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## Homosociality in Michael Radford's *The Merchant of Venice*

William Shakespeare wrote many of the most seminal works in the Western literary canon, with dramatic pieces ranging from histories such as *Richard III* to comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As a playwright, Shakespeare was a master of subtext, as his words often provide information not explicitly stated, and due to the relative lack of stage directions in his plays, Shakespeare encourages his viewers and readers to speculate as to his intentions. The combination of subtext and speculation has provided interpretations of his works that differ drastically from one another. Since the dawning of film in the late nineteenth century, Shakespeare's works have been continually adapted to fit the silver screen, with each film distinct from its predecessors. One particular aspect that has stood out in these adaptations of Shakespeare has been their various representations of same-sex desire, as demarcated by Eve Sedgwick in her pioneering work on the topic, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Directors of Shakespearean films have noticed several of these cues in the dramatic texts to their productions, using their own medium to develop ostensibly nonromantic and nonsexual character interactions into the explicitly homoerotic, invoking romantic and sexual attraction between members of the same sex.

*The Merchant of Venice* has created controversy over the past several hundred years by revealing a debate over the character of Shylock and whether or not the play encourages the audience to hate the character or to sympathize with him. Alongside this debate, however, another focuses on the nature of the relationship between the merchant, Antonio, and the area of disagreement with his friend, Bassanio. Many analyses of Antonio and Bassanio have angled towards the homosocial and homoerotic connections between the two, and Michael Radford's 2004 filmic adaptation of *Merchant* presents several scenes in ways that help develop those

ideas. Radford's film presents an iteration of Antonio (Jeremy Irons) that pines for Bassanio (Joseph Fiennes), who does not necessarily reciprocate his feelings. Antonio, however, attempts to win over Bassanio through manipulative tactics and by trying to establish himself as a dominant figure, financial and otherwise, in Bassanio's life. Meanwhile, Radford's Bassanio uses Antonio's feelings towards him to take advantage of their friendship to get the capital he requires in order to capture the affections of the rich heiress, Portia (Lynn Collins). Act 4 of the play details the complexity of these relationships by providing a visual representation of what Sedgwick refers to as an "erotic rivalry" between Antonio and Portia over the figure of Bassanio (21). Sedgwick defines an "erotic rivalry" as "the bond that links the two rivals [that] is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the rivals to the beloved" (21). Here the term "beloved" references Bassanio. Radford's film presents the homosocial and homoerotic dynamics between Antonio and Bassanio most prevalently in 1.1, 1.3, 4.1, and 5.1 through their interactions with one another, and with special attention drawn to their facial expressions and movements.

Radford's *The Merchant of Venice* opens with the titular merchant, Antonio, uttering the play's first line, "In [truth] I know not why I am so sad" (1.1.1). He listens as his comrades, Solerio and Solanio, speculate as to the cause of his melancholy while he walks to the window. As Solanio shares his ideas, Antonio looks out the window and sees Bassanio on a boat coming towards his home. At this moment, Antonio has lost focus on Solanio's words, and the instant Salerio takes over the conversation, there is a moment where Antonio pauses, blinks, and shakes his head, as if he had been lost in a trance as he watches Bassanio arrive. This moment presents the first hint of Antonio's homoerotic feelings towards Bassanio, as it shows that when thinking about Bassanio, Antonio loses his attention. A few seconds later, Solanio suggests that perhaps

Antonio is in love, to which Antonio brusquely replies “Fie, fie” (46), with a panicked expression on his face to signify that he is trying to get off the subject and brush it aside before Bassanio enters his home. Moments after they move on from Solanio’s conjecture, Solanio remarks, “Here comes [my lord], Bassanio” (57), and Antonio then lets out a slight smile, implying that he knows only Bassanio can cure him of his sadness. Beginning the story with these early cues allows the audience to enter Antonio’s mind and understand how Bassanio alters his mood with his presence. This knowledge makes it easier to acknowledge why Antonio takes his subsequent actions, and helps the audience sympathize with his character.

As 1.1 continues Bassanio enters Antonio’s home with Graziano and dines with Antonio, though they quickly move to Antonio’s bedroom so they may discuss Bassanio’s need to borrow money. Bassanio lays on the bed, an action that causes Antonio’s eyes to wander about the room, away from Bassanio – almost as if he were trying to appear bashful or modest. In other words, Antonio wants to seem pure and respectful to Bassanio by taking his eyes off him while in a quasi-erotic situation. This scene also demonstrates the first moment where Bassanio knowingly takes advantage of Antonio’s affections for him, as he mentions his “[youth]” as “something too prodigal” (129), hinting at his comparatively young age and lavishness while lying on the bed and placing his hands near his crotch. Bassanio later states, “I owe you most in money, and in love” (131), smiling as he says the word “love,” implying his awareness that Antonio’s sentiments towards him are more than those of mere friends, while also flirting with him so that he may get what he wants. The hushed tone of Bassanio’s voice also implies intimacy between himself and Antonio, as Bassanio appears to seduce him into adhering to his request.

Bassanio’s methods of seduction are enhanced when Antonio joins him on the bed while saying “be assured / my purse, my person, my extremest [sic] means / lie all unlocked to your

occasions” (137-139), placing particular emphasis on the word “person” by hesitating before the word leaves his mouth. The hesitation allows the audience to infer that by “person,” Antonio means “body;” that is, his body is at Bassanio’s disposal to use when he needs it. This pregnant pause identifies that Antonio is revealing his homoerotic feelings towards Bassanio, and is enforced by the actions that follow in which Bassanio gets to his knees on the bed and directly tells his friend “in Belmont is a lady richly left, / and she is fair, and fairer than that word, / of wondrous virtues.... / Her name is Portia” (161-165). Rising to his knees on the bed subsequently places Bassanio in a physically higher position, suggesting that he has assumed an equal footing in the conversation, and has shifted the power dynamic to his favor in an act of expressing dominance over Antonio. The expression of dominance in this way enables Bassanio to continue to take advantage of Antonio, as he eventually says to him, “O my Antonio” (173), a phrase which acts not only as a term of endearment, but also conveys ownership and control over him. The camera focuses on Bassanio as he says, “Her name is Portia” (165) and then cuts to Antonio, slowly panning towards his face to reveal an expression of anguish and broken-heartedness. By revealing that he aims to marry Portia, Bassanio makes Antonio believe that their relationship is about to fall apart, causing him to “[attach] undue importance to Bassanio’s marriage plans, which he sees as desertion” (Hurrell 332). This attachment serves to make Antonio go extra lengths to help Bassanio get the money he needs in order to not face the abandonment caused by him. Antonio hesitates before answering Bassanio’s request for money with “Thou know’st all my fortunes are at sea” (177), looking as if he regrets having to say such a thing and, feeling as though he has disappointed Bassanio, he stands and walks away. However, once Antonio realizes that he can give Bassanio access to his credit, Bassanio kisses his hand. This moment could have been played off as a moment of graciousness – simply

Bassanio showing his appreciation towards Antonio – but Radford’s film chooses to go further by filming Bassanio placing his hand on Antonio’s face and kissing him squarely for a long second on the lips. As each frame goes by, Antonio slowly moves in towards Bassanio and close his eyes, looking enthusiastic at being able to kiss Bassanio. The fact that Antonio closes his eyes while Bassanio kisses him shows that he is not taken aback by the situation, but rather enjoys it and wants it to be even more intimate by keeping them closed as Bassanio pulls away from him.

The film’s portrayal of such a kiss, from Bassanio to Antonio, demonstrates that Bassanio will continue to lead on his friend so that he may continue to use Antonio to his advantage for the duration of the story. This action also creates a newfound sexual tension between the characters as *Merchant* progresses; As Bassanio also begins to act more conflicted regarding his feelings towards Antonio, and slowly becomes torn between a decision he must make concerning Portia and Antonio. Although he manipulates Antonio by flirting with him, “[Bassanio] does not want to hurt his friend” (Hurrell 334). When he tries to avoid doing so, Bassanio comes to the “[realization] that there is a great disparity in the degree of friendship between them” (334), which in turn makes it easier for him to unintentionally cause harm to Antonio. The unintentional harm reveals itself later as Antonio’s promise of a pound of his flesh, purely out of dedication to getting Bassanio’s romantic favor.

As the film progresses to 1.3, the dynamic between Antonio and Bassanio has shifted to Antonio’s desire to impress Bassanio by acting in a traditionally masculine manner. The scene portrays Antonio’s response to Shylock’s query as to why he should lend him money through showing Antonio in a physically dominant position to Shylock. This moment, in a similar manner as to how Bassanio acted on the bed in 1.1, makes Antonio appear in control of the situation. Yet the dominant position switches as Shylock stands and Antonio sits, and just at this

moment Shylock suggests that if the payment cannot be met, Antonio shall owe him a “pound / of [Antonio’s] fair flesh” (142-143), a deal to which Bassanio says Antonio “shall not seal such a bond for [himself]” (147). When Bassanio makes that remark, he has a tone of concern, as if his manipulation of Antonio has gone too far and he must encourage him to back out of the deal – however, Antonio refuses to back out, and looks self-assured that he will not lose when he observes, “Why, fear not, man: I will not forfeit it. / Within these two months – that’s a month before / this bond expires” (149-151). This segment depicts Antonio showing off to Bassanio in an attempt to impress him by establishing perceived dominance over Shylock. When Antonio states that he does “expect return / of thrice three times the value of this bond” (151-152), he is shown shaking his head to brush the forfeiture of his flesh aside as if it were no big deal. By engaging in this action, Radford suggests to the audience that it is Antonio’s means of assuring Bassanio that he will be able to pay back the bond and he has nothing to cause him worry. Undertones of homosociality are prevalent in this scene due to Bassanio’s uneasiness about the situation presented to him and Antonio’s handling of it by attempting to prove himself more masculine than Bassanio. In doing so, he confirms his homoerotic impulses. Though Antonio may prove himself a more powerful person, he ultimately loses this status in the actions Portia subsequently takes when she dons the wise male persona of Balthazar.

Once the play reaches the court scene in 4.1, Radford focuses on not only the fight over Antonio’s flesh, but also who will have access to Bassanio’s flesh: Portia or Antonio. In the latter half of the scene, the film depicts Antonio strapped to a chair and preparing for Shylock to carve into his flesh, during which Antonio gives a lengthy kiss to Bassanio’s hand. Antonio’s belief that he is about to die leads him to say, “Grieve not that I am fallen to this for you” (264), a command that reminds Bassanio that Antonio’s choice to partake in the bond was specifically

done for him at Antonio's own discretion. Because the timing of Antonio's kiss is right before he says this line, one can attach it to the subsequent lines:

Commend me to your honorable wife:  
 Tell her the process of Antonio's end;  
*Say how I loved you; speak me fair in death*  
 And when the tale is told, *bid her be the judge*  
*Whether Bassanio had not once a love.*  
 Repent but you that you shall lose your friend  
 And he repents not that he pays your debt;  
 For if the Jew do cut but deep enough,  
 I'll pay it instantly with all my heart. (271-279)

These lines demonstrate that Antonio's decisions to both aid and to die for Bassanio were fueled by his homoerotic desires aimed towards him. When he states that he "repents not that he pays your debt" (277), he proceeds to insist that he does not regret fulfilling his promise to his beloved. An expression of anguish and defeat plagues Antonio's face when he instructs Bassanio to "Commend [himself] to [his] honorable wife" (271), as this moment establishes his forfeiture of Bassanio to Portia – a loss that Antonio will not be able to regain, even after he receives freedom from the bond. While Antonio instructs Bassanio to "Say how [he] loved [him]; speak [him] fair in death/And when the tale is told, bid her be the judge/Whether Bassanio had not once a love" (273-275), the scene cuts to the disguised Portia. As the camera presents Portia, she appears genuinely bereaved as she listens to Antonio, turning pale and nervously swallowing as she suddenly becomes aware of his love for Bassanio. This moment shows how the erotic rivalry comes to realization and deepens the competition between Antonio and Portia over the beloved



Bassanio, as now Portia must prove herself more worthy of his love than Antonio. Also during Antonio's instructions, the viewer sees Bassanio struggling with the parting of his friend, crying through the words, "I am married to a wife / which is as dear to me as life itself" (280-281). This segment makes it seem as though he is reminding Antonio that, although he does have love for him, his marriage supersedes any notion that Antonio could ever act on his homoerotic nature in a romantic manner. After the judgement, which makes impossible Shylock's goal of receiving a pound of Antonio's flesh (and through which Antonio is able to live), Antonio seeks comfort by holding onto Bassanio's clothing. This action serves as a reversion more in tune with the beginning of *Merchant*, where Antonio pines for him from the window. The emasculation of Antonio from 1.3 to 4.1 can be traced as Bassanio now comes to see Portia (disguised as Balthazar) as the more masculine figure who seeks his love due to her intelligence as exemplified during the trial and her appearance as a wise man of authority. This discovery plays towards an underlying homoerotic side of his character by demonstrating Bassanio's attraction to characters who display dominance and emotional strength.

In the aftermath of the court case when Bassanio and Antonio walk towards Portia and Nerissa (both of whom are dressed as males), the viewer sees the competition over Bassanio escalate, with "Portia and Antonio, the two to whom he is most deeply committed and who most have earned the audience's trust, [as they] both press him, one cryptically (4.1.440-44) and the other openly, to give away the ring" (Pequigney 215). The attempt Portia makes to have Bassanio give up the ring she gave him is presented with her flirting with him, making an effort to grab his hand and take the ring off his finger, while also smiling and slightly laughing. These actions involve Portia testing whether or not he will flirt back with the male identity she has donned, and seeing if she can elicit the same emotions in him as her newfound erotic rival

Antonio. Telling Bassanio that she will “take no more [than the ring]” (4.1.426), indicates that Portia (as Balthazar) is trying to convince her husband that the value of the ring is worth no more than its monetary value, and that it would not be an awful thing of him to give it to her.

However, when Portia says “you, in love, shall not deny me this” (427), the camera cuts to Bassanio and he replies, “I will not shame myself to give you this [ring]” (429). Bassanio delivers this line with a rushed tone, suggesting he is trying to quickly shut down Balthazar’s proposition and that Bassanio would not give him the ring because he does not love Balthazar, as if Bassanio were tossing aside the notion that Balthazar is in love with him. When considering the idea that being in love is not indicative of being attracted to Balthazar, it is clear that Bassanio wishes the situation were as simple as handing the ring over without second thought. Radford depicts this wish using Bassanio’s movements such as his quick, frantic and flustered blinking after Balthazar states “you teach me now how a beggar should be answered” (438). In a need to defend himself, Bassanio elaborates on his reasoning by stating the rules laid out by his wife. Doing so makes it seem as if Bassanio does not care about the terms Portia had created for him when she gave him the ring, and that the only thing holding him back from giving the ring to Balthazar is the vow he made. This statement’s significance delves even more into the possibility that Bassanio could eventually turn his relationship with Antonio into one that is homoerotic, as it hints at the prospect that Bassanio feels same-sex attraction.

Portia’s effort to get the ring and to test how deep her husband’s loyalty runs to her demonstrates not only her cunning, but as the shot changes and presents the two women leaving, it also depicts Antonio’s final attempt to lure Bassanio in a romantic way. In this last effort, when it appears Portia and Nerissa are out of earshot of the two men, Antonio remarks, “let... my love... / be valued ’gainst your wife’s commandment” (4.1.448-449), a comment to which

Bassanio adheres. Giving up the ring acts as a trial for Bassanio due to the level of commitment it symbolizes, and to Portia, Bassanio's ability to give it up as easily as he does means that he cares more for Antonio than he does her. This "expression of gratitude" makes it unclear to who Bassanio will choose, and ponders the question of whether Bassanio actually leans more towards the homoerotic rather than the homosocial. Though this moment can be interpreted as simply Bassanio giving Balthazar his thanks for saving his friend's life, it does show that Bassanio is willing to give away the object that represents their love for Antonio, suggesting that he is still contemplating whom he truly loves.

As *The Merchant of Venice* ends, in 5.1, the film demonstrates a moment of self-sacrifice that shows how these characters shall live out the rest of their days. Samuel Crowl writes, "At the end of the film... the lovers and Antonio have all returned to Belmont" (150), informing his reader that Antonio will not get his way, as not only does he not have a lover, but Bassanio has finally made the decision of taking Portia as his lover over Antonio. Radford decides to show Bassanio's aside, "Why, I were best to cut my hand off / and swear I lost the ring defending it" (Shakespeare 177-178), by playing it as a hushed remark focused solely to Antonio, a sign of their closeness and roles as confidants to each other. While Bassanio makes his quip, Antonio shifts his head towards Bassanio in a tilt that suggests he believes nothing else could have been done in the situation, though it could have been avoided had Antonio not encouraged Bassanio to give up the ring up at the end of 4.1. This small detail helps the viewer identify Antonio's quiet manipulation of Bassanio's actions and makes it appear that Antonio is now attempting to act subservient to Bassanio in order to make him seem in the right.

While Bassanio and Portia subsequently fight after Graziano reveals the information as to the whereabouts of Bassanio's ring, Antonio reconsiders his actions taken earlier in the story, as

he sees that his actions have gotten his friend in a predicament that leaves him unhappy. As Portia attacks Bassanio for giving up his wedding ring to a doctor (Portia as Balthazar) out of thanks, Antonio comes to Bassanio's side to protect his marriage by addressing her with the lines:

I once did lend my body for his wealth, [...]  
 [...] I dare be bound again,  
 My soul upon the forfeit, that your lord  
 Will never more break faith advisedly. (5.1.249-253)

Within these lines, the audience hears Antonio trying to atone for Bassanio's mistake, even though the outcome would not benefit his own romantic interests. One observes here that though Antonio sincerely loves Bassanio, he has come to understand that what truly matters to him is his friend's happiness, even if that means Antonio must sacrifice his personal pursuit of Bassanio. Jeremy Irons' delivery of these lines combines tones of hesitation and sadness, as he accepts that he must release his love for Bassanio and permit Portia win him over. A notable action takes place as Portia gives Antonio the ring to give to Bassanio, as what follows is a shot that describes the homosocial relationship between the two as it currently stands. Antonio gives Bassanio the ring, saying, "Swear to keep this ring" (256), and then smiles. The segment suggests that Antonio's instructions have a dual meaning – that Bassanio should never lose Portia because she is a good woman, as well as that he should keep the ring because Antonio gave it to him in an act that would be the closest he could ever have to a proposal. Even though Antonio does give up the pursuit of Bassanio, he still appears to love him. Portia's revelation of herself to be the doctor at the very end of *Merchant* proves that Bassanio actually makes the move to choose the more masculine figure between herself and Antonio; once he learns of Portia's activities, Bassanio

addresses her as “sweet doctor,” once again indicating his attraction to the male persona she put on in Act 4. Indicating such an attraction elaborates on how the homosocial relationship between Antonio and Bassanio was broken apart by a new masculine figure in Bassanio’s life – Portia. Her dominance as both a woman, and a male figure of power and wealth, lures Bassanio to her and away from Antonio, as her disguise made her out to be a figure representing the ideal masculine identity. Radford uses approximately fifteen seconds after everyone leaves to present his audience with Antonio one final time, alone in his thoughts, and abandoned by Bassanio – the one thing he had feared from the beginning and the ultimate cause of the sadness he could not name in 1.1.

Michael Radford’s 2004 filmic adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* gives its audience a fascinating portrayal of homosocial and homoerotic bonds between the characters of Antonio and Bassanio, making use of the scenes the two share with one another to develop their relationship beyond the original text. The decisions made in depicting the characters demonstrate undertones of unrequited love and male companionship in ways that Shakespeare’s words alone suggest but cannot fully convey, as Radford introduces subtle facial mannerisms and bodily movements that highlight the passionate dynamic between Antonio and Bassanio. This filmic presentation of *Merchant* not only shows the complexity of same-sex desire and friendship, but also manages to capture the feelings of decision and rejection in ways that viewers alike can identify with and which can aid in the understanding of how humans act when faced with love.

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