulet's Wife tell Juliet that she will marry Paris, and yet there is no Paris in *Private Romeo*. The actors tried to come up with a visual cue, with for instance the idea that Paris was an academy Glenn would have to transfer to. They then realised that it worked without it, since the scene is more about conveying the idea of the parents'/friends' disapproval of his relationship with Romeo/Sam, and the violence of their rejection. The movie therefore uses the text of *Romeo and Juliet* primarily to convey the characters' feelings, without trying to match every detail of Verona to their reality. These discrepancies, however, are not used as a Brechtian technique to remind the audience that this is not real, but are fully embraced. If the experience of the characters does not match their words, we are at least expected to understand that their words translate their feelings. Thus, the Shakespearean text is used with the understanding that it helps the characters convey feelings that they may not otherwise have words for. If the use of Early Modern speech is also old-fashioned and unsettling in a twenty-first century school—although this is regular practice on the stage—it is used for what is often talked of as the universality of Shakespeare's language. Interestingly, it is not meant to hinder communication but to enhance it, and to make the story more lyrical. Meta-theatre is thus crucial to the movie's narrative. *Private Romeo* starts with the privates reading the play in class. They are therefore set up as readers/actors. Later, however, it is unclear whether the privates are saying the lines of the play for themselves, or as their parts. The boundaries between acting and real life are therefore blurred, which participates of the film's subversion of the genre and plays with suspension of disbelief. As I explained above, this is not used to remind the audience that it is not real. Of the three levels:

- actors

- characters (level 1): students in a military school
- characters (level 2): characters from *Romeo and Juliet*

the movie never hints at the existence of the actors. Levels 1 and 2 are blurred so that the students and the *Romeo and Juliet* characters are at times practically indistinguishable. This could also be interpreted as a refusal of binaries, which contributes to the queering of the medium. Queer, indeed, is often associated with a refusal of binaries in gender and sex. The label is used by individuals who do not want to subscribe to one single label of the LGBT+ list, but rather want their identity to be understood beyond those labels, or perhaps simply in contrast with heterosexuality or cisgenderism, which tends to uphold a male/female vision of gender and relationships. Queer denotes that one belongs to the community, without having to specify how. As it is meant to offer a space and a rallying cry for all those struggling with cisheteronormativity, queer creates a space for blurred identities (while acknowledging diversity). Therefore, deconstructing the classical use of metatheatre in mainstream movies may well be understood as another tool by which the substance builds upon the form.

Resorting to metatheatre also creates an implicit discussion of the power and uses of theatre, or art in general. Therefore, as *Private Romeo*, like *Shakespeare's R&J*, explores the characters-actors' sexuality, it also make a more general point about the power of theatre to help the audience apprehend new notions and ideas, about the world as well as themselves. What seems to be the starting point of the split narrative, what initiates the plot of the movie, is the reading of the play amongst the privates. Thus, literature is presented as a stimulus for communication, romance and self-discovery. It is also visually represented as what brings warmth and colour into the military life the privates lead, as the cinematography employs warmer

colours during the “Verona” moments (Fig. 2 and 3), in contrast with the grayer military school setting (Fig. 4 and 5). The pen is here presented not as a better weapon, but as cultural enrichment and liveliness, compared to what the sword has to offer—structure and rigidity. If Brown’s goal was to use his art to influence the military’s view on LGBT people, and perhaps influence the wider public’s perception of LGBT people in the military, then there is clearly a parallel between that and how he represented art itself in his movie. In other words, the outward agenda he has for his work, is already represented in his vision of art within the movie’s narrative, although it is hard to say whether this is a deliberate *mise en abyme*, or simply a reflection of the director’s views.



Fig. 2 and 3: examples of warmer colours and oversaturation in the duel scene (00:51:05) and the final scene (1:27:12).



Fig.4 and 5: grayertones in military school scenes: the privates being reprimanded for hazing (00:36:25), and a classroom moment (00:49:01).

Private Romeo's presentation of queer sexuality is twofold. First, it is presented as in conflict with the context, the social structure the queer characters are in. The military school, with the context of DADT that would have been on the audience's minds at the time, represents the patriarchal, heteronormative society that does not allow their romance. The friends of the lovers also reject them and react violently to their relationship, for instance by hazing Glenn/Juliet. Secondly, however, their budding romance is shown in a positive, romantic, almost lyrical light characteristic of New Queer Cinema, which often presents an unashamed view of queer. While the society around them is a source of violence and conflict, the feelings themselves are presented as positive. In this aspect, the ethics of the movie combine with the ideas that the play tries to put forward. *Romeo and Juliet*'s romance is not the real source of the problem, but the feud between the two families is; much like Sam and Glenn's romance is not the real issue. The movie thus both underlines this aspect of the play, and uses it to convey its own ideals. I would argue, however, that this attachment to positive representation is taken further, and may explain the choice of ending, which I will discuss in the part on ethics. It is worth noting here, however, that New Queer Cinema was often associated with narratives that would defy death, for instance

bringing back to life AIDS victims (Aaron, 5). As such the temporary nature of the deaths in the movie can be seen as both a defiance of narrative logic—of the canon of the play—, and as an allusion to this strategy of earlier queer movies.

1.2.2.2 SHAKESPEARE'S R&J

Shakespeare's R&J, like *Private Romeo*, starts in class, with the students reading the book, except not as part of the class, but as a subversive act, contrasting with the rigid frame of the school's different teachings. The play alternates between moments when the teenagers re-enact the play between themselves, and moments when they interact as students, with original text from the playwright. The meta-theatrical dimension is therefore also quite present here. In both adaptations, the characters are both actors and spectators of their own play-within-the-play. The use of metatheatre is similar. However, in *Shakespeare's R&J*, the different levels are not as blurred as in *Private Romeo*. While the original play's pronouns are also kept here, it remains a reading between the students, without colliding with their own life. Interaction is always happening between the young men, rather than between the students-as-characters like in the movie. Here, the students play together through their reading of the text, but characters and students never really merge. The play-text thus becomes more of a means through which their feelings come out, but it stays within its own level of metatheatricality. In other words, while the students read as the characters' parts, their actions remain their own, and the play is only a catalyst for their actions. The personalities of students and Shakespearean characters never truly blend, though similarities are drawn, for instance between Mercutio's feelings for Romeo, and Student 3's feelings for Student 1. As such, the text can be abandoned while the students'

feelings are still being expressed through other means. Indeed, Calarco uses intertextuality as a means of queering Shakespeare. Indeed he deconstructs the text much more (see Appendix), and uses other texts than Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, as well as his own additions. Indeed, certain sections include some of Shakespeare's poems, most notably sonnet 18, which replaces part of the wedding scene. Thus, Calarco links the two texts through their homoeroticism. Indeed, Sonnet 18 belongs to the sonnets addressed to the Fair Youth. This classic poem, well-known for its homoerotic themes, inscribes the play within a history of queer texts, and gives legitimacy to the playwright's choice of queering *Romeo and Juliet*, by hinting at Shakespeare's own sexuality, or at any rate at the queerness of his other works. Sonnet 18 is directly spoken in reaction to the other students' interruption of the reading. Unlike in *Private Romeo*, where the other privates' discontent is made known by their use of the more violent and accusatory parts of *Romeo and Juliet*, here the other students' opposition to the homoerotic scene unfolding in front of them, is simply to put an end to it by taking the book away from their comrades. In this context, the students' sudden and almost instinctual quoting of sonnet 18 (instinctual because unlike with *Romeo and Juliet*, they are never seen learning or reading that text), acts as a direct response against oppression. We can even talk of a gradation. Indeed, they first exchange the romantic vows of *Romeo and Juliet*, originally made between two heterosexual characters. However, as they experience a push-back because of their apparent queer attraction, and are deprived of that text—which is perceived as a cipher for a universal language of love—they react by responding with a clearly queer-coded text. Whereas before the homoeroticism could have just been interpreted as the byproduct of all-male casting, reciting that sonnet seems the students' affirmation that they are serious. They go from shyly repeating a heterosexual romance, with the

distinct possibility that this is just acting, to embracing their queerness by chanting a queer text in the face of oppression. In other words, they seem to give an Early Modern equivalent to the Queer Nation rallying cry: “we’re here, we’re queer, get used to it”. The use of a queer text from the same author subtly carries the message that they are legitimate in acting *Romeo and Juliet* as two boys, because Shakespeare himself at least condoned such feelings, and wrote about them himself. They are reclaiming their place in a queer genealogy that goes from Shakespeare to them. Sonnet 18 acts as the missing link between *Romeo and Juliet* and the lives of the characters.

In parallel, the play-within-the-play is also punctuated by the students' lessons, from Latin conjugation of the verb *amo* (to love), which insists on the play's thematics, to repetition of Christian commands like "you shall not sin", which highlight the rigidity of the religious teachings in the original play, of which it is a strong theme; in this adaptation of course; and in Christian private schools in general. The commands are also presented here as a counterpoint to homoeroticism. This helps build the context for the reading, and the students' reactions. The Christian, moralising setting is the background upon which the romance grows, much like in *Romeo and Juliet* itself. Thus, the adaptation revives this aspect of the play which is partly lost in modern Western adaptations, by foregrounding the reality of traditional Christian institutions and the values they still transmit. I would argue that this creates two correlating effects. First, the traditional values of the Christian school create the backdrop for the hostility against the queer students which gives the adaptation its argument. Second, the inclusion of queerness into the play in this very context renews the stakes of *Romeo and Juliet* by making the play's arguments speak

to current political issues. The adaptation's argument and the original play's argument are thus completely entwined.

In a sense, *Private Romeo* takes the metatheatrical aspect much further than its predecessor. However, *Shakespeare's R&J* arguably offers a more complex and nuanced use of the original text and additional material.

1.2.2.3 *STILL A ROSE*

Short films are also considered a staple of queer filmmaking, since they generally require a lower budget than feature-length, and therefore are easier to make for independent, queer film-makers. The cinematographic and costume quality of *Still a Rose*, however, surpasses that of many short films. *Still a Rose* makes use of cinematic cuts to link together four different narratives into a single one. Instead of presenting the different scenes—a man and a woman in the original configuration, with the roles reversed, two men, and two women—one after the other, the scene is cut so that each line is taken from a different configuration, alternatively. Additionally, the costumes are very similar between male and female Romeos, and between male and female Juliets. As such, it is left unclear whether they represent two different characters, or a single one, double-cast. *Still a Rose* thus follows the unity of scene common to short films, but the cuts, typically used to change shots, are here used to transition between parallel shots, but of another actor, in order to link the different configurations.

1.3 : THE ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF QUEERING A TRAGEDY

These adaptations also raise the ethical question of tragedy in queer works of art. *Romeo and Juliet* is arguably the archetypal story of doomed love. Therefore, adapting it in a queer context means writing one more tragic queer story. However, these particular adaptations finds workarounds to avoid this. I will now address the problem of tragic queer representation in media in general, before discussing how the adaptations studied here—mainly *Shakespeare's R&J* and *Private Romeo*, but also *Still a Rose*—subvert that trope.

1.3.1 A SHORT HISTORY OF THE “BURY YOUR GAYS” TROPE IN ENTERTAINMENT

As I have mentioned in the introduction to this paper, early twentieth-century representation of queer people was generally tragic. Queer characters could not be seen to have a happy ending, as it would make it seem like the author or publisher condoned their way of life, which in turn would lead to censorship. For instance, Tereska Torrès's *Women's Barracks* was condemned by the United States' Gathings committee, as promoting moral degeneracy. Future novels and comics then had to follow the committee's rulings to avoid fines and imprisonment. Queer writers, especially in pulp (which was already seen as broaching “dirty” topics), thus included queer characters, but had to make it seem as if they condemned their queerness to pass censorship. Lesbians and bisexual women in particular would either kill themselves, or go mad, or be institutionalised. Marijane Meaker was thus told that no character could be both queer and happy, so as not to advocate for homosexuality in the eyes of the censors (Thomas, 2016). Famous counter-examples would be Patricia Highsmith's *The Price of Salt* and E. M. Forster's

Maurice. Highsmith published her novel in 1952 under a pseudonym, and the book was considered unprecedented for its happy ending. Highsmith commented in interviews that she received many letters from women who had read it, thanking her for its positive representation. *Maurice* on the other end was published posthumously in 1971, but Forster first started writing it in 1913 and revised it throughout his life. He was quite adamant that *Maurice* should have a happy ending, for if it was not possible in real life it should at least be possible in fiction. However, that meant that the book would have been highly controversial, hence the late publishing.

With the advancements made by the queer civil rights movement, positive queer representation became possible. However, the context of the AIDS crisis meant that queer activists and HIV-positive artists tended to create works that reflected their struggles. As for cinema, in the early days of Hollywood, movies had more easily a queer subtext and feminist undertones. However, as the same censorship was applied to cinema as to novels, and as film's codes became stricter, homosexuality could no longer be portrayed. In the UK, *Edward II* (1970) was the first instance of two men kissing on British television. It cannot be said that the situation has much evolved since. While queer representation is much more widespread, all identities are not equally represented. While gay men are the most represented of all the identities of the acronym, lesbians and bi people are far behind, and transgender characters are all but nonexistent (Dolan, 12). Roy Grundman argued in 1992 that despite the emergence of new directors like Gus Van Sant or Todd Haynes, “to have a film made by a gay director reach the screen still counts as an against-the-odds success in a homophobic industry whose bottom line argument is box office. And by the way, where are the lesbians?” (Grundman, 50). That argument can still be made in

2018, as only one or two queer films a year make it to the big screen. Queer female characters are also still often killed on television, in what is colloquially known as the "bury your gays" trope. Thus, GLAAD (formerly the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation)'s annual study of LGBT representation in US media counted that queer characters in primetime broadcast series represent under 5% of regular characters. Of those, gay men are the majority, while there is a total of sixteen transgender characters across all platforms (broadcast, cable and streaming). Based on GLAAD's numbers, lesbian and bisexual women represent a little less than half the queer characters, or under 2,5% of all TV characters. However, a number of articles mention that queer women account for almost 10% of all characters' deaths on TV in the 2015-2016 season. While queer characters are far fewer than heterosexual, cisgender characters, they are killed much more often, which highlights a problem in representation that is still present today. The GLAAD study insists that

television failed queer women this year as character after character was killed. This is especially disappointing as this very report just last year called on broadcast content creators to do better by lesbian and bisexual women after superfluous deaths [...]. This continues a decades long trend of killing LGBTQ characters—often solely to further a straight, cisgender character's plotline—which sends a dangerous message to audiences. (GLAAD report, 6)

Their president, Sarah Kate Ellis, also adds in the foreword that "[w]hen the most repeated ending for a queer woman is violent death, producers must do better to question the reason for a character's demise and what they are really communicating to the audience" (GLAAD report, 3). The study also notes that TV series are still far ahead of films in terms of LGBT representation (GLAAD, 6).

In light of these facts, I would argue, alongside queer representation advocates, that there is an ethical dimension to choosing to kill a queer character, or to queer a character that will inevitably die. These tragic representations participate in the stereotype that queer people cannot be happy. The persistence of this stereotype then influences young queer people's perception of their future, as well as heterosexual parents' ideas that being queer is negative and dangerous for their children, which does not encourage dialogue and makes coming out difficult, thus also contributing to queer children's depression and suicide rates. While it is only one parameter, I will argue that, for kids in isolated places like the countryside, or highly religious communities, the media are the only way to see people like themselves. Therefore, all artists have a responsibility with regards to the content they produce. While works that denounce homophobia and the discrimination people face, or discuss the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s, are clearly important and should not be neglected, it is also important for both queer people and others that artists put out positive representation, to show that possibility.

1.3.2 HOW CREATORS CONFRONT THE ISSUE

Choosing specifically Shakespeare's tragedies as the classical works one wants to queer is in itself problematic for this reason, and the different artists seem aware of this, as they find workarounds. Calarco openly acknowledges this issue in his introduction to the reedition of the play:

I remember thinking that I would not want a boy like Jadin Bell¹¹ or anyone else

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Jadin Bell was a gay American teenager who killed himself in 2013, in a context of intense bullying both at school and online. His death started a discussion on the effects of bullying, and especially of gay bullying.

wrestling with identity and self-worth to be sitting in the audience and have that image be the last one of the play. That "all-too familiar tableau of queer adolescent angst" [qtd from *The Advocate's* review of the play] that ended the play was becoming deeply problematic for me. It felt irresponsible, actually. (Calarco, 7)

Thus Calarco explains that at the last minute, he changed what was "meant to be a very sad, desolate, final image" (Calarco, 7) into a more triumphant one for the new edition, out of this sense of responsibility for his struggling queer audience. Indeed, with such a play, the question of the audience is important. Whether a play is meant for an exclusively queer audience, as can be the case with performances put up in gay bars, or for a wider, mainly cisgender and heterosexual audience, the approach will be different : the same subjects cannot be discussed in the same way with a general audience as in an LGBT-only space, where the spectators have a degree of shared experience. Calarco first did not want this play catalogued as a "gay play", and by his own admission even refused to give the rights to Celebration Theatre, which specialises in works that deal with the queer experience (Calarco, 5). His play was therefore first intended for a general audience. However, even if it was not advertised for its queer themes, LGBT people will inevitably be in the audience. Calarco thus felt a responsibility to them, and especially to queer teenagers, to give some hope at the end. He argues as well that the original play allows for hope too, since the last scene of *Romeo and Juliet* also offers a kind of hope with a return to peace.

Private Romeo likewise takes a lighter approach to the ending. As I noted earlier, *Private Romeo* seems to follow the general pattern of New Queer Cinema movies, largely through its attachment to a remorseless and affirming approach to queerness in the face of opposition. Multiple times in the director's commentary, Alan Brown and the two main actors repeat that they do not think the movie is directly about homophobia (*Private Romeo*, director's commentary, 00:26:10-00:27:15). The director argues that "it's more subversive because we

didn't make it [homophobia] the issue", and while there are personal issues of homophobia for individual characters, "it did not become the driving force of the film," (1:32:10-1:32:18). Brown chose to show how "love can overcome" (1:31:00) any situation. In other words he chose to portray the exclusion and violence of homophobia, but wanted the main focus of the movie to be about the positive relationship between the two main characters, where that homophobia did not triumph. He then uses the metadiegetic aspect of the narrative to create a happier ending than the play allows. At the metadiegetic level, Mercutio, Tybalt, then Romeo and Juliet all die. However, at the intradiegetic level, the students have a different fate. Brown and the actors explain that in rehearsals they had this idea that, from the perspective of teenagers, the drama is heightened, so that "they might as well have died" as far as their perception of the world is concerned. Therefore, although the text of the play says otherwise, the audience can clearly see that Tybalt and Mercutio are not really dead in the duel scene. Furthermore, another scene shows the two students reconciling over their wounds later on. This discrepancy between text and image is also part of the originality of form in this movie. More importantly, however, it allows all characters to survive, thus showing that there are other ways for this situation to end than tragically. Brown ties this to a willingness to show another way than suicide, as bullying issues for queer teens were brought to light at the time (1:19:45-1:20:10). In the movie, the scene where Juliet drinks the sleeping potion, and that in the Capulets' crypt all happen in the same space, an amphitheatre. In addition, the apothecary scene is also cut. Romeo just drinks Juliet's sleeping draught instead of poison like in the original play, and both wake up together in the end. The cinematography and in particular the music still create a certain suspense, especially since Romeo's drinking follows Juliet's monologue on her doubts over Friar Lawrence giving him poison instead. However, both

young men waking up together allows for the movie to offer a positive, hopeful ending, while still keeping the stakes high and making a point, here not so much on the toxic environment of two families' feud but of a military school and what young men can do when left to themselves. These two scenes are where the two layers of metatheatre are most separated, aside from the very first scene. Thus, I would argue that this technique is not used to counter suspension of disbelief, but to play with expectations and offer a different ending, while maintaining this narrative layer where both the military school and Verona co-exist. In other words, the happy ending is a deviation from the tragic canon, but rather than breaking the fourth wall, *Private Romeo* seems to create its own alternative reality for the characters, who remain presented as both Sam and Romeo, Glenn and Juliet. The movie uses the play's themes to discuss homophobia, but also refrains from indulging in the tragic ending that could have so easily proven the point further. If the movie is about homophobia in the military and its consequences, it is also about acceptance and change. Since *Private Romeo* was made to oppose Don't Ask Don't Tell, it makes sense thematically to include a positive ending, one where the heroes are accepted as they are—what Brown and other activists hoped would happen for LGBT people in the military.

However, we must examine how this decision affects the meaning of the play. Indeed, I would argue that one of the play's strengths lies precisely in the fact that it is a tragedy. The senselessness of the feud, or even of the rejection that the two protagonists have to go through, takes all its meaning in the tragic ending. The play's conclusion is the only logical result of the characters' actions. Therefore, one can argue that a watered-down version of the play would also lose this strength. *Private Romeo* already minimizes the family conflict in its retelling, which focuses more on friendship and loyalty instead. If the external violence the characters

undergo is lessened, and the tragedy is also erased, does it not undermine the core message of the play? In other words, *Private Romeo*'s erasure of the tragic and violent in the play it takes inspiration from may well do the movie a disservice. The question, however, lies squarely in ethics: Brown had a choice between showing the extreme results of homophobia in the military down to driving his characters to suicide, thus following the original play and its denouncing techniques; or presenting a weaker version of the play, and perhaps a weaker argument against homophobia (but as he says himself the movie is not about homophobia) but a more inspirational work for the teenagers in his audience. Therefore, while I would argue that in some ways *Private Romeo* does not make use of the original play in the best of ways both for the essence of that play and from a queer perspective, it is also evident that the director's goals were better met by the ending he chose to give his work, and that choice makes sense from an ethical perspective. Whether adapting *Romeo and Juliet* was the best way to achieve those goals, however, considering the conflict highlighted here between what the play's ending would lead to, and what Brown chose, is still an open question.

I would argue that *Still A Rose* takes a similar stance, by choosing to curtail itself to the balcony scene. This scene is at the center of *Romeo and Juliet's* romance, and often seen as *the* canonical moment within one of the most canonical of Shakespeare's plays. A key element of that scene is that it happens in what I would call the "private" sphere, at night, away from their families and the feud. If the concerns of the risks are still present, it remains one of the most positive scenes of the play. Therefore, the choice of the most positive scene in the tragedy, and one that is centered on love, is crucial to the understanding of the short film. Adversity is still present, of course, both in the dialogue, when Juliet worries about Romeo's safety, and in the

context. Indeed, *Romeo and Juliet* is such a central play in the English literary canon that even people who have not read it are familiar with the plot. As such, one can expect that everyone watching the film will be familiar with the surrounding plot, and aware of the stakes. However, the film itself focuses on the love between the two protagonists, instead of their hardships. This itself can be part of *Still a Rose's* message. The writers-directors not only chose a play with a romance, but one in which that romance has to be hidden from their families, to draw a parallel with the struggle of queer and interracial couples. However, by not showing that conflict itself, they voluntarily do not show the homophobia, only the resilience of the couple who work through it, therefore focusing on the positive aspects.

1.3.3 PORTRAYING MINORITIES WITHIN THE MINORITY

Finally, I would like to raise the issue of race in these adaptations. *Romeo and Juliet* has often been used to discuss racial and ethnic issues, for instance with *West Side Story*, but also less famous productions which chose to picture one of the two families as black. One instance of this common practice would be the 2014 Broadway production of the play, with Orlando Bloom as Romeo and Condola Rashad as Juliet. Other productions use race-blind casting, where some actors are black regardless of the race of the other actors who play their families.

However, in queer adaptations the racial representation is often minimal. The question of queer women of colour is an interesting one, as they face combined struggles with regards to their race, gender and sexuality. Likewise there is very little queer women of colour in the media, since both Black people and women are under-represented, as well as queer people, as pointed out above. The issue here is to represent sometimes gender-nonconforming queer women without erasing Black women's femininity. The problem is that when only one character stands

for all these different communities, it is difficult to present a nuanced portrayal that does justice to all these identities. While *Still a Rose* includes a Black actress as Romeo, the fact that she plays only Romeo ties in with stereotypes of Black women being defeminized in media, and presented as tougher and more masculine. This phenomenon goes as far as the stereotype of the “angry black woman” or even the Sapphire, a stereotype dating back to the pre-Civil war era in the US, but still present nowadays. Sapphires were portrayed in opposition to the feminine upper-middle class white woman, as “strong, masculinized” women who worked alongside men in the fields, or aggressive women who drove their families away, while in reality their owners sold their children away, causing understandable anger (West, 295-6). However, I would argue that unlike the other male characters in the play, Romeo hardly possesses this kind of violent masculinity that is stereotypically associated with the trope of the “angry black woman”. Thus, *Still A Rose* still manages to target both the issues of mixed-race and same-gender relationships, and to illustrate “equal love in unequalled prose”, as their video description proposes.

Shakespeare's R&J, as a playtext, does not account for the race of the actors or call for a certain casting, but *Private Romeo* has one Black character, who plays Escalus. This is an interesting choice, as it places him in a position of power, but also means that he has a limited role to play, and he is not one of the (openly) queer characters. Additionally, in the context of the military school, this student may be in charge, but he also answers to the teachers, who are absent for the time of the action. This means that the character's authority is limited by the context of the adaptation, and it can be seen as problematic that this happens precisely to the Black character. On the other hand, it makes this character more rounded, as his decisions not only depend on what he wants for himself and for the people he is in charge of, but on his superiors' decisions. It

makes Escalus a more complex and multi-faceted character. The lack of racial diversity is one major deviation from New Queer Cinema, as well as the lack of “flamboyance”. New Queer Cinema often focused on the marginalised even within the community. It did not stop at what was considered by the mainstream as “acceptable subjects”, but addressing interracial relationships, the experiences of trans people and queer people of colour, etc. (Aaron, 3-4). Flamboyance is used to denote something colourful or over-the-top, but in the case of queer, it also refers to more feminine or gender-nonconforming gay men (sometimes referred to as “fairies” or “flamers”), drag queens, etc. However, *Private Romeo* has quite a sober aesthetic. This is partly due to the military context, but it may also denote a willingness to be more mainstream, to show more “regular” queer characters, so that the teenagers the movie is intended for may identify with them more easily, and so that the message of acceptance of the movie may be better perceived, by showing queer people’s love is similar to anyone else’s. Indeed I would argue that the very fact of adapting *Romeo and Juliet* as a queer romance implies that creator and audience recognize the universality of the experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that the director would not endanger that by making his characters too “other”. However, Daniel T. Contreras notes that even within New Queer Cinema, with a few exceptions, movies were generally racially homogenous, despite the genre’s “claims of representational revolution and inclusion” (Contreras, 120). Thus, it seems that the question of racial diversity is not a new problem in queer cinema, but one that dates back to the beginnings of the genre, despite queer people of colour’s heavy involvement in queer liberation movements. Perhaps this is a point where queer Shakespearean cinema would profit from the Shakespearean stage’s more open approach to race, with for instance the democratization of race-blind casting.

Finally, while *Still a Rose* gives equal screen time to women and to men, the others' choice of an all-male casting highlights issues of gender, and the presence (or absence) of women in theatre. This issue is mainly dependent on the choice of available productions, which may partly indicate that women are less represented in filmed adaptations of Shakespeare plays. However, the size of the corpus is too small to make a definitive argument, and a proper answer to this question would necessitate a statistical study of all productions. However, it is generally true of Shakespearean productions, and theatre in general, that men are given more roles than women. This is in part due to the lack of female roles in the original text, and sometimes solved by cross-gender casting, as we will see in the second part. The fact remains that lesbian adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* are scarce, and where they exist (as for Curio theatre's production), procuring a copy proves difficult.

CONCLUSION

As I have shown, the text of *Romeo and Juliet* is quite conducive to queering. In addition to themes that can be easily associated with the queer experience, Renaissance theatre's reliance on all-male casts is also reworked and subverted for two out of the three adaptations under study. Those two interpretations also rely heavily on mises en abymes to convey their political ideas. *Still a Rose* on the other hand relies more on symbolism and visual parallels to make the playtext itself convey its message, in the way it is shared amongst protagonists of different genders and colours.

All three emphasize the original text's homoeroticism, and as such one could say they do something *for* the text. They also re-politicize a political play by adding in the notion of

equality across sexual identities and sometimes race—a theme also present in *Othello* and *Merchant of Venice*—which has the potential to make the play resonate with modern audiences. The three adaptations use different techniques to carry across their message. While *Shakespeare's R&J* and *Private Romeo* both use more experimental, queerer techniques, *Still a Rose* presents a more traditional cinematography, and respects both original text and setting. However, I would argue that this is perhaps its strength: it does not rely on anything but Shakespeare's original wording to convey its message, which gives more bearing to the argument. *Private Romeo* and *Shakespeare's R&J* both transpose the setting, as we have seen, to military schools, and while they keep most of the text, they do rely on added material both to set the scene and convey their message. *Private Romeo* would be the most experimental of the two by reason of its cinematography, although perhaps the codes of New Queer Cinema as I have tried to explain them are not so experimental twenty years down the line. However, this strategy will appeal more to the queer audience familiar with the genre. The setting as transposed also fits the proposed goal of touching young audiences with their message.

In short, *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations present a variety of ways in which to queer the play, which can be explained by their specific political intents. As such, they also present three contrasting interpretations of the same play.

PART 2: TRANSGENDER NARRATIVES OF *HAMLET*

Hamlet's text as we know it is an editorial reconstruction—actually reconstructions, since each new edition makes different editorial choices—of the play based on two quartos—Q1 from 1602; Q2 from 1604—and the first folio, printed in 1623. The date of writing, as well as the date of the first performance, are hard to determine. Additionally, the length and complexity of this reconstruction means that most, if not all, directors are led to amend the text, displace scenes, etc. One can thus argue that all productions of *Hamlet* are already adaptations. Nevertheless, it still remains a prominent play in the canon, if not *the* canonical play. As such, the play provides interesting grounds for adaptations in general.

Hamlet is often lauded as the most complicated, well-developed character on the English stage. The play indeed deals extensively with the questions of identity and appearances, hypocrisy and acting. Hamlet has the longest speaking part in a Shakespeare play, and his soliloquies are world-famous for their introspection and insight into the character. This depth of character is contrasted with the dealings of the court, which relies on hypocrisy and secrecy. Being and seeming are two key aspects of Hamlet's existential dilemma. The theme surrounding the links between identity and appearance is part of what makes Hamlet so amenable to queer adaptations. Transgender identities especially are often seen as formed around a dichotomy between the self and the body. Hamlet also bears traditionally feminine qualities sometimes associated with queer characters, and the role has commonly been given to women. In addition, the original character of Hamlet can be read as queer, especially in his relationship to Horatio.

After discussing the elements of the play that are typically interpreted as queer, and those that could lead to queer interpretations, I will delve into the question of past Hamlets

played by women. I will then analyse the strategies surrounding both productions under study: their outlook on the transgender issue, what they bring to the question of Hamlet's identity and to the play's discussion of women, and the different aspects of masculinity at play in *Hamlet* and its adaptations. Finally, I will discuss the ethical issues that arise from both productions, from homophobia to the question of appropriate casting.

2.1 ELEMENTS OF *HAMLET* THAT INCITE QUEER ADAPTATIONS

2.1.1 HAMLET AND HORATIO

Hamlet and Horatio's relationship can also be interpreted as queer, and indeed both scholars and directors have pushed such interpretations. Jeffrey Masten thus argues that “sweet” in “Good night, sweet Prince” (5.2.343) has queer connotations. Indeed the term is used in a romantic context elsewhere in the Shakespearean canon: similar intimacy appears in *The Merchant of Venice* with Bassanio, whom Antonio addresses as “[s]weet Bassanio,” and with his wife Portia, whom he calls “sweet doctor” (Masten, 72). One may also recall the use of “sweet” to qualify Rosalind and Phoebe by their suitors in *As You Like It*: “Sweet Phoebe” (Silvius, 3.6.1), “sweet youth” (Phoebe to the disguised Rosalind, 3.6.64), “sweet Rosalind” (Orlando, 4.1.150). Thus the term has a history of being used in a romantic context. In *Hamlet* itself, Claudius also addresses his wife as “[s]weet Gertrude” (3.1.28), although it could be argued that the term is used throughout the play both in the case of family relationships, between Laertes and Ophelia for example, and in a more public context by courtiers. Horatio does not only call Hamlet “sweet” in his final address, as Hamlet is dying, but also calls him “sweet lord” earlier (3.2.49). In that same scene, Hamlet tells Horatio

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish her election
Sh'ath sealed thee for herself.

(...) Give me that man
That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him
In my heart's core—ay, in my heart of heart—
As I do thee. (3.2.59-70)

While Hamlet is complimenting Horatio for his good character, the language is heightened and contains an element of lyricism. Hamlet here claims Horatio as his own, as one would a lover. Furthermore their attachment is evident in the final scene, when Horatio tries to drink what remains of the poisoned cup to die with Hamlet, a gesture reminiscent of Romeo's at Juliet's death. Such an interpretation is perhaps necessarily tainted by our modern understanding of sexuality. Indeed, as Alan Bray explains, Renaissance male friendships would have been intimate, including kisses and bedsharing. Such relationships were considered platonic and entirely separate from the concept of sodomy (Bray 42-43; 46), which regrouped a lot of sexual acts besides anal sex or sex between men, such as zoophilia, sex out of wedlock, pedophilia, etc. which were all conflated as unlawful and ungodly sex acts under the social construct of “sodomy”. However, Bray also diagnoses a fusion of the two ideas—sodomy and male friendship—by the end of the sixteenth century. He argues that texts such as Marlowe's *Edward II* are symptomatic of the Elizabethans' difficulty to determine a concrete dividing line between male friendship and sodomy, as the boundaries meant to separate the two progressively disappeared (56). Gaveston's closeness and intimacy with Edward is thus meant to be seen as a sign of sodomy (and indeed is interpreted as such by the court) while they're also seen as signs of close friendship in the Elizabethan era. Such signs—closeness, bed-sharing, kissing—then also served as proofs in accusations of sodomy. It seems that a question of social class intervened in the distinction, and sodomy was also treated as a co-occurring behaviour to atheism, heresy,

treason, etc., making male friendship the socially acceptable version of the same apparent behaviour.¹² Additionally, as Bray also points out, “homosexual relationships did indeed occur within social contexts which an Elizabethan would have called friendship” (54), meaning that what may have been seen as friendship might indeed have been a homosexual relationship. Most contemporary discussions of sodomy and male friendship rely on public, rather than intimate behaviours. As such, interpretations of Hamlet and Horatio's relationship that acknowledge its complexity and queer undertones are not necessarily anachronistic, and may even be recovering something of the original meaning that Shakespeare put into their lines. Horatio's and Hamlet's interactions may be proof of a strong male friendship as was conventional for the Elizabethans, but it can simultaneously show homoerotic undertones, and Shakespeare must have been aware of both possible interpretations. Furthermore, to a modern audience, the faithful representation of such a close, intimate friendship between men will inevitably appear to have homosexual connotations, since they do not fit the modern idea of heterosexual masculinity. Therefore a contemporary production may choose to play on this potentiality, regardless of the fact that it may not have appeared that way in Shakespeare's own time. Directors have often exploited this ambiguity in the text. A production is bound by the era it is made in, and will often use the classic text to discuss contemporary issues. Gregory Doran in particular, in his 2009 production of *Hamlet* at the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), did not shy away from expressing the strong physical closeness in Hamlet and Horatio's relationship.

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See for instance the Baines' Note accusing Marlowe, as discussed in 1.1.2.



Fig. 6: David Tennant and Peter de Jersey as Hamlet and Horatio in 5.2 of *Hamlet* (2009), dir. Gregory Doran.

The last scene is already emotionally charged, and it is a common enough staging decision to have a fallen Hamlet beheld by Horatio. However, the hands, looks and closeness of their faces in this case (see fig. 2) make it even more intimate. The acting makes more concrete the ambiguity of the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio as either close friendship or romance.

What is more, the court's interpretation that Hamlet is mad not with grief, but with love for Ophelia (2.1.82), can be seen as another sign of heteronormativity being forced upon him. Indeed Polonius, and the others after him, can only comprehend Hamlet's state of mind if it revolves around a woman. Furthermore, when he does not respect the court's rules, and refuses to stop mourning his father, his behaviour is equated with madness. Hamlet is *queer*, in the first meaning of the word, in that his behaviour is strange and unfitting for the court. However, writing it off as heterosexual love-madness allows the King and Queen to not take their share of

responsibility for Hamlet's depressive state. Thus Hamlet's estrangement from his family, while not in itself queer, makes Hamlet's experiences resonate with queer people's, much as Romeo and Juliet's does.

2.1.2 SUICIDE IN *HAMLET* LINKED TO QUEERNESS

Finally, Hamlet's suicide ideation can contribute to discussions on the high suicide rate amongst queer people. Carla Freccero reflects on *Hamlet* through the prism of teenage suicide. The play offers the possibility of refusing "to be", since the alternative is to "submit, dedicate yourself with filial piety to furthering the parental aim" (2011-1: 171). Thus, suicide would be the option to escape the future planned by one's parents. It seems, however, that suicide ideation comes from a wish to escape family expectations and duties, as Juliet does for example by killing herself when the only option she has left is to marry Paris. Likewise Hamlet contemplates "not to be" (3.1.55) : that "he himself might his quietus make / With a bare bodkin" (74-75) not only so he wouldn't have to bear the affronts to himself and his father's memory from Claudius and Gertrude, but to shed his duties, his "fardels" (75), to his father, of exerting revenge himself, and his moral conundrum between avenging his father and committing murder. His hypothetical suicide, a reaction to familial expectations, could even be seen as counter-normative and queer. Indeed, Lee Edelman argues that (hetero)normativity's aim is reproduction through heterosexual coupling, so that the child becomes a symbolical future for the parents, a form of endurance after death and collective survival (2011-2:148). Queerness is in conflict with this norm specifically because queer sex does not (usually) lead to procreation. Edelman therefore argues that refusing to procreate, in itself, is queer. He reasons that Hamlet's demand that there be "no more marriage" (3.1.146) is in essence queer, as it refuses the heterosexual institution of

marriage, and conception alongside it. Edelman's argument is carried even further: Hamlet being the child through whom King Hamlet survives—even in name, which itself is a sign of patriarchal filiation—, his hypothetical suicide would be the end of his line, and the ultimate act against survival—which is seen as heteronormativity's goal—, which would make suicide inherently queer. However, Edelman's glorification of suicide as the ultimate resistance against heteronormativity is dangerous, and based on an erroneous take on queerness which would only define itself as the absence of procreation. We can however observe that suicide is linked to depression, and queer people are at a higher risk of mental illness when rejected by their families. Suicide therefore is not inherently linked to queerness, but remains a consequence of society's perception and exclusion of queer people. While the suicide drive is perhaps not where queerness is to be found in the plays, the act of queering them puts into perspective the correlation between rejection and suicidal ideation, as Hamlet feels alienated from his family. It does however reinforce the impression given in the media that queer people are condemned to despair and/or death.

2.1.2 EDWARD VINING: THE THEORY OF A FEMALE HAMLET

Hamlet's more traditionally feminine traits justify the role being played by women, but also transgender interpretations. An early study of the play, by Edward Vining, entitled *The Mystery of Hamlet* (1881), indeed posits that the general puzzlement at Hamlet's complexity, “so much that seems unaccountable and strange in the doings of Hamlet” (16), can be explained by him actually being a woman. Since it is quoted as the inspiration for Gade and Schall's *Hamlet* (fig. 3), I will now discuss its arguments, and how they can be reinterpreted from a feminist, transgender-positive standpoint.

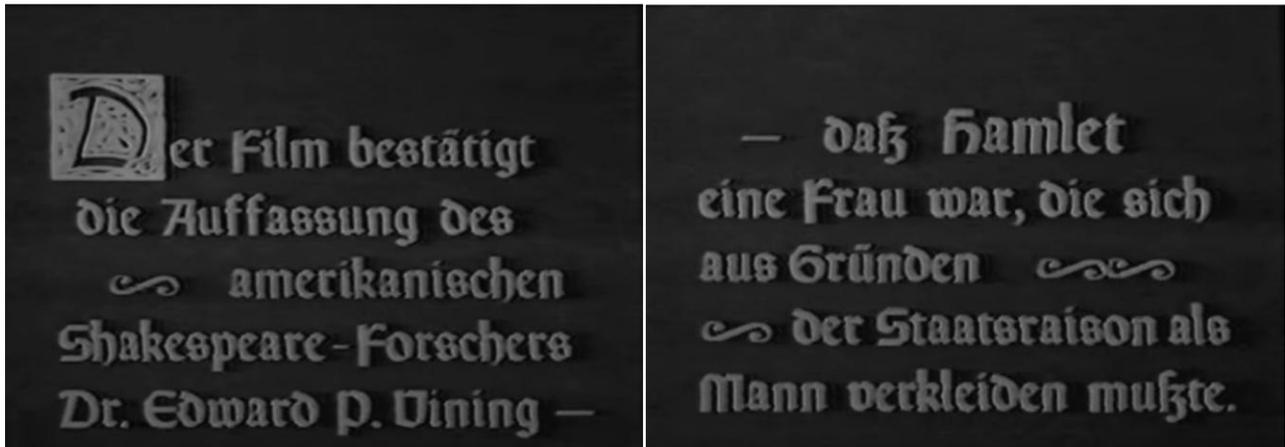


Fig. 7: *Hamlet* (1921), 00:00:38 and 00:00:52. The intertitles read: “The film confirms the view—of American Shakespearean scholar Dr. Edward P. Vining—that Hamlet was a woman who for reasons of State had to disguise herself as a man”.

By transgender-positive, I mean that the interpretations I propose introduce the possibility of transgenderism, as opposed to transphobic and binary interpretations, which tend to erase transgender people's existence. While awareness of transgender issues is recent, transgender people have been present at different times in history, under different labels (see for instance Madame d'Eon in eighteenth-century France, and Magnus Hirshfeld's work as the Scientific Humanitarian Committee and Institut für Sexualwissenschaft in the early twentieth century). Thus, while the vocabulary itself may be anachronistic, transgender-inclusive interpretations are not. I also want to attract attention to the fact that trying to justify a transgender interpretation in any text is a sensitive endeavour. First, there is no singular transgender experience to draw parallels with, and there need not be a sense of transness to a character to justify its queering. Secondly, in dealing with old texts, it is tempting to look for the “feminine” in male characters, or for the “masculine” in female ones, but this strategy is also rooted in transphobia and binarism, as it draws on the expectation that men are one way and women another. However, while we need to acknowledge that these binary gender expectations, and gender expressions, are social constructs,

their study in the original text remains interesting insofar as it may uncover why this particular character more than others draws such interpretations, and why transgender people may relate more to Hamlet. The history of interpretations of the character as female, or woman-like, may also help explain the occurrence of such queerings, and Vining belongs to this history.

He explains Hamlet's "weakness" (16) by claiming he has to be a woman, which is misogynistic and based on toxic masculinity, whereby a true male hero cannot show feelings, hesitancy or weakness. Toxic masculinity indeed refers to the socially constructed and destructive gender expectations directed at men, such as expecting men to repress "unmasculine" behaviour like crying, showing emotions, etc. and rewarding anger, toughness, etc. as the only proper expression of masculinity. It has been linked to higher risk taking, health threats, and violence, as well as repressed emotions, in men (Connell, 25; Courtenay, 1387-8) and is ultimately linked to misogyny, since the repressed traits are the ones socially considered as feminine. According to Vining, Hamlet "lacks the energy, the conscious strength, the readiness for action" necessary to the perfect male character (46), but is so admired because he fits the characteristics of female perfection instead. In Vining's sexist, binary vision of gender, gentleness, lack of physical strength—compensated by shrewdness and plotting—, and dependence upon others are signs of a feminine character (47). Dissimulation, such as when Hamlet tries to discover Claudius's guilt through the play within the play rather than by confronting him directly, is also declared a feminine characteristic, a trait he would have inherited from his mother (48). Hamlet's misogynistic harangue against Ophelia is for Vining a sign of female jealousy, or of a woman in male disguise trying to play what she thinks is the part of a man (58-59). Indeed Vining, perhaps influenced by the eighteenth-century trend of having a female actress play the part of Hamlet,

does not stop at his description of a feminine man, but claims that Shakespeare really created in Hamlet a woman who would have been raised to “play a prince's part” (59), and therefore Shakespeare would have rewritten the play to better fit a female Hamlet. Vining uses Shakespeare's propensity to write cross-dressing heroines as a further proof of his theory (61).

He also uses Hamlet's love for Horatio, which I discussed above, to “prove” his theory further. Vining denies the possibility that Hamlet could be homosexual, to argue that the only explanation for Hamlet and Horatio's bond is that it is the love of a woman for a man (62). It is unclear whether Vining's theory of a female Hamlet is meant specifically to deal away with the character's queerness, or whether his theory simply proves convenient in erasing it. This line of argumentation is of course rife with homophobia, as it relies on the belief that romantic love between two men is unnatural, or even inexistent. It shows, however, that the queer interpretation of Hamlet and Horatio's relationship dates back to the late eighteenth century. Likewise Vining denies the possibility of love between Hamlet and Ophelia, which by his argument would otherwise have been a same-gender relationship. Furthermore, reading the “to be or not to be” soliloquy as Hamlet shrinking from his duty to kill Claudius for fear that he may die in the action, he diagnoses his readiness to bear all ills rather than act as a sign of delicacy that can only fit a woman, not a young prince (53). Vining also asserts that Hamlet's harshness and readiness to jump in Ophelia's grave is also a sign of the hysterical female nature, as is his rhetorical mastery, following the stereotype of women as cunning (56).

I would argue that the stereotype of cunning, dissimulating women stems from women being historically more often in a position where they have fewer rights and power and are therefore forced to resort to less direct modes of action to obtain justice, for instance. Hamlet

is placed in a similar situation, since his father's alleged murderer is the king, thus preventing any recourse to the law. Thus, his cunning and schemes are the only way for him to obtain revenge for his father's death. While that does not make him feminine, despite Vining's argument, it means that he is placed in a more traditionally feminine role. One can recall for instance Euripides' *Hecuba*—on which *Hamlet* focuses heavily—where the prisoner queen, also encouraged by a ghost, must find a way to exact revenge on her son's murderer despite his power over her. *Hamlet* is similarly placed in a position of subjection to Claudius, and the way he works through his revenge plot can be reminiscent of famous female characters. *Hamlet* thus subverts these gender roles by putting the male hero in a similar position to heroines, and exploits all the complexity of a character who embodies both traditionally feminine and masculine traits. This dynamic is admittedly frequent in revenge tragedies, where the avenger is regularly put in a lesser position.¹³ It does however allow a production to play on the character's gender: while Vining's analysis of *Hamlet* relies on stereotypes and prejudices, both against women and queer people, he nonetheless brings to our attention the fact that *Hamlet* does not fit a classic representation of masculinity, as portrayed from revenge tragedies to contemporary action movies. Indeed, he does not share the violent nature of *Titus Andronicus*, or other typically manly heroes of the Elizabethan stage, such as *Tamburlaine*, *Henry V*, or *Petruchio*. Although it could be argued that *Tamora* or *Lady Macbeth* share these characters' violent and vengeful traits, they are often described as masculine and unnatural. Therefore, one can argue that *Hamlet* possesses traits commonly thought of as feminine. Claudius himself calls *Hamlet's* sorrow “unmanly grief”

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See for instance: *Titus* in *Titus Andronicus*, *Hieronimo* in *The Spanish Tragedy*, etc.

(1.2.94). However, it is perhaps significant that these words are spoken by the villain of the play, and a man of action. Grief is indeed often still perceived as typically feminine, and that is one of the problems entailed by toxic masculinity, that it does not allow men to express certain emotions, which are perceived as weak. However, one can perhaps concede that a male character with traditionally feminine traits makes it more acceptable to cast female actors for the part. Even if the categorization of feminine and masculine traits is based on binary, patriarchal gender roles that feminism tries to circumvent, one must recognize that they are still prevalent in society. At any rate, the popularity of Vining's argument, and the fact that it became an inspiring element for the 1921 movie, shows that this particular categorization of the feminine and the masculine seemed reasonable in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

The tradition of women playing Hamlet, from the eighteenth century onwards, with actresses such as Charlotte Charke—famous eighteenth-century English actress and crossdresser—, Sarah Bernhardt, Asta Nielsen, and Maxine Peake, must have been in part justified by the notion that Hamlet is not just a male part, but a character who embodies the human condition as a whole, regardless of gender. Indeed, playing Hamlet is considered the pinnacle of one's acting career, since his depth and versatility make it a challenging role to play. What is more, a feminist take on a woman playing Hamlet can be a reclaiming of these traits evidenced by Vining as feminine, but not negative traits. Likewise a production which endorses Hamlet's femininity as well as his homoerotic relationship with Horatio can acknowledge the stereotypes of feminine gay men, and subvert them. At any rate, portraying Hamlet as a feminine gay man means acknowledging feminine gay men's complexity, when they are so often stereotyped as shallow. Therefore, Hamlet's femininity and the sexist theories about it are

interesting, first because they allow us to discern expectations about masculinity and femininity at a given time, which is useful for the study of contemporary works, and secondly because the character fits neither of these binary, stereotypical categories, which allows actors and directors to play with gender expression and expectations. Adaptations can thus use Hamlet's both feminine and masculine traits to portray the struggle of transgender people to present their gender. They can show them dealing with both gender dysphoria¹⁴ and traits commonly associated with their gender assigned at birth, which are used to discredit their identity.

2.2 TRANSGENDER TEXT AND SUBTEXTS IN INTERPRETATIONS

I will now delve into how the subjects of my research incorporate a transgender Hamlet, discuss these performances and their links to the question of gender performativity in theatre, and finally discuss the misogyny in the original play, and how the differences in the adaptations influence it. The two *Hamlet* adaptations I have chosen contain very contrasted portrayals of a transgender Hamlet, which I will now explain.

2.2.1 ASTA NIELSEN'S HAMLET: A WOMAN IN DISGUISE

2.2.1.1 THE QUESTION OF HAMLET'S GENDER

Svend Gade and Heinz Schall's movie adaptation, seeped in the culture of 1920s Germany, and inspired by Vining's work, relies on the idea that Hamlet is actually, "biologically"

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Gender dysphoria refers to the distress experienced by some transgender people about their physical or assigned gender, which conflicts with their gender identity.

a woman. This circumstance is justified by the addition of a prologue wherein Gertrude gives birth to the princess while the king is at war with Norway, and presumed dead. In order to secure the succession, she publicly declares her newborn a boy (00:07:41). Although it turns out that the King survives, the stratagem is kept up so as not to lose the people's trust, and Hamlet is therefore raised as a boy. This narrative is interesting as an early film portrayal of deviation from one's gender assigned at birth, as well as a good example of a transgender Hamlet. Delving into Hamlet's gender identity in the movie, however, proves quite complicated. From then on, I choose to refer to Asta Nielsen's Hamlet with the epicene pronoun "they", or "singular they", which is used similarly to neopronouns by nonbinary people, to avoid the confusion that would stem from switching from "he" to "she", as Nielsen's Hamlet's gender is open to interpretations, and the use of singular "they" is recognized by the Associated Press stylebook and certain dictionaries when a person's gender is unknown, instead of "he or she" ("Singular 'They'", 2016; Sopelsa, 2017). In this context the pronoun still works grammatically as a plural but refers to a single individual of undefined gender, as I will argue that this Hamlet can be interpreted as a man or as a woman. This is also justified by the fact that, although the movie points to Hamlet being a woman, the narrative title cards use the pronoun "sein" repeatedly: "seinem Unkel" (00:12:07), "seines Vaters" (00:30:58), which is either the masculine or neutral possessive pronoun in German. Using "they" thus avoids entertaining the confusion by referring to Hamlet-as-a-woman as "him" or Hamlet-as-a-man as "her", and acknowledges the ambiguity of the character's gender in the film. I will however continue to refer to Shakespeare's character using male pronouns.

The movie takes the stance that Hamlet truly is a woman, thus adopting an essentialist perspective: the character's gender is defined by their sexual organs. However,

because the pretense of being male is not Hamlet's own choice, but their family's decision, it is as if male gender was assigned to them at birth (by Gertrude declaring them male), and they are obligated to conform with society's expectations, and therefore with the gender presentation associated with men, regardless of their own gender identity. Indeed this Hamlet struggles with containing their femininity, and even tells Gertrude that they "are not a man, nor allowed to be a woman" (1:07:49). Therefore, while the movie's own approach is essentialist, one can reinterpret it as a metaphor of the transgender person's struggle to come to terms with their identity. In this reading, Hamlet can be understood through a modern lens as a closeted transgender woman, having to respect the gender they were assigned at birth, even if the roles seem reversed, as usually the gender assigned at birth is biological, and one's gender identity is socially constructed.

Indeed, the movie is based on an essentialist perspective that one's gender equals one's biological (genital or chromosomal) sex: Hamlet is biologically a woman, therefore despite being socialised as male, they feel like a woman inside. However, a contemporary interpretation or reclaiming of the movie could be that Hamlet's gender identity—their neurological makeup—is female, despite their parents' attempt at socializing them as a man, therefore reflecting the experiences of transgender women. Indeed, scientists have shown that gender identity in transgender people is reflected in their neurological makeup, with transgender people's neurological configuration resembling that of the gender they identify as more closely than of the gender they were assigned, regardless of whether they are undergoing hormone therapy (European Society of Endocrinology, 2018). What is more, this interpretation has the advantage

of opening the reflection on nature versus nurture. Indeed one's transgender identity does not depend only on socialisation, but neither is it entirely biological; it is instead a mixture of both.

Another, more symbolic interpretation would be that Hamlet is assigned female at birth¹⁵ (as per the observation of their genital sex), but their gender identity is male (as per their presentation and socialization). This interpretation has the disadvantage of not taking into account the difference between socialization and gender identity, which is central to the transgender experience. Three elements seem to account for a transgender person's experience: sex assigned at birth, typically genital sex; socialization; and gender identity. The first interpretation balances gender identity against socialization (and arguably gender assigned at birth, if not on the basis of genital sex), while the latter balances sex assigned at birth and socialization as gender identity. The issue here is that the two are quite distinct. A transgender man is typically assigned female at birth, and socialised as a girl by his parents and society until, and sometimes even after, his coming out. In the context of this film, Hamlet repeatedly expresses their difficulty with the male role that is assigned to them (00:18:24), which leans away from this latter interpretation. However, if this Hamlet cannot be entirely interpreted as a transgender man, they do share part of the transgender man's experience and therefore are relatable to them. Indeed, Hamlet has to

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Assigned female at birth or AFAB, and its antonym assigned male at birth (AMAB) are fixed idioms used by transgender people to discuss what we could call their "biological sex", in reference to the gender assigned on their birth certificate which they no longer identify with. The notion of biological sex indeed poses a number of problems scientifically (e.g. chromosomal sex can be different from genital sex, and intersex people are often placed into the binary categories of male and female despite physical characteristics that match neither), and carries the idea that transgender people are "born in the wrong body", which is not how all trans people experience their transness. The use of AFAB or AMAB thus avoids misgendering transgender bodies, and refers instead to societal expectations imposed on transgender people based on said bodies.

constantly “pass”¹⁶ as a man, despite their feminine traits. The movie also raises the issue of the focus on and fetishization of transgender people's bodies, in a way that is more easily understandable in the context of Hamlet as a trans man. The main occurrence of this issue is the final scene, where, as Horatio holds Hamlet's body in his arms, he discovers their bandaged breasts, and therefore their "true" sex. Hamlet's presentation as male is disregarded for the “reality” of their body. The focus on perceived biological sex as the true sex is an important issue of transgender activism. The erasure of Hamlet's life and experiences for the perceived empirical reality of their body parts is a common violence experienced by transgender people, who struggle with passing and not being outed by someone discovering their breasts or Adam's apple for instance. While the movie perpetuates this violence by refusing to acknowledge as real anything but Hamlet's genital makeup, showing this violence can arguably raise awareness to its existence, even if it was not the directors' intent. As such, the movie is re-interpreted and reclaimed by transgender people not as an essentialist movie but as a window into their experiences, and as part of early transgender media. In this sense, interpreting Hamlet as a transgender man regardless of the movie's insistence that they feel like a woman is also going against the essentialist message of the movie, which is that regardless of socialization, one will always really be the gender that corresponds to their genitals. This radical interpretation, while not supported by the movie's script, is the essence of reclaiming a transphobic or homophobic text for oneself.

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the concept of “passing” is used by transgender people to refer to the fact of convincingly appearing to outsiders as a certain gender, to a similar degree as a cisgender person. While transgender people may choose specifically not to pass as a sign of pride or revendication of their rights, passing is a necessity for many, for instance in work situations.

2.2.1.2 NUANCES IN HAMLET'S GENDER EXPRESSION

Despite being inspired by Vining's theory, this movie's Hamlet is more active than Shakespeare's, and Lehmann even argues that "despite Hamlet's feminization, he/she proves to be far more capable of revenge than his/her Shakespearean counterpart" (Lehmann, 85). Without the ghost's prompting, Hamlet starts investigating the death of their father as soon as they get home from Wittenberg to find their mother marrying their uncle. Hamlet talks to the man who found the king's dead body, who reveals that he found a snake too, which reminds Hamlet of the ones in the dungeon—where they find Claudius's dagger. Only later does Hamlet exclaim that their father "came to [them] in a dream and bade [them] avenge him". This Hamlet therefore shows resolve in finding the truth, even more than Shakespeare's original character. This contrasts from Vining's characterization of Hamlet as passive, lacking strength of will and readiness to act (Vining, 46). However, while in some instances Hamlet seems to play up their manliness, the movie also accentuates stereotypically feminine traits and movements to show that despite being raised as a man, they're still "really" a woman: Nielsen's Hamlet wears heavy eyeshadow and lipstick, and in the meeting with Horatio (00:13:16-00:14:07), they seem demure, delicate, their shoulders hunched as if to take less space, and crosses their legs in a more feminine manner than before. When Hamlet learns that their father died, they faint (00:25:43), which references a topos associated with women in Victorian and earlier literature. Of course the whole point of having a woman play Hamlet while following the theory of Hamlet being originally a woman would be to see if that is plausible for the audience. However, accentuating the character's femininity in such an exaggerated way might be counter-productive. On the other hand, this type of acting with emphasized body language is also typical of silent films, and as such the stereotypically feminine

traits highlighted by Asta Nielsen as Hamlet may only seem exaggerated because of the medium, to which we are no longer accustomed. The movie also plays with Hamlet's gender by having a doctor examine them to prove their madness, and observe that their head is unusually small for so much wisdom (00:47:28-00:47:39). This plays both on dramatic irony—the doctor does not know, unlike the audience, that she is a woman—and on the stereotype that women are less intelligent due to their smaller brains. Here, the doctor does not understand that such a clever man could have such a small brain. The implication is that, if Hamlet is indeed a woman, and is nevertheless clever as a man, the size of the brain does not matter; women are men's equals in intelligence. One could go as far as to say the film denounces phrenology as a pseudoscience. However, if we remember Vining's argument, Hamlet had to be a woman because of his inferiority of mind, indecisiveness, etc. Thus, by suggesting that women are similar to men in intelligence despite their size difference, the directors might even be implying that, while they support Vining's theory of a female Hamlet, they do not subscribe to the misogynistic views behind it.

Hamlet's first encounter with Ophelia is also the occasion for Asta Nielsen to act out a masculine toughness. They indeed take Ophelia by the sleeve, by the braid, as if observing an object for sale, before feigning disinterest and ostensibly yawning before getting back to their book (00:45:23-55). Again, this overly brusque acting is part of Hamlet's performance of masculinity, perhaps part of what the character thinks is how a man is supposed to behave with a woman. From a critical perspective, this performance a) shows that someone who was assigned female at birth can convincingly pass for a man, thereby being an example of Butler's theory on the performativity of gender, and b) discusses men as they are perceived by women or AFAB

people. Hamlet, being male by education, could only have learned this behaviour by observing and mimicking other men. Masculinity is therefore not innate. It is, however, a behaviour learned and repeated by men. Whether purposefully or not, the movie makes a point about toxic masculinity and how men learn to disrespect women and objectify them—and perhaps also about how Hamlet, identifying as a woman, feels that they themselves deserve to be treated.

Later on, however, when Hamlet confronts Gertrude by declaring that “[they are] not a man, and not allowed to be a woman” while clutching their breasts (1:07:43), they express angst that could now be related to gender dysphoria, the distress felt by transgender people at their body or socially perceived gender. Since Nielsen’s Hamlet’s body must resemble that of a cisgender woman (as the nurse declares her a girl when she is born), the dysphoria must be mainly social, which is to say that it stems from the way they are perceived as male by others. The phrasing also highlights Hamlet’s inbetweenness in this situation, which can hint at a nonbinary identity. I would also argue that it is a symptom of Hamlet’s inability to belong. In this respect, the question of Hamlet’s gender links back to their place at court. Shakespeare’s Hamlet has trouble finding his place at court after his time in Wittenberg and his father’s death. He is stuck between being the king’s nephew and his father’s son; a student and a prince. Thus, Hamlet’s gender troubles add another level to this unstable identity. An important theme of the play is indeed Hamlet’s struggle between being and seeming, and Nielsen’s Hamlet’s problem is that they cannot truly seem what they are, thus enhancing Hamlet’s impression that the court is the locus of so much hypocrisy. Samuel Crowl compares Hamlet to a spy who has to uncover Claudius’s treachery, and adds that in the 1921 movie, Hamlet has to both protect their own lie from the court, and uncover Claudius’s (Crowl, 6). Furthermore, David Leverenz raises the

question of Hamlet's true identity in the play, and rightly states that other characters only see him as the roles he wants to play for them (Leverenz, 132). In the film, as the king and queen pretend to be innocent, and as Hamlet's university friends pretend to be there for them, the prince not only has to seem unsuspecting, and no longer grieving, but they also have to seem a man. This heightens the play's stakes, if at all possible. What is more, corruption and hypocrisy are linked with the theme of rot and "sullied flesh", first in the Ghost's words and then throughout the play. See for instance in 1.5: "[r]ankly abused" (1.5.38), "leperous distillment" (1.5.60), as well as in the ghost's whole description of his death. It is to be noted here that King Hamlet refers to his ear as "the whole ear of Denmark", implying that the poison that consumed his body is literally consuming the whole State, since State and King are seen as one in medieval conceptions of royalty. In the adaptation, this recurring theme links back to Hamlet's issues with their body and appearances. While the quote, "oh, that this too too sullied flesh would melt" (1.2.129)¹⁷ does not appear in the movie, the play is famous enough that the words can come to mind and for the audience to draw the link.

The directors also made the peculiar choice of linear storytelling: following the prologue, the movie cuts to Hamlet going to Wittenberg and meeting Fortinbras there, then to Gertrude and Claudius scheming to kill King Hamlet, then only to the wedding and coronation of Claudius, around which time Shakespeare's play starts. The movie therefore leaves no doubt as to Claudius's guilt and Gertrude's complicity, unlike the play, which in this regard takes Hamlet's

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For the different textual versions of this line, see Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor's commentary in the 3rd Arden edition of the play (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p175. All three possibilities are interesting in the present context: "sallied" and "sullied" both link back to the theme of the rotting body or the assailed body of Denmark that the ghost mentions, while "solid" both answers to "melt" and in the case of a transgender Hamlet refers to the inflexibility of a body that triggers dysphoria.

perspective and leaves the spectator to their own conjectures until the 3.3 monologue where Claudius confesses his guilt. Here, therefore, Claudius's and Gertrude's guilt is not in question, so the focus has to shift. I would argue that the new focus is on the question of gender, and how being a woman (as the directors present it) bears on Hamlet's life. This linearity, however, contrasts with queer movies' common use of nonlinear storytelling and fragmented narratives, as discussed in part 1. However, queer media arguably did not exist as a genre at the time, and it is therefore hard to argue that this is a deliberately anti-queer decision.

2.2.2 MAXINE PEAKE'S *HAMLET*: A NONBINARY APPROACH?

2.2.2.1 A PARTIALLY EXPLICIT APPROACH TO *HAMLET*'S GENDER

Unlike other productions studied here, which heavily modify or cut the playtext, the Royal Exchange Theatre production does not add to the text of the original play to acknowledge or explain this decision. In fact, Hamlet's transgender identity is barely hinted at, since the performance is integrated into the play. At first glance, Peake's Hamlet is simply another case of a woman playing a male role. The meta-text, however—programmes, teacher resource pack, interviews with director Sarah Frankcom and actress Maxine Peake—mentions this decision:

So, is Hamlet male or female in this production? The answer is, both! Maxine is playing Hamlet as a woman that “presents” as a man. This means that Hamlet will be referred to as a ‘he’ throughout the play, but that Maxine will be free to emphasise both the male and female aspects of the character at different points in the story. In a world that is gradually opening up to alternative perceptions and expectations of gender, this fresh approach aims to get audiences thinking differently about the play and transgender issues. (Royal Exchange Theatre, “*Hamlet* teacher resource pack”)

Their stance on the character, therefore, would be closer to a nonbinary approach to Hamlet's gender—"both" male and female. The choice of words, "as a woman that "presents" as a man" may also be understood to mean that the character is a transgender man, as some early perspectives on transgender issues work from the assumption that a transgender man would be biologically a woman (that is, his sex is female), while his gender identity is male. While this perspective is now disproven by both social and medical sciences, the essentialist and biological rhetoric persists, sometimes even in transgender-positive material, such as here.

Nowadays gender expression is usually considered a different parameter than gender identity (cf. Appendix 2). For instance, a drag queen may present as female, but still identify as male, while a transgender woman may, for different reasons, still present as male, without it affecting her gender identity. Here the choice of pronouns for Hamlet does seem to indicate that the character considers himself a man, and presents as such. However, the phrasing leaves open the interpretation that Hamlet is a closeted transgender woman, who still presents as a man, for instance because of family pressure, and whom everyone is misgendering. The character's gender performance would therefore be an act, to pretend to be a cisgender man. While other information given by the cast and crew seem to go against this impression, it is interesting that, because of the unclear phrasing and the lack of in-production discussion of Hamlet's gender, both interpretations are possible, as well as Hamlet being nonbinary, that is to say he may have a gender identity that does not totally fit in either of the two commonly accepted "male" and "female" genders, despite still using "he" pronouns. The issue with studying gender and gender performance is that no criteria exists to define a transgender person, besides their own identification to a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth. Gender expression/gender performance therefore cannot

be taken as a hint at, or criteria of one's gender identity, since, as explained above, the two may greatly differ. Additionally, any individual, transgender or otherwise, will embody a mixture of what are considered stereotypically male or female traits at a set point in time and place, as masculinity and femininity are arbitrary social constructs that no-one fulfills entirely. Therefore the Royal Exchange's assessment that Peake "emphasise[s] both the male and female aspects of the character at different points" in itself does not make the character transgender. It does, however, show a willingness to delve into issues of gender, which itself helps draw attention to feminist and transgender issues surrounding gender expectations. It could even be argued that this particular phrasing implies that trans people are different from cisgender people in that they have to present as "both" male and female even if they identify only as one or the other. Indeed, arguably, all characters have both stereotypically "male and female aspects" to their characters but this is only highlighted here in the case of the transgender character. Therefore, I would argue that this extract, aimed in part at pupils, may do more to confuse the readership than to explain their intent.

Interpreting Peake's Hamlet as a transgender woman adds complexity to the play: like for Nielsen's, it adds a layer to the lies and hypocrisy that Hamlet has to negotiate at the Danish court, while also heightening Hamlet's discomfort through dysphoria. Interpreting this Hamlet as a transgender man, which is the general consensus, makes the representation more casual. However, perhaps the fact that the play represents a transgender character without a deeper meaning behind it, and has even the villain respect his identity, would in itself be radical.

2.2.2.2 A GENDERBENT CASTING

Additionally, the rest of the characters were partially genderbent, meaning that their gender was changed, here according to their casting. Usually, we talk of genderblind casting to designate a casting that does not take into account the gender of the actors. In such cases, the fact that the actor's and character's genders are mismatched is not acknowledged—as is the case with Peake still playing Hamlet as a (transgender) man. Here, however, for all other characters, when a woman plays a male role, the text is adapted to her gender. Polonius thus becomes Polonia, and is addressed as "lady", "madam" or "mother". Likewise, the First Player and Rosencrantz are also genderbent, and the gravediggers are played by women, and Marcellus becomes Marcella. With the exception of the latter role, the actresses tend to wear feminine-coded clothes, hair and makeup, which contrasts with Hamlet's masculine-coded, large clothes that make him look androgynous. It's also of note that, unlike in the early promotional material (see cover image), Peake seems to have cut her hair short for the role, or at least for the performances around which the play was filmed. I could not find out if it was decided that the characters would be feminized prior to, or after the casting, but since the play originally presents only two female roles, the decision most likely is part of an effort to reach a certain gender equality for actors, or at least to offer more roles for women, since lack of female roles has been a concern in theatre circles in the past decades (Higgins, 2012; Pascal, 2018). Rosencrantz represents a third case, since the only reference to the character's gender is in 2.2, when Hamlet declares "Man delights not me" and Rosencrantz approaches him as if to kiss him, at which points he continues with "nor woman neither", which suggests Rosencrantz is a woman. However, since Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are most often addressed together, one cannot really know Rosencrantz's gender, except by

deducing from appearances. This gender non-conforming appearance leaves open the interpretation that Rosencrantz might just like to present as a woman, and may be nonbinary. While this may not be the first instinct of most spectators or viewers, the simple possibility created by not acknowledging the character's gender, especially in a production which already makes a point of being inclusive of transgender identities, is in itself important when it comes to representation, as nonbinary people are virtually never represented, even in LGBT media. On the matter of casting, it must also be pointed out that colourblind casting was also used. Indeed Laertes is played by a black actor, although Polonia is played by a white actress, and the matter is never acknowledged. The casting of people of colour in traditionally white roles has also developed to offer more roles to Black actors. Historically, white people were cast in any role that was not specifically a black role (such as Othello), and still are most often, despite conscious efforts from the theatre community. And even for those Black characters, the use of blackface was prominent in theatre and minstrel shows from the Elizabethan era until the mid-twentieth century. Therefore, while I should point out the lack of people of colour specifically in LGBT roles in the productions studied here, with the exception of female Romeo in *Still a Rose*, it is important to acknowledge the efforts made for more diverse plays in terms of ethnicity as well as sexuality and gender. Here, besides Laertes, the first player is also a woman of colour, and Guildenstern is played by a middle-eastern man. As a result, Sarah Frankcom's play offers a spectrum of sexual and racial identities too rarely seen in Shakespearean theatre.

2.2.2.3 PERFORMING THE PLAY'S GENDERED INTERACTIONS

Besides her androgynous clothing and haircut, Peake's gender performance includes lowering her voice, as well as what one could describe as toxic masculinity: in scene 2.2 with Polonia, his feigned madness translates as sexualization. Hamlet touches his crotch, and then almost assaults Polonia, which reflects very negatively on him. One can wonder whether this choice stems specifically from the fact that Polonia was feminised, or whether the same choice would have been made with a male Polonius. Considering the majority of sexual assaults happen to women, and male assault victims are often erased from the media or discriminated against as unmanly, we must address Hamlet's behaviour with women, and whether it was meant to communicate about misogyny. In the "nunnery" scene, he is also quite handsy with Ophelia, and forcefully kisses her even as he rejects her. Peake's Hamlet, like Nielsen's, seems to emphasize the negative aspects of masculinity.

Hamlet as a play has a number of examples of misogyny, though whether this is an authorial choice to portray the Danish court as toxic to women, or Shakespeare being a product of his time, is up for debate. Hamlet, as a character, displays a mistrust of women that influences his behaviour. Other characters, however, also display prejudices against women, notably an emphasis on sexual purity, that may well stem from the views on women at the time of writing, but deserves to be unpacked nonetheless.

Femininity is associated with negative emotions and actions throughout the play. The king first notes Hamlet's "unmanly grief" (1.2.106) and later Hamlet compares himself repeatedly to a prostitute:

this is most brave,
That I, the son of a dear [father] murdered,

Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,
Must like a whore unpack my heart with words
And fall a-cursing like a very drab, (2.2.517-21)

What Hamlet associates here with prostitution—which is usually associated with women—is his incapacity to enact the revenge expected of him. The line "this is most brave" is here antiphrastic, as Hamlet bemoans his lack of courage. The stereotype put forward here is that women are more talkative than active, an stereotype that goes back at least to early medieval literature. Furthermore there are negative, sexual connotations associated with "whore" and "drab" rather than simply women, as is implied in Claudius's "unmanly". Hamlet therefore associates the fact that he processes and expresses his emotions ("unpack my heart with words") rather than impulsively act, as a necessarily negative behaviour. The notion that men should not express emotions (other than rage) and be strong at all times ties in with the concept of toxic masculinity. In this particular form of masculinity, any kind of emotion or behaviour associated with femininity is seen as weakness, and must be avoided. Elaine Showalter thus argues that "Hamlet's disgust at the feminine passivity in himself is translated into violent repulsion against women" (Showalter, 115). Hamlet indeed declares "Frailty, thy name is Woman" (1.2.146), thus stating women embody "frailty and lack of constancy." The Arden editors note that this is a standard misogynistic belief for Shakespeare's time (Thomson & Taylor, 177). Hamlet makes further remarks on women's sexuality, such as when he tells Polonius: "have you a daughter? [...] Let her not walk i'th'sun: conception is a blessing, but as your daughter may conceive, friend—look to't." (2.2.179-183). The assumption here is that women are bound to have sex and conceive, if not under close supervision from their father. Hamlet suggests that women (here, Ophelia) should be kept under lock and key. At this point, however, he is pretending to be mad, so his sincerity is

doubtful. Later, however, during the so-called "nunnery scene", he shows great verbal violence towards Ophelia which can hardly be excused by his madness. He first questions her honesty (3.1.102), then argues that her beauty and honesty cannot go hand in hand, "[f]or the power of Beauty will sooner transform Honesty from what it is to a bawd than the force of Honesty can translate Beauty into his likeness" (3.1.110-112). He seems to consider women as merely breeders (3.1.121), repeatedly exhorts Ophelia: "Get thee to a nunnery!" (3.1.120; 136), "Go thy ways to a nunnery" (3.1.128-9), "[t]o a nunnery, go, and quickly too" (3.1.139) and finally "[t]o a nunnery, go!" (3.1.148). The editors note that in Q1 Hamlet says it three more times than in Q2 and the first folio (Thomson & Taylor, 290). It has also been pointed out that nunnery can be used as slang for brothel, and this ambiguity reinforces Hamlet's obsession with Ophelia's sexuality, and the violence of this exhortation. He seems to perceive all women as whores, "breeders of sinners", "wanton" (3.1. 144) and deceitful creatures: "God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another." (3.1.142-3). Finally, women make monsters of the men they marry (3.1.138). The idea that women are the source of all sins stems from the passage in Genesis where Eve encourages Adam to eat the apple of knowledge. Portrayals of women throughout the European Middle Ages can be placed within the dichotomy of Eve as the original sinner, and the Virgin Mary as the unattainable example of purity. Hamlet's views here seem inscribed within this tradition. However, this is also an example of Hamlet's preoccupation with female sexuality and purity throughout the play, which stems from Gertrude's relationship with Claudius, which he perceives as incestuous and a sign of unfaithfulness (1.2.150-157), despite the fact that levirate marriages were common and even encouraged in the Bible. Hamlet's religious justifications therefore can only go so far. It is worth noting that we are never given Gertrude's point of view

on the alliance, or on King Hamlet. Hamlet's entirely subjective perspective is thus all we have to make up our mind about Gertrude. Interestingly, Hamlet's disgust at his mother's actions translates into his own relationship with Ophelia, and in generalizations against all women. It is also worth noting that the Ghost himself entreats Hamlet not to act against his mother, but to "leave her to heaven / And to those thorns that in her bosom lodge / To prick and sting her" (1.5.85-88), and yet Hamlet keeps coming back to her unfaithfulness, and in the "closet" scene, he directly accuses her. He also raises doubts as to her ability to love, "for at [her] age / The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble" (3.4.66-67). Hamlet cannot imagine an older woman experiencing sexual desire, and yet he spends most of the play fixated on it and how she

live[s]
In the rank sweat of an unseamed bed
Stewed in corruption, honeying and making love
Over the nasty sty — (3.4.89-92).

The insistence on the smells ("rank sweat", "sty") gives shape to the metaphorical nastiness Hamlet associates with his mother's sex life, even if from a religious point of view, it would be perfectly legitimate for her to have sex with her husband. That vocabulary, however, is also associated with rotting Denmark throughout the play. The incestuous alliance is a metonymy for the whole country's corruption. Hamlet opposes words, feelings, and whoredom to reason and obedience, which are the two warring sides in himself, one which he considers more feminine and the other masculine. Leverenz thus argues that Hamlet extends his criticism to all women because Ophelia's behaviour in giving him his letters back reminds him of Gertrude's dishonesty, but that through his soliloquies, he "extends that condemnation to the woman in himself" (Leverenz, 142). Hamlet's misogyny is therefore not only directed outward, but also inward, which makes it interesting to study in the case of a female or transgender Hamlet.

However, the misogynistic views are not only Hamlet's. Indeed, other characters exhibit similar thinking. The emphasis on a woman's purity, which shows through Hamlet's concerns for his mother's sexuality, also transpire in Laertes' and Polonius' concerns for Ophelia's chastity. Laertes indeed insists:

Then weigh what loss your honour may sustain
If with too credent ear you list to his songs
Or lose your heart, or your chaste treasure open
To his unmastered importunity. (1.3.28-31)

The metaphor "your chaste treasure" serves as euphemism for Ophelia's virginity: Laertes warns her not to let Hamlet have sex with her. This comment reminds her, and the audience, of the importance placed on a woman's chastity. Later in that same scene Polonius likewise warns her against any contact with Hamlet which may give him false ideas, because, as he explains later, he "feared he did but trifle / And meant to wrack thee" (2.1.109-10). Polonius here refers to the social ruin that is brought upon women who do not show sexual purity. These same considerations follow Ophelia in her grave, when Laertes mentions her "fair and unpolluted flesh" (5.1.228). When Gertrude addresses her prayer to her, she speaks of Ophelia as she relates to her own son: "I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife" (5.1.233) and mentions her bride-bed. While this association of love and death is not unusual, and may even remind us of Romeo's claim that "unsubstantial death is amorous, / And that the lean abhorrent monster keeps / Thee here in dark to be his paramour" (5.3.103-5). However, here it is also symptomatic of the fact that women are mainly defined through the men in their life, as mother, daughter, or wife. The scene devolves into a fight between Hamlet and Laertes, where the focus is mostly on themselves and their own pain, and not on Ophelia, despite their professed love and the fact that it is her funeral. For instance, Hamlet asks:

Swounds, show me what thou'lt do.
Woul't weep, woul't fight, woul't fast, woul't tear thyself,
Woul't drink up eisel, eat a crocodile?
I'll do it. Dost come here to whine,
To outface me with leaping in her grave?
Be buried quick with her, and so will I. (5.1.263-8)

This is a show of his own pain, demonstrated with the repetition of "woul't" and a gradation both in the intensity of actions suggested, and in the number of syllables. The focus is on himself and Laertes, and on which one will demonstrate the most grief. The thought is not on showing love and respect for Ophelia but on one-upping her brother in appearances, and thus showing in fact utter disrespect for her, by leaping into her grave and fighting at her funeral. The emphasis on Ophelia's body and purity also transpires in numerous productions, where she is generally dressed in white, but also undresses during her "madness" scene. Ophelia and Gertrude are the only two female characters of the play, and Gertrude for her part is also vilified, at least by the title character for her sexuality and supposed actions. The play works with misogynistic assumptions, which are then embraced or denounced by the different adaptations. As such, the play can also be used in modern adaptations to discuss and denounce misogyny and patriarchal oppression.

Making Hamlet a woman or a transgender man colours the misogyny of the play, as it becomes directed towards Hamlet himself as well as towards Ophelia. Much like misogynistic remarks differ if they are coming from Gertrude or from the men in the play, the problem is the same as it becomes internalised with a female Hamlet (if we accept that is what Nielsen's Hamlet is). Likewise transgender characters come with the implication that they were raised with the expectations of their gender assigned at birth, which influences their behaviour. It is then possible to see Hamlet's misogyny as trying to compensate for what he perceives as his own femininity with aggressive masculinity and rejection of all things feminine, but also as criticism he takes for

himself as well as for his targets (whether Gertrude or Ophelia). Likewise, Polonius becoming Polonia in the Royal Exchange production colours Hamlet's "I would you were so honest a [wo]man" (2.2.173) with the same sexual undertones as it does when talking about Ophelia. This in itself becomes a commentary, for those who are familiar with the playtext, on how one same word, "honest", changes meaning depending on the gender of the subject. Hamlet's vulgar and masturbatory gestures at Polonia (00:49:00 and 00:49:53) also heighten the disturbing character of Hamlet's misogyny and obsession with sex—apparent in his remarks on "c[o]untry matters" (3.2.110)—, in what is perhaps a hint at Freudian analyses.

Frankcom's production also subtly recognizes the misogyny of other characters' words by having Ophelia make disgusted faces at Laertes when he mentions her chastity (00:17:53) and answer him ironically that she will treasure his advice. This scene is put in parallel with the next one where Polonia gives advice to Laertes — a scene which is known for Polonia/Polonius's idiomatic and ultimately empty advice. However, the production does not deviate from the traditional objectifying portrayal of Ophelia's "mad scene", wherein she takes all her clothes off (2:13:00-2:14:02). Ellen Showalter rightly analyses, from Ophelia's representation in productions and scholarship, that while Hamlet is the typical melancholic hero, Ophelia's melancholy was often seen as mainly biological—from the Elizabethans' erotomania to the Victorians' hysteria (Showalter, 118). In short, female sexuality and female insanity are often linked both in artistic representations of the character and in performance (Showalter, 116), and despite decades of feminist criticism trying to change this, Frankcom's production adheres to tradition on this point, and Ophelia even wears the virginal white dress that is emblematic of the character.

2.2.3 LAERTES AND FORTINBRAS IN QUEER ADAPTATIONS

Laertes and Fortinbras serve as Hamlet's foils in the original play. All three men's fathers have been killed, and all three react differently in the circumstances. Nigel Alexander thus argues that the play presents the audience with three different opportunities for recognition and self-identification in the three men (Alexander, 49). For instance, Fortinbras is often portrayed as the active, stereotypically masculine and strong counterpart to Hamlet's passivity and more intellectual character. Thus, they are not his foils only in their reaction to similar circumstances but in the different kinds of masculinity that they embody. Therefore, their portrayal (or absence thereof) in queer adaptations is of interest to this study. There is a definite concern that a masculine, active Fortinbras could reflect negatively on a female Hamlet, and imply that women are weak and passive, unlike men—in other words, the very idea that Vining was putting forward.

Interestingly, despite being the shorter of the two adaptations, the 1921 movie offers a more in-depth portrayal of Fortinbras than a number of productions of the play. Indeed, whereas productions tend to erase Fortinbras entirely, here the character is developed further than in the play. Unlike more war-like and revengeful Fortinbrases, however, Schall and Gade's reworked character is first seen vigorously shaking hands with Hamlet when they meet in Wittenberg. He asserts that they should free themselves from their fathers' hatred, before drinking together (00:20:31-49). Later on, Hamlet is sent to Norway rather than England, and allies there with Fortinbras to go back to Denmark and take the throne from Claudius. Fortinbras addresses them as his friend (1:41:12) and embraces them warmly (1:41:27). The two are later seen sharing Fortinbras's kingly dais (1:43:35). This portrayal of Fortinbras as an ally and friend, and the fact

that Hamlet helps orchestrate the conquest, here framed as retaking the throne for Hamlet, helps mitigate the contrast between the two and the idea that women are passive and peaceful while men are warlike.

Laertes on the other hand is seen as more masculine, but in a violent and boorish way. When he is first introduced to the audience, he is mistreating his servant (00:14:24-00:16:17). Indecisive, abusing his rank, making a point of blaming the servant for his own clumsiness, Laertes seems designed specifically to criticize this kind of toxic masculinity. He represents what is rotten in the state of Denmark, and is the manifestation in Wittenberg of the Danish court. Hamlet, in contrast, appears reasonable and thoughtful. Where one could expect the film to replicate Vining's idea, it seems in fact to denounce certain forms of masculinity in order to elevate Hamlet despite their more feminine characteristics; and where Hamlet and Fortinbras could have been enemies, they become unlikely allies, making the measured man side with Hamlet.

In Sarah Frankcom's production, on the other hand, Fortinbras is a non-entity. The role has been entirely cut from the adaptation. Perhaps the decision stems from a lack of time, and the fact that the character is erased from a lot of productions, since his subplot is quite separate from the rest of the intrigue and therefore easier to edit out. However, it could also stem precisely from the worry that Fortinbras, as a successful counterpoint to Hamlet, could imply that trans men or women are less than their cisgender counterparts; and that the femininity in Hamlet is the source of his failure.

Laertes on the other hand is portrayed quite differently from his 1921 counterpart. He is always smartly dressed, which contrasts with Hamlet's own oversized, ruffled, literally blue-

collar clothes. He is shown as a sympathetic character, close to his sister and mother, hugging them warmly upon his departure (0:20:41). Hamlet on the other hand is often rude, emotionally distant and cruel, especially with Ophelia, Polonia and Gertrude. As such, the audience is meant to sympathize with Laertes. However, it is not Laertes' masculinity that makes him more relatable or likeable, but rather his softness compared to Hamlet's harshness, whereas the two qualities are usually seen as respectively more feminine and more masculine. In this regard, Sarah Frankcom therefore subverts expectations of masculinity and femininity.

2.3 ISSUES OF CASTING AND QUEER ERASURE

Two main issues arise from those transgender productions. The first one is the way they approach the play's homoeroticism, and in particular how the Asta Nielsen movie uses Hamlet's gender to explain away their attraction to Horatio. The second one is the problem of cisgender actresses playing transgender roles. While this second issue has more to do with the industry, studying how a production interacts with its queer text warrants to discuss that production's practical impact on the community, as they cannot be separated.

2.3.1 QUEERING TO DE-QUEER THE TEXT?

I will now delve into how both interpretations handle the text's homoeroticism, and the problems posed by the 1921 movie, and to some extent by the Royal Exchange theatre production, in terms of erasure. First, one needs to remember that, although so far I have talked about the Gade and Schall movie in terms of transgender Hamlets, this is first and foremost a reclaiming. The movie itself works on more binary and essentialist bases, and Hamlet is not

considered a transgender man, or a transgender woman, but a cisgender woman masquerading as a man for different reasons. As such, it allows the creative team to deal with the male homosexuality in a different way than if Hamlet was truly considered a transgender man—whereby the dynamics would still be similar in essence, although it might be informed by the question of gender. However, in the present case, Hamlet being considered a woman allows them to erase the homosexual themes. Hamlet's attraction to Horatio is explained away by the conceit of Hamlet being female. Using Vining's theory and their own scenario, they make this classic homoerotic and homosocial relationship heterosexual instead. What is more, one would expect that if Hamlet's relationship to Horatio is thus changed, the homosexual relationship will be diverted to Hamlet and Ophelia, portraying another homosexual relationship, and a female one at that, which is rarer in the media in general; this corpus is representative of that trend. However, this is also explained in the film by Hamlet choosing to seduce Ophelia out of jealousy. Horatio is in love with Ophelia, and confronted by Hamlet, exclaims that "[he] love[s] her like a man loves a woman" (1:30:10). This remark of course plays into the dramatic irony. We know, unlike Horatio, that Hamlet is a woman. His claim seems to ascertain that he loves Ophelia in a way he could never love Hamlet, which both erases the possibility of male-male attraction, and is ironic if we assume, as the movie wants us to, that Hamlet is female. After this declaration from Horatio, however, Hamlet pursues Ophelia with the idea that if they seduce her, she will not be with Horatio. Additionally the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio resolves itself when Hamlet dies and Horatio finds out, "too late", by grabbing Hamlet's breast (2:04:49). He then kisses them. This makes Horatio's feelings appear quite superficial, as they are conditioned by Hamlet's body, and only shown in that last moment, or at any rate that homosexuality is so

impossible to him that he only realises his attraction when he realises that Hamlet was a woman (or had the body of one). Additionally, the movie thus carries the idea that homosexuality is unthinkable, even though in practice the only difference between before and after is Hamlet's (perceived) gender. It is not only that Horatio represses his feelings because Hamlet is a man as far as he knows, but he does not seem to *have* those feelings for as long as Hamlet is perceived as a man, and suddenly loves them, "as a man loves a woman", to paraphrase his own words with regards to Ophelia, as soon as he finds out. This is also an example of compulsory heterosexuality: two men who are close can only be portrayed as friends, but a man and a woman cannot only be friends, they have to be in a relationship. This poses the question of the ways in which society influences portrayals in visual arts, and vice versa. Indeed movies like this arguably both follow the societal norms of their time, and enforce them. The influence of media on audience and society's perception of minority groups is an important question that I want to raise with this paper, albeit one that cannot have a definitive answer. This scene is also offensive by today's standards, from a transgender perspective, as it focuses on the bodily. The essentialist argument is indeed very present here, and also at the crux of discrimination against transgender people. If this is not shocking for the 1920s, it is to be addressed when the movie is reclaimed and reused as an example of transness by modern LGBT groups.

While Maxine Peake's portrayal does not present such obvious issues, one can note the coldness between Horatio and Hamlet, which is most obvious in the ending, where it is customary in productions for Horatio to hold Hamlet as he dies. Here, however, Horatio is standing far apart from Hamlet, even once Hamlet falls to the ground, and only goes to him after he is dead. The homoeroticism of the text, as evidenced above, is not translated into this

production, which favours distance between the two characters. For instance, in their first encounter, their hug ends with Hamlet patting Horatio on the shoulder (00:13:05), which puts an emotional distance between them that was not there at first. However, the relationship between Ophelia and Hamlet is shown as very physical, which, since unlike the 1921 production this one acknowledges Hamlet as a transgender man, raises the question not of homosexuality, but of relationships involving transgender people, which in itself is interesting. However, Ophelia's mad scene has her kissing her female attendant (2:14:04). As such, one can only wonder at the unfortunate association of female homoeroticism and madness. Once again, female insanity is equated with sexuality.

2.3.2 CIS ACTRESSES, TRANS ROLES

Finally, both the 1921 movie and the 2015 stage production cast cisgender actresses to play transgender characters. Similar issues have been raised by transgender people and unions, concerning mainstream media's recurring use of cisgender men to play transgender women. This is an important matter to address, as the work ethics of a production also reflect on that production's message. Furthermore, studying a work's representation of a community warrants that we listen to that community's complaints with regards to how their issues and their representation is handled, and address these issues. Their main objection against this practice is that it contributes to the perception of transgenderism as a simple disguise, or as cross-dressing, which in turn leads to them not being taken seriously. This in turn makes transgender rights harder to obtain, and puts transgender people in danger of being abused, through the lack of legislation protecting them. What is more, transgender people face difficulties in the workplace. The fact that their identity papers do not always correspond to the name they use, or not all their

papers match, outs them automatically to possible employers, which leads to a higher number of unemployed or even homeless transgender people. In the acting industry, transgender people are very rarely given cisgender roles (or roles not specifically thought for transgender people), and transgender roles are very few. Thus, when transgender roles are given to cisgender people, it also impacts the already limited employment possibilities of transgender people. The issue is harder to discuss for the 1921 movie, for lack of statistics. For the Royal Exchange Theatre production, however, I would argue that the decision to cast Maxine Peake in a transgender role partly counteracts their good intentions in portraying said transgender character in the first place. However, I could not find information on the point in the creative process at which the idea of having a transgender Hamlet emerged. Unlike specifically transgender roles, as in for example *The Danish Girl*, where the character's gender identity was part of the story before the casting intervened, it is highly possible that Maxine Peake was cast first for a genderblind or genderbent Hamlet, as was the case of so many actresses playing the role, before the idea to make the character transgender appeared in rehearsal. It is also possible however that Sarah Frankcom, the director, had this idea of a transgender Hamlet and specifically chose Maxine Peake for the role regardless. While the field of Shakespearean theatre is definitely smaller than mainstream media, transgender actors and actresses are definitely present there, as evidenced by the creation of a transgender-specific theatre company, the Transgender Shakespeare Company. Transgender-friendly productions would therefore do good to hire transgender actors.

CONCLUSION

Thus, *Hamlet* as a play is highly conducive to queer adaptations by its homosexual subtext, and its important focus on identity. Productions generally emphasize the homoerotic aspects of the relationship between Hamlet and Horatio, however, the productions studied here portray Hamlet as a transgender character instead, played by female actresses. This tradition goes back to the nineteenth century and the notion that Hamlet could be a woman can be found most notably in Vining's critical work, *The mystery of Hamlet*, which Schall and Gade quote as an inspiration for their movie. While the RET production openly aims at raising awareness, Asta Nielsen's Hamlet has been retrospectively interpreted as transgender, even though this was not visibly the directors' goal. These contrasting portrayals raise different issues concerning transgender people and gender performativity. They place queer characters at the forefront of classical plays, thus giving them a place in the narrative of western theatre. Even if their portrayals are problematic, especially with regards to the casting and the erasure of homoeroticism, they fill an important gap in representation, and lead the way for more inclusive theatre, as well as mainstream media.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Both *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* present themes and characters that justify queering them—if indeed a justification was needed—or at least explain why they seem to be so often chosen for queer adaptations. The adaptations then rely on those aspects for their queerings, but also develop their own strategies and original interpretations to make a coherent interpretation of the original text, which both carries these modern ideas, and give new readings of the play.

The theme of family conflict, which is omnipresent in *Romeo and Juliet*, and to some extent in *Hamlet*, makes the plays relatable to a queer audience. The characters' transgression from familial expectations ties in perfectly with advocacy on the right to love, whether racial or across genders. Questioning one's sexuality is also often seen as a teenage issue—although this by no means signify that one cannot realise they are queer at any age—and the play's titular characters thus represent best the angst associated with teenagers exploring their sexualities despite their parents' disapproval. *Romeo and Juliet*'s argument also revolves a lot around suicide which, in view of suicide rates in the LGBT community, makes for associations of ideas worth discussing. Finally, queerness is arguably already present in the original play in the form of Mercutio. Indeed, there seems to be a consensus amongst scholars that the character was queer-coded from the start. At any rate, his interactions with Romeo are loaded with homoerotic puns and double-entendres, making their relationship easy to explore with a queer perspective.

From the three *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations I have studied, *Still a Rose* clearly stands out by reason of its short form and “classic” take on a classic scene, with simple cinematography and a double, diverse casting to carry its message of love across race and

genders. In fact, it relies on the codes of theatre, and on the canonicity of the balcony scene in particular, to normalise the relationships portrayed.

The other two adaptations on the other hand make use of queering techniques, by queering the form of the play and changing the context entirely. The context of the private or military school in both cases creates an environment that justifies both the entirely male cast, and the traditional values that go against same-gender relationships. For Joe Calarco, this is done primarily through references to a Christian background, which ties in with the play's heavy religious connotations, while Alan Brown specifically targets homophobia in the military, and in particular Don't Ask Don't Tell. Though quite different in form, both works approach the play through similar techniques. This also both subverts and continues the tradition of the all-male cast, which has the double effect of allowing homoerotic subtext and keeping women at the margins.

Both works rely on metatheatre and nonlinearity to offer something quite different from the original play. This not only is a way of queering it, but it also brings out new facets of the play by putting the emphasis on different moments, or on links with other texts—in particular for Calarco's. The cinematography of *Private Romeo* is heavily inspired by New Queer Cinema techniques, which give it its peculiar aesthetic, while *Shakespeare's R&J* employs Christian texts and other Shakespearean works alongside the playtext to address the question of homosexual desire.

All three adaptations also pointedly avoid the tragedy of the original play, which is seen as a matter of ethics in queer representation for at least Calarco and Brown. The fact that the characters do not die in the end is an unexpected denouement for the audience, who are generally

aware of the original plot. This strategy may be unsettling, but it also gives originality to the works. It questions the ethical use of retaining tragedy when queering canonical tragedies, and places these works in opposition to the numerous works that contain tragic endings for the queer characters despite not having to handle a tragic original material. This issue could also be discussed with regards to *Hamlet*. There, the adaptations under study are more straightforward, and did not veer much from the original ending of the play. What are, therefore, the ethics of portraying even the most vulnerable of LGBT people in a tragedy? Are representation and inclusivity paramount, even when the messages spread can have negative effects? Or perhaps we need to embrace the fact that tragic outcomes are also part of the queer experience, and should also be expressed.

One reproach that can be made to both Calarco and Brown is that their works are lacking in racial diversity as well as in female characters. If the setting of the military school was used by Calarco to explain the all-male cast that was demanded of him, and Brown took that setting without questioning it, it remains that Calarco makes no mention of race, and Brown's movie has one, non-queer Black character. As shown in *Still a Rose*, the issue of mixed-race unions and same-gender unions can be dealt with in a similar manner, and this comes across both as a lack of inclusiveness and a missed opportunity. I have made a similar point later on concerning the casting of transgender characters in transgender roles in contemporary *Hamlet* adaptations, though Sarah Frankcom's production is much more inclusive in terms of race, showing that representing both queer people and racial minorities is indeed possible, even in the adaptation of a classic play.

In the end, all three *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations I have studied take different distances from the Shakespeare play, without ever really going against the ideas set out in the original work. I argue they represent a panel of what can be done in queer adaptations of Shakespeare, whether one uses the conventions of the medium to their advantage or instead subverts them and employs more modern techniques for those modern ideas. The adaptations of *Hamlet* on the other hand are more similar, which can be explained by the fact that they are more “straightforward” adaptations of the play, generally much less experimental in their treatment of the original text.

The choice of queering *Hamlet*, and specifically the portrayal of the title character as transgender (or what would now be called transgender) in both Schall and Gade’s film, and Frankcom’s production can also be in part explained by elements of the original text. *Hamlet*’s focus on identity, as well as the opposition between being and seeming, are important to our understanding of transgender adaptations, as is the notion of secrecy in the play. What is more, *Hamlet* is already widely considered to have queer undertones in Hamlet and Horatio’s relationship. An issue with the adaptations here is specifically that they erase the homoerotic subtext most of the time, and although they add transgender representation, this representation may be awkwardly done, and in Schall and Gade’s case at least, involuntary. Indeed, their film is based on the dated, conservative theory by Edward Vining, which posits that Hamlet is a woman, based on a misogynistic and homophobic reading of the play. It must be noted, however, that in some aspects the film challenges the theory it is based on, since for instance Hamlet is much more active than the original. Despite the movie’s initial purpose, its rediscovery as an early

twentieth-century portrayal of what seems to be the transgender experience has made it a classic of queer cinema.

Both adaptations rely heavily on the actress's presentation to carry across information on the character's gender. The silent film of course also relies on intertitles to explain Hamlet's situation, while the Frankcom production never openly mentions the character's transness, except in the metatext, and clumsily at that. This is easily explained by the fact that no text was added to Shakespeare's. While it could work to the detriment of the production in terms of queer advocacy, it also means that the adaptation is more faithful to the original, and thus may "win over" a more conservative audience, who may not even have seen the play otherwise. This, coupled with Peake's nuanced performance of Hamlet's gendered behaviour, allows for a subtle discussion of the gendered dynamics of the play. Both adaptations also modulate Laertes' and Fortinbras' masculinities in a way that does not make Hamlet's more feminine traits stand out as negative.

Therefore, even though *Hamlet* adaptations seem less daring in their techniques, they do offer interesting insights into transness, but also into the play itself, for instance by adding depth to the issues of identity, and by questioning the characters' gendered roles.

There are some obvious links between the original plays, notably in terms of themes: family relationships and suicide are two major themes in both plays. The themes do seem to contribute to the choice of play as queering material. Other often queered plays indeed include *Twelfth Night*, of which some important themes are crossdressing, mismatched identities, and love; and *Richard II*, which contains important queer subtext and homoeroticism between

Richard and his minions. Queerness in the original, and themes that can be related to queerness, thus seem essential. However, I would argue that the place of these two plays in the canon is also one major reason why they engender so many queerings. Indeed, in the study of the adaptations themselves, few common points arise. The plays call for different treatments of the themes, and in fact the issues that are chosen by the artists concern different parts of the LGBT community: *Hamlet*'s focus on identity gives rise to transgender interpretations, while the problematic of forbidden love in *Romeo and Juliet* means the adaptations focus on same-sex relationships. Interestingly, *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations also tend to use metatheatre, while *Hamlet* is the only one of the two plays which originally contains a play within the play. In short, while certain themes are conducive to queer interpretations, this short sample of adaptations points to the multiplicity of possible queerings of Shakespeare plays. In fact, the diversity of techniques, of media and of outlooks on queer issues is perhaps what characterizes queer adaptations.

As I have argued, Shakespeare plays and queer adaptations mutually enhance one another: Shakespeare's popularity and habitually recognized universality help the new adaptations carry their message, but the adaptations also participate in keeping the plays alive as an audio-visual medium, as they were first intended. Rather than hiding issues of sexuality, gender or race behind this fictitious idea of a universal, archetypal human experience that Shakespeare would have created, they engage creatively with the text to produce a discursive space where the issues are addressed and linked to the themes of the plays, triggering associations between characters' experiences and queer people's experiences that both make the characters even more relatable to queer people, and helps non-queer people understand the queer experience through Shakespeare's powerful language. The queer elements renew the plays' themes and add

urgency to the plot with very tangible, current stakes, and bring to the public the sometimes long-erased homoerotic aspects of Shakespeare's work. At the same time, queer adaptations also challenge established interpretations, and as such they can both uphold Shakespeare's place in the canon and resist what this place implies in terms of normativity. As such, and because queer elements can clearly be found in Shakespeare's works, this ambivalent approach adopted by queer adaptations—and by queer theory—ultimately leads to a better, more complete understanding of Shakespeare. It seems therefore that queer adaptations of Shakespeare are not only profitable to the queer community but to Shakespeare's oeuvre. Shakespeare has been used over time for all kinds of political goals, and his popular image as a classic author can be and has been used for conservative purposes, and even to defend colonization and British superiority. Queer adaptations, however, like post-colonial adaptations, challenge the conservative interpretations and reclaim Shakespeare. Aesthetically, this means more experimental drama, but also drama that brings Shakespeare to communities which may not otherwise be exposed to his work. It thus challenges the popular vision of Shakespeare as normative and conservative, takes these works out of their institutional carcan to instead make them alive with queer possibilities and dramatic urgency born from the criticality of queer issues.

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APPENDIX 1
STRUCTURE AND INTERTEXTUALITY
IN CALARCO'S *SHAKESPEARE'S R&J*

The play comprises significant cuts to all scenes which were not all listed here. They are only noted when out of order from the original text.

ACT 1

prayer: "In the name of the father..."

confessions

love letters (original text): "My love..." > Sonnet 14

Sonnet 14 | prayer of confession

"Amo, Amas..."

maths

list of sins

book reading on gender difference and propriety

child's bedtime prayer: "now I lay me down to sleep / pray the lord..."

Midsummer Night's Dream 5.2: "now it is the time of night... Now are frolic!"

Romeo and Juliet Prologue

1.1: "draw thy tool... My naked weapon is out."

"a dog of that house... I am a pretty piece of flesh." *They fight.*

"Quarrel, I will back thee."

"Turn thee, Benvolio; look upon thy death."

Prologue's lines 9 and 12 repeated x3

"Villain!"

"Oh, where is Romeo? ... did I see your son."

"Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs... preserving sweet."

"Many morning hath he been seen ... an artificial night."

"Come, my good friend, speak, do you know the cause?"

"In sadness, my cousin, I do love a woman... examine other beauties."

[cut to scene 2] "This night at Capulet's once yearly feast... but to rejoice in splendor of my own."

[cut to scene 4] "Give me a torch ... you beat love down." "Come, we burn daylight, ho!"

"Nay, we mean well in going to this masque, ... This wind you talk of blows us from ourselves." "Strike, drum."

[cut to scene 3, whole scene minus small cuts]

[cut to scene 5] all: "The ball!" "Did my heart love til now... I hold it now a sin."

"I will withdraw... Madam!"

"Amo, Amas..."

"My friends, this is a Montague, our foe... our solemnity this night."

"I'll not endure him."

"Madam, your mother craves a word with you... My life is my foe's debt."

"Come hither, nurse . . . of one I danced withal."

cut to 2.1

2.2, "a balcony" until "But love from love, toward school with heavy looks."

2.3: "Within the infant rind of this weak flower / Poison hath residence and medicine

power"

2.2: "Romeo. ... 'Tis twenty years til now." "Tis almost morning."

2.3 "Good morrow, father. ... To turn your households' rancour to pure love."

2.5.1 "the clock struck nine" x2

tick tock noises. all count to 12.

2.5

2.6 "Ah, Juliet, if the measure of thy joy / Be heaped like mine..." x2

"But my true love is grown to such excess..."

Sonnet 18

Sonnet 116

2.6 "so smile the heavens upon this holy act/ That after-hours with sorrow chide us

not."

"Amos, Amas, ..."

extracts from the earlier manual on gender roles

"Thou shalt not lie, steal, cheat, kill— LUST!"

quick succession of lines from Prologue, 2.2, 1.4, prologue again.

3.1 until "Else, when he be found, that hour is his last"

ACT 2

repeated last 3.1 lines

3.2

3.3

3.5

4.1 (beginning of the scene with Paris is cut): from "Oh, Juliet, I already know thy grief" to "hither shall he come"

"and he and I" to "to Mantua" | Sonnet 18, lines 1-4

4.3: "Romeo, Romeo, Romeo! Here's drink. I drink to thee."

4.4: "Good faith, 'tis day"

4.5 until "ties up my tongue and will not let me speak" (end of scene with friar and Paris cut entirely)

5.1 until "no, good my lord."

5.2

5.1 "Get thee gone" to end of scene.

5.3 (Paris cut from the scene): "Thou detestable maw, thou womb of death ... I'll cram thee with more food."

"O here lies Juliet, and her beauty makes... There rust, and let me die."

2.3: "Now ere the sun advance his burning eye / the day to cheer, and nights dank dew to dry."

Amo, Amas, ...

extract from the earlier manual on gender roles

Thou shalt not...

A Midsummer Night's Dream: 5.2: "Now is the time of night... Now are frolic!"

"Now is the time of night" x3

"if we shadows have offended... "give me your hands if we be friends"

Romeo and Juliet: 5.3 "A glooming peace this morning with it brings... than this of Juliet and her Romeo."

1.4: "I dreamt a dream tonight." "I dreamt."

3.1: "Why dost thou stay?"

4.1.70 / 3.3.16: "I do spy a kind of hope; the world is broad and wide."

Sonnet 116 lines 2-6

2.2 "if thou dost love, pronounce it"

1.4 "I dreamt a dream tonight." "Strike, drum"

3.3.16 "the world is broad and wide."

3.1: "Why dost thou stay?"

1.4 "You are a lover, borrow Cupid's wings / And soar with them above a common ground."

3.3.16 "the world is broad and wide."

1.4: "I dreamt a dream tonight." "I dreamt..." x3

End of Play

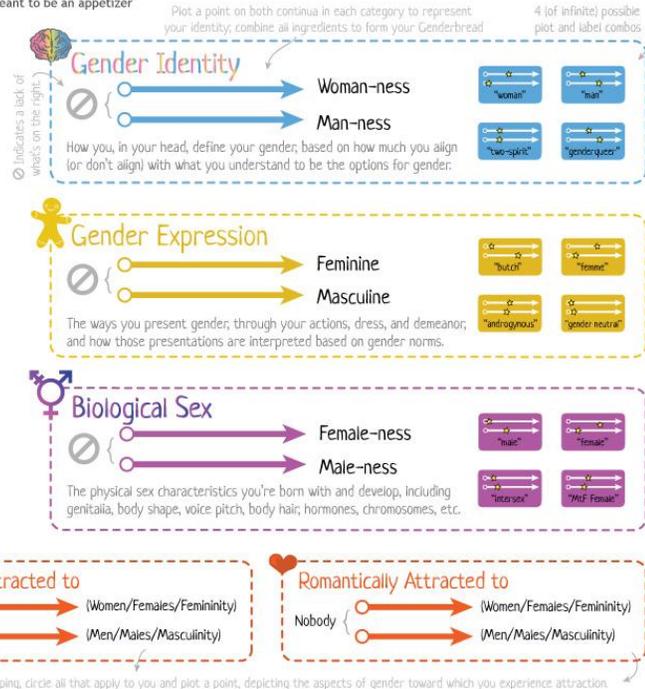
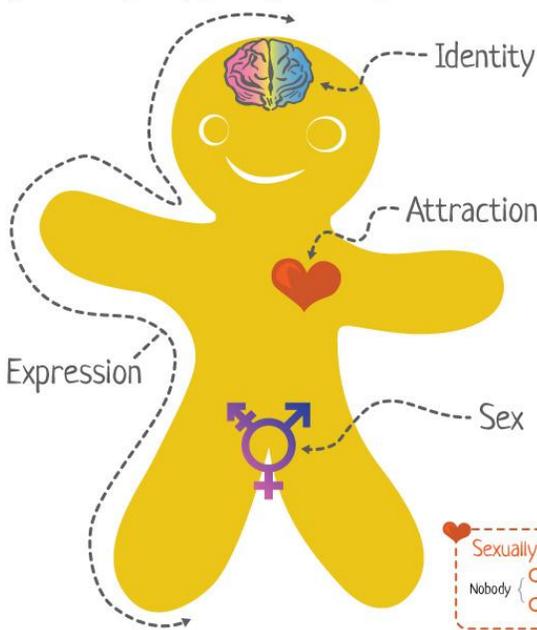
APPENDIX 2
 THE GENDERBREAD PERSON

The genderbread person is a tool used by LGBT advocacy groups such as SOS Homophobie in efforts to educate children and the general population on differences between sexual attraction, genitalia, gender identity and gender expression. It is considered the most complete representation of the spectrum(s) of LGBT+ identities.

The Genderbread Person v3.3

Gender is one of those things everyone thinks they understand, but most people don't. Like *Inception*. Gender isn't binary. It's not either/or. In many cases it's both/and. A bit of this, a dash of that. This tasty little guide is meant to be an appetizer for gender understanding. It's okay if you're hungry for more. In fact, that's the idea.

by its pronounced **METROsexual.com**



For a bigger bite, read more at <http://bit.ly/genderbread>

Graphic by Sam Killerman, March 16 2015. <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2015/03/the-genderbread-person-v3/>