And then, sir, would he gripe and wring my hand,
Cry, 'O Sweet creature!' and then kiss me hard,
As if he plucked up kisses by the roots
That grew upon my lips; and then laid his leg
Over my thigh, and sighed and kissed . . .

The passionate couple described above are not Anthony and Cleopatra or Hermia and
Lysander, but Cassio and Iago (Othello, III.iii.425-29). In his film of Verdi’s opera
version of the play (1986), Zeffirelli superimposes Iago’s recounting of this incident
to Othello with an image of the naked, handsome body of the sleeping Cassio who
somnambulantly mouths Iago’s sung words. Out of Cassio’s body comes Iago’s voice.
This juxtapositioning of male voices parallels the juxtapositioning of male bodies so
that the homoerotic overtones of the passage are purposefully and pointedly underscored
by the film. The post-dubbing of the film, both as a product of the Italian cinema and
as an opera, allowed for this use of verbal-visual montage. The homoerotic image of
Cassio’s recumbent body emphasizes his comparatively androgynous nature. The blond
hair of the actor playing Cassio, Prince Urbano Barberini, is intended to be read in a
similar manner, in stark contrast to Othello’s masculine and dominant darkness. In
his Autobiography, Zeffirelli specifically associates the prince’s blondness with that
of the actress playing Desdemona, the soprano Katia Ricciarelli (335). Zeffirelli’s
interpretation here is not amiss, as the dramatic structure of Shakespeare’s play is
little more than a homoerotic web of disrupted male bonds and jealous tensions into
which the unsuspecting Desdemona innocently intrudes. After all, it is Iago, not
Desdemona, whom Othello “loves not wisely, but too well” (V.ii.431).

For the better part of four centuries, the same Shakespearean scholars who have
praised the bard for his almost universal understanding of human psychology have
been intent on straightjacketing his concept of human sexuality into a limited and
conformist heterosexual polarity. There is, quite simply, more in heaven and earth,
as well as in Shakespeare, than is dreamt of in this simple-minded homophobic philosophy, as recent gender deconstructive readings of such plays as *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and particularly *Twelfth Night* have indicated. Shakespeare’s theatre far from champions homosexuality as a cause, however, and when he does broach the topic, it is more likely in order to deride the character in question, such as Antonio’s self-disgust over his attraction to Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice* or Hamlet’s berating of the effemintely Frenchified Osric. In accordance with such a homophobic sensibility, the male bonds in Shakespeare’s plays such as those found in *Othello* usually remain safely within the realm of heterosexual male behavior patterns, any homoerotic undercurrents remaining precisely that—undercurrents. Such relationships have traditionally been referred to by the euphemism “Renaissance friendship,” or what the Italians have called *eroica amicitia*, literally “heroic friendship.” Peter Levi, Shakespeare’s most recent biographer writes, “The romantic attachments of pairs of young men, bound up with ideas of love and honor, did in real life reach a hectic degree” (33). It is certainly reasonable to believe that male-male relationships in Renaissance England were more affectively demonstrative than those of contemporary Anglo-American society. Consider one of Antonio’s several impassioned addresses to Sebastian in *Twelfth Night*:

I could not stay behind you: my desire
More sharp than filed steel, did spur me forth:
And not all love to see you (though so much
As might have drawn one to a longer voyage). (III.i.4-7)

The eighteenth-century critic Edmund Malone comments on the effusive displays of emotion between Shakespeare’s male characters, noting that “such addresses to men, however indecent, were customary in our author’s time, and neither imported criminality nor were esteemed indecorous” (qtd. in Pequigney 30). Quite probably so. The sexual historian Philippe Aries explains such “Renaissance friendship” in relationship to homosexuality proper:

I think that in certain cultures, e.g., Italian Quattrocento and Elizabethan England, there developed, out of an apparently asexual form of sentiment, a particular kind of manly love that verged on homosexuality; but it was a homosexuality that was undeclared and unadmitted, that remained a mystery, less through fear of prohibition than for a distaste for labelling oneself in the eyes of contemporary society as non-sexual or sexual. One hovered in a mixed zone that belonged to neither. (71)

Unfortunately, the term “Renaissance friendship” has also long functioned as the closet in which certain scholars have hidden their own homophobia. Simply because “Renaissance friendships” existed does not mean homosexual male relationships did not. During Renaissance times, the Catholic Church actually performed marriage ceremonies, wherein these ostensibly Platonic “Renaissance friendships” were solemnized, only later to discover that a number of the friendly pairs had actually sexually consummated their vows.

A more enlightened view shows Shakespeare’s plays to be as pan-sexual as they are pan-social and pan-psychological. The point is simple. Homosexuality existed in Renaissance society and Shakespeare knew it. Furthermore, Shakespeare wrote with a homosexually aware audience in mind. Otherwise, lines such as Hamlet’s “Man delights not me—nor woman neither” would not play (II.ii.309). Nevertheless, Zeffirelli has prudishly, homophobically and mistakenly claimed that there are no love scenes in Shakespeare “for the simple reason that girls were played by boys and it would have been unseemly to attempt to show them intertwined on stage” (Zeffirelli 338-39). Despite Zeffirelli, it should be remembered that Elizabethan audiences saw adolescent males in such roles as Cleopatra seduce young men on stage on a regular basis. In any case, although theatrical convention dictated that the boy be seen solely as the female character, there nevertheless existed a phenomenon known as “persona-
tion,” a term used to refer to the identification between the boy actor and his role, an identification which went beyond the bounds of standard acting techniques of the time. The Shakespeare critic Katherine E. Kelly refers to “flaunting the qualities of the boy actor—sexually and verbally exuberant, punning, quick-witted and chiding.” She goes on to assert that “repeated use of this strategy seems to have distinguished Shakespeare” (84). On the narrative level, then, Shakespeare’s audience empathized with scenes of heterosexual love, while on the level of theatrical convention, they witnessed a vicarious game of homosexual cat and mouse. Even the conservative Shakespearean scholar S.L. Bethell has had to concede a “multi-consciousness” to Shakespeare’s audience (202-03).

Despite whatever sense of vicarious homosexuality may have existed in Shakespeare’s theatre audience, the most compelling evidence for a homosexual sensibility in Shakespeare himself comes not from his plays but from his sonnets. The sonnet cycle is essentially a series of love poems written from Shakespeare to his patron, the Earl of Southampton. Joseph Pequigne’s enlightening book, *Such is My Love*, has provided a detailed analysis of the bawdy imagery in the sonnets, asserting their homosexual content, and recounting to what ludicrous lengths homophobic scholars have gone in an effort to desexualize their contents. However, as opposed to his more renegade contemporary Christopher Marlowe who had gone so far as to declare the sacrifice that Jesus’s love for John was “an unnatural love,” Shakespeare certainly never intended to flaunt whatever homosexual component there may have been to his nature. His sonnet cycle was written for the private perusal of Southampton and was never intended for publication. It is only by an accident of history that the works ever entered the public domain. In fact, the dearth of legal records regarding Shakespeare attests to the fact that he was nothing if not a well-behaved man in conformity with the society of his time. Especially when compared to most of his playwright contemporaries who left copious trails of documentation behind them, it is odd that Shakespeare was not involved in a single court case throughout his entire dramatic career. If he managed to avoid the wrath of the official censor, the Master of Revels, it was simply because his writing never really challenged the powers that were.

Essentially then, Shakespeare was a social and political conservative. Not only does he respect authority in his works, but he recognizes a “right” authority whose rightness is essentially in keeping with the concepts of the Divine Right of Kings and the metaphorical universe which characterized the *Weltanschauung* of his time. In Shakespeare, whenever authority is usurped, the usurper, whether Brutus of Macbeth, Bolingbroke or Richard III, must eventually atone for his sins, and when the proper chain of authority is upset, there are repercussions throughout the universe, including the natural order—the mad scene from *King Lear* serves as the most classic example. It is this same essentially conservative stance which ties Shakespeare to Franco Zeffirelli, as Zeffirelli also, in an almost medieval manner, is intent on there being some sort of metaphorical connection between the specific incident and the universal order as a whole. Zeffirelli asserts that “some sort of plan is being worked out into which we all fit” (249). Similarly, upon surviving the Allied bombing of Naples, Zeffirelli superstitiously claimed that “the Madonna dell’Arco had worked another miracle” (27). In his film *Jesus of Nazareth* (1976) the character of Joseph reveals the simple-minded religious roots of Zeffirelli’s all-pervasive conservatism. Joseph exhorts the young Jesus, “God gives us rules to keep our lives straight.” Hence, Zeffirelli’s conservative religious views also explain his attitudes toward his homosexuality. He notes, “My private life is what it is, but my religious convictions are unwavering. I believe totally in the teachings of the Church and this means admitting my way of life is sinful” (241). Throughout his autobiography Zeffirelli vociferously exploits every opportunity to assail the leftist politics of Luchino Visconti, yet he remains quite reticent about the specific nature of his relationship with the older director. At
his most candid, he cryptically refers to himself as being “something more than an employee” of Visconti’s. Instead, he relegates explicit references to their sexuality to off-color comments by Coco Chanel and Anna Magnani (113). Magnani warns Zeffirelli, “Though I love Luchino, I know he’s a snake. You may be able to get at the good inside him, but you need a very special corkscrew” (80). Ever the prude, he claims he was shocked at her “vulgaritv.” Zeffirelli, law-believing if not exactly law-abiding, exiles his homosexuality to the closet, and this is where it is usually found in his films.

The fact that Zeffirelli has never made homosexuality the conscious and overt subject matter of his filmography should also be viewed from within the perspective of the Italian cinema as a whole. When Italian Neorealism burst onto the world film scene in 1945 with Roberto Rossellini’s Rome: Open City, it brought with it a revitalization of homophobia and gay-bashing which has characterized the Italian cinema in a more or less modified form right up unto this present day. Peter Bondanella describes the Nazis in Rossellini’s masterpiece: “Bergman is a monster; he is also pictured as an effeminate homosexual. Ingrid is a vixen like lesbian who seduces Marina with expensive presents and drugs” (38). Here homosexuality and fascism mutually reinforce one another in their parasitic antipathy. From a historical perspective, such mutual identification of homosexuals as fascists and vice versa is especially reprehensible, when it is remembered that homosexuals interred in Nazi concentration camps were the worst treated of Hitler’s undesirables and died at a higher rate than any other group, including the Jews. Nevertheless, despite the homosexuality of two of Italy’s foremost film directors, namely Pasolini and Visconti, such antipathetic treatment of homosexuality has persisted in the Italian cinema as much as it has in its more box office-oriented American counterpart. While Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Teorema (1968) might seem to present homosexuality in something of a positive light, his Salò (1975) and the “trilogy of life” films openly and unmistakably attack it. Pasolini never championed homosexuality as a cause, having never fully integrated it into his own personality. He comments, “My homosexuality was something additional, something outside, it had nothing to do with me. I always viewed it beside me as an enemy” (qtd. in Carotenuto 25). Homosexuality appears somewhat less marginalized in the filmography of Visconti, but Visconti disturbingly maintains the same mutual identification of homosexuality with fascism in his The Damned (1969) that Rossellini had perpetrated two decades earlier. Death in Venice (1971) and Ludwig (1973) do deal with the topic openly, if very discreetly, yet neither film presents it in a positive manner. In Death in Venice, von Aschenbach’s obsession with the young Tadzio only leads to his eventual death by the plague. Regarding Ludwig, Zeffirelli has convincingly argued it to be Visconti’s most personal film. If so, then, as Vito Russo has pointed out in his landmark study of homosexuality in the film The Celluloid Closet, Visconti’s most personal insight into the homosexual condition seems to be the disappointing realization that “sleeping with the stable boy rots your teeth” (254). Federico Fellini offered his tribute to homosexuality with his Satyricon (1969), but cast an English and an American actor in the two leads because, as he put it, “there are no homosexuals in Italy” (qtd. in Russo 256). Franco Brusati’s To Forget Venice (1978) focused unequivocally on a homosexual couple, but by the end of this film the characters renounce their homosexuality as an impediment to personal growth. In all of Italian cinema, only the character of Paul Ree from Liliana Cavani’s Beyond Good and Evil (1977) seems to have adopted a healthy attitude toward his homosexuality, even urging Friedrich Nietzsche to accept his own repressed drives, but Ree does so only from beyond the grave and only after being gang raped.

In her article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey presents her theory of the gaze. In accordance with her feminist ideology, she associates the controlling impulse psychology assigns to scopophilia with a male-dominated society’s agenda to control women. She claims that in standard Hollywood cinema “the spectator
identifies with the main male protagonist" (in Mast 810). However, camera practices generally considered as standard in classic Hollywood cinema were actually established to induce the male spectator to identify with what was otherwise considered to be an antipathetic heroine, namely Julie Marston as played by Bette Davis in the film *Jezebel* (1938). To this end the director of the film, William Wyler, painstakingly employed “camera work and cutting . . . to situate Julie as the governing sensibility of the story” (Schatz 225).³ Mulvey argues that the history of cinema is essentially the history of men looking at women. In studies of scopophilia made in Denmark in the 1970s twice as many men as women reported experiencing excitement from the visual pleasure of watching heterosexually pornographic materials, 22 percent of the men as opposed to 11 percent of the women (Kutchinsky, in Kimmel 237). Such results might seem to confirm Mulvey’s point. She herself presents classic examples from Alfred Hitchcock and Josef von Sternberg in an effort to support her thesis that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist self” (810). However, there is more in heaven and earth, as well as in the cinema, than is dreamt of in her philosophy too. The history of the cinema has also included women looking at men, women looking at women, and perhaps most notably, men looking at men. Had Mulvey chosen her examples from the filmography of Jean Cocteau and Rainer Werner Fassbinder the clitocentric aspects of her argument would have fallen apart. Certainly Mulvey is correct in assigning Kim Novak the “burden” of Jimmy Stewart’s “sexual objectification” in her discussion of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*. The reverse, however, is true in the case of Visconti’s *Senso* (1954), wherein the repeatedly recumbent presence of Farley Granger as object of the lustful gaze of both Alida Valli and the camera comes to mind. Simply put, if there is such a thing as the gaze, then there is such a thing as a homosexual gaze. To assert the existence of a homosexual gaze does not necessarily remove the agenda for control from scopophilia itself, however. The axis of control merely shifts from the male-female polarity to the more Oedipal older male-younger male polarization, the older male burdening the younger male with sexual objectification. Such an exercise of voyeuristic power especially distinguishes the work of an older, already established director with relatively young, unknown actors. Zeffirelli’s homoerotic treatment of such attractive, previous unknowns as Michael York, Leonard Whiting, Graham Faulkner, Martin Hewitt and Prince Urban Berberini merely serves to confirm this thesis.

When Zeffirelli made his film version of *The Taming of the Shrew* (1967), he had already mounted stage versions of *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello* and *Much Ado About Nothing* in England, as well as an Italian production of *Hamlet*. Nevertheless, most of his directorial work prior to this time had been in opera, as is evident from his exuberant stage business and use of supernumeraries in his *The Taming of the Shrew*. The play exhibits Shakespeare's conservative social position primarily as it manifests itself in his attitudes toward women. Shakespeare’s relationship with his own wife remains somewhat enigmatic, as he and Anne Hathaway evidently spent most of their married life away from one another. Although there are references to Shakespeare’s daughters, brother and illegitimate nephew moving to London to live with him, no such references exist regarding Anne. Instead, she remained permanently in Stratford-on-Avon, an Elizabethan woman who apparently “knew her place” in the male supremacist society of her time. Shakespeare’s problematic views regarding women have prompted the publication of more than a dozen books on the topic in the past two decades and *The Taming of the Shrew* has been a prime target. The film critic Jack J. Jorgens has commented, “To a feminist, *Shrew* is . . . a piece of male chauvinist wishful thinking” (67). Accordingly, Wilfrid Sheed has argued that the comedy is so misogynist that “there is no way of making this play funny in modern times” (in Schickel 169).⁴ With his oft-repeated stance against abortion rights, Zeffirelli is hardly a friend of the feminists, and his film at least superficially seems to remain true to
the misogyny of Shakespeare’s original. Katherina’s closing speech, wherein she places her hand beneath Petruchio’s foot in token of her submission, was one of the few speeches in the play kept almost in its entirety in the film. However, the decision to play the speech in earnest was not Zeffirelli’s, but Elizabeth Taylor’s (Zeffirelli 216). Furthermore, the scene concludes with Katherina’s defiantly absenting herself in a moment when Petruchio leaves her unattended. In terms of a phallocentric agenda, perhaps more telling was the emphasis the film placed on the scenes wherein Petruchio, channeling all meaning through himself like a latter-day Adam, renames the world around him. He capriciously confounds day for night and sun for the moon. Katherina is forced to acquiesce to such inanity, rendered subordinate even by the system of language she uses.

As by-products of the same phallocratically repressive society, homophobia and misogyny derive from a similar source. The gay activist writer John Stoltenberg has argued:

Homophobia is totally rooted in the woman-hating that male supremacy thrives on. The male supremacist social hierarchy necessarily derogates both those who are female and those who are queer—namely, those who are male anatomically but not male enough sociosexually. . . . The faggot is stigmatized because he is perceived to participate in the degraded status of the female. (in Kimmel 250)

Consequently, although The Taming of the Shrew focuses on the misogynistic aspects of Shakespeare’s socially repressive sensibility, the play also provided Zeffirelli with ample opportunities for exhibiting both his homosexual and homophobic vision. In his Brother Sun, Sister Moon (1973) and Jesus of Nazareth, Zeffirelli maintained empathy and admiration for the characters of St. Francis and Jesus, respectively, while still presenting the two protagonists as men who embodied certain traditionally “feminine” characteristics. Such is not the case in the more polemically sexist The Taming of the Shrew. Here, instead, Zeffirelli invites the derision of the feminine in the caustic effeminacy of a variety of male characters. Hortensio, Bianca’s ineffectual younger suitor, is rendered repulsively sissified, continually playing with his hair and nervously faltering on his own words. To a similar end, Gremio, Bianca’s older suitor, is ridiculously costumed in an obnoxiously foppish pair of pantaloons. Later, the Tailor and the Haberdasher are portrayed even more effeminately, the Haberdasher fainting when Petruchio begins brutally tearing apart his handiwork.

Nevertheless, the text does provide Zeffirelli with occasion for a more good-natured sort of homosexual tomfoolery. Consider the following interchange which occurs upon Petruchio’s arrival in Padua. He commands his servant, played in the film by Cyril Cusack:

**PETRUCHIO:** Villain, I say, knock, me here soundly.
**GRUMIO:** Knock you here, sir? Why sir, what am I, sir, that I should knock you here, sir?

**PETRUCHIO:** Villain, I say, knock me at this gate,
And rap me well, or I’ll knock your knave’s pate.

**GRUMIO:** My master is grown quarrelsome,
I should knock you first,
And then I know after who comes by the worst (I.i.8-14)

Although the term “to knock” may have originally served as a pun for “to strike a blow,” in Zeffirelli’s film version it functions equally as well as a pun for copulation, in this case, between two men. Still later, Shakespeare’s text makes an off-color reference to the predominately homosexual practice of analingus. As Petruchio courts Katherina, they engage in the following verbal joust:

**PETRUCHIO:** Come, come you wasp; i’ faith, you are too angry.
**KATHERINA:** If I be waspish, best beware my sting.
**PETRUCHIO:** My remedy is then, to pluck it out.
**KATHERINA:** Ay, if the fool could find where it lies.
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PETRUCHIO: Who knows not where a wasp does wear his sting?
   In his tail
KATHERINA: In his tongue.
PETRUCHIO: Whose tongue?
KATHERINA: Yours, if you talk of tales, and so farewell.
   Good Kate, I am a gentleman. (II.i.205-13)

Homophobic scholars intent on “cleansing” Shakespeare have deleted precisely this passage from various editions of the play. Zefferelli includes it with Katherina sitting on a trap door atop Petruchio. This physicalized inversion of their relative positions in a male supremacist world functions as a visual correlative for the inversion of the sexual practice to which the bawdy alludes.

Nevertheless, Zefferelli’s homosexual sensibility is even more evident in his camerawork than in his subject matter, as it is this which is all-pervasive, and this which is the vehicle of the gaze. Despite his desire to become a bankable Hollywood director, Zefferelli was not a product of the Hollywood studio system, and so it is not surprising that his camerawork deviates from standard Hollywood practices. Instead, his first experiences behind the camera were as Visconti’s apprentice, specifically as an assistant director on The Earth Trembles (1948). Thus, Zefferelli’s use of the homosexual gaze has been a matter of unintentional training as well as natural sensibility. The homosexual Zefferelli opens his film of The Taming of the Shrew by parodying the heterosexual idea of woman as “sexual object.” Here the camera follows Tranio’s lustful gaze to an obese, ridiculously endowed, blond prostitute, pointedly framed in a window. Later, Petruchio’s and Katherina’s encounter with the bearded Vicentio on the road to Padua provides Zefferelli with a similar opportunity for satire of the traditional gaze. When Petruchio tests Katherina by arbitrarily asserting that Vicentio is a woman, Katherina responds by calling the old man a “young, budding virgin” and pointedly scrutinizing him as object of her penetrating stare. A similar inversion of standard Hollywood practices characterizes Zefferelli’s treatment of Elizabeth Taylor throughout the film. Even when Katherina is first seen, it is more as bearer of the gaze rather than object of the gaze. As Elizabeth Taylor had the most famous eyes in cinema at the time, Zefferelli could tease his audience with a metonymic close-up of one of her eyes looking out from between the shutters of an upstairs window. This pattern repeats itself later when both Katherina and Bianca survey their prospective suitors below, the gender roles of Mulvey’s theory of the gaze inverted yet again. After their visual interchange at the window, the dark-haired Katherina aggresses the more passively blond Bianca, grabbing a phallic switch and threatening to disfigure her as object of the male gaze. Katherina cries, “I’ll mar thee ’til no man dare look on thee.” When this behavior merely confirms Baptista in his preferential treatment of Bianca, Katherina breaks her adopted phallus over her knee. Petruchio then enters with his sword prominently displayed, something which happens recurrently in the film. Perhaps the most blatant example of phallic showmanship occurs when Petruchio attempts to drag Katherina away from the wedding reception. At this moment, Zefferelli cuts to a punctuated close-up of Grumio’s valiantly raised sword as, in an overtly calculated manner, it is illuminated with a flash of light. Nevertheless, despite such coy homages to phallocentrism, Katherina retains her status as preferred bearer to the gaze throughout much of the film. After Petruchio has wooed her, she is locked in a room from which she peers at the scheming men below. Here the close-up of Taylor’s famous eyes is enhanced by the bright colors of the stained glass window out of which she looks. At her wedding, the intense ferocity of her gaze, abruptly revealed from beneath her veil, causes the priest to jump back in terror. It is through Katherina’s gaze that Zefferelli’s camera takes in both the opulently displayed wedding gifts at the reception and the luxurious clothing the Tailor and Haberdasher later submit for her and Petruchio’s approval. Throughout the film the
camera repeatedly watches Katherina watch others, Petruchio, Baptista, Hortensio, the wedding guests, her servants, etc., as in an effort to control her own destiny, she attempts to assess their vulnerabilities. As Katherina verges on becoming the governing sensibility of the film, Zeffirelli's version actually tends to subvert the misogynist agenda of Shakespeare's play.

When Lucentio and Bianca first meet on a Paduan street, Zeffirelli's homosexualized camera spends as much time in adoring close-ups of Lucentio's face as it does Bianca's. Moments later, when the two characters espy each other again in front of her father Baptista's house, Zeffirelli actually privileges Michael York as Lucentio. While the camera contents itself with a two-shot of Bianca speaking with her father, it repeatedly returns to close-ups of York. Such close-ups of York's face will become a signature of Zeffirelli's filmography, recurring in both *Romeo and Juliet* (1968) and *Jesus of Nazareth*. In still a later scene from *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Lucentio and Bianca are shown making love in a garden, the blond adolescent Biondello functions as lookout from a tree above. Here Zeffirelli's camera is at eye level with Biondello's buttocks, the first manifestation of what may be called his sodomizing gaze. In Zeffirelli's film version of *Hamlet* such camerawork is evident in the "play within a play" scene, which begins with a gratuitous close-up of the gymnasts' buttocks as they flip over one another. Despite these two clothed examples, Zeffirelli's sodomizing camera usually prefers naked male adolescent buttocks as the preferred object of its gaze. In this context, Martin Hewitt as David in two love scenes from *Endless Love* (1981), Graham Faulkner as St. Francis in the town square in *Brother Son, Sister Moon*, and Leonard Whiting as Romeo in the love scene from *Romeo and Juliet* come to mind. All these scenes were memorable for being emotionally charged, but critics have canonized Whiting's buttocks in particular, visible "for more than seventeen seconds in three shots" (Donaldson 169). The film critic Pauline Kael claimed that scenes from the film "look like ads for *The Boy*," a gay-oriented publication (157). The film critic John Simon also noted "fondly lingering shots of Romeo's bare bottom," arguing that Zeffirelli's film was "a *Romeo and Juliet* for ... pederasts" (in Alpert 208).

The first love tragedy in the history of western theatre, *Romeo and Juliet* is arguably one of Shakespeare's most innovative works. Although Prince Escalus's authority is never challenged, the play does call into question the moral rectitude of the patriarchal order of Lords Capulet and Montague. In fact, the play is uniquely revolutionary among Shakespeare's works in its overwhelming sympathy for those who rebel against patriarchy. Zeffirelli is careful to establish the misogynist phallocentrism of this patriarchal order in the opening shots of his film. When the Capulet ruffians enter the square threatening to "thrust" the Montague "maids to the wall," the homosexual gaze of Zeffirelli's camera focuses on crotch level (I.i.21). Throughout the film Danilo Donati, Zeffirelli's costumer, calls further attention to the mannerist phallocentricism of Verona society with his brightly-colored "fashion show in codpieces—two-toned with fringe and bows and laces" (Kael 153). The prominent codpieces are merely a visual correlative for Sampson's barrage of phallically-charged taunts, such as "Me they shall feel while I am able to stand; and 'tis/know I am a pretty piece of flesh," "My naked weapon is out," and "I do not bite my thumb at you, sir; but I bite my thumb" (I. i. 34-35, 40, 57-58). When the belligerent Tybalt first struts into the scene, the camerawork is even more elaborately attentive, panning upward to survey Michael York's calves and thighs, pausing at his crotch, and then continuing past his torso before finally framing his face in close-up. By placing the feud in such consciously phallocentric terms, Zeffirelli presents it as little more than the result of having two cocks, Montague and Capulet, in the one hen house of Verona. The families thus have more in common than they have differences, as Romeo astutely realizes with his "Here's much to do with hate, but more with love" (I.i.182).

Unlike the strident and garishly-clad Tybalt, the more androgynously soft-spoken Romeo first appears carrying a flower; he is dressed in muted colors, his codpiece
not even visible beneath his doublet. No camera flourishes announce his arrival. Instead, his apotheosis occurs in a softly-lit long shot as he joins his cousin Benvolio, whose point of view the camera shares. As he approaches, Romeo walks into a close-up, the camera then following him in profile until he sits. Finally reclining beside his cousin, the camera again shoots his face in close-up from above, and he talks of love. All this is underscored with some of the most gently romantic theme music in the movie. That Zeffirelli employs such sensitive camerawork to privilege Romeo throughout the film comes as no surprise. Justifiably aware of the importance of the close-up, Zeffirelli cast Whiting in part because “his looks were perfect for the role.” In fact, Zeffirelli considered Whiting “the most exquisitely beautiful adolescent male I’ve ever met” (Zeffirelli 228). In comparison, Zeffirelli’s treatment of Juliet’s first appearance is not nearly so adoring. She is first spied through an upstairs window across a courtyard in long shot. No romantic theme music accompanies her and she is given no close-up at this juncture, but is seen only in long shot, medium shot or two-shots with either the Nurse or Lady Capulet. In this early part of the film even Tybalt functions more as object of the gaze than does Juliet.

When Romeo and Juliet meet at the Capulet ball, Zeffirelli’s homosexual camera again prefers Romeo. After an initial zoom when Romeo first sees Juliet, she then appears only from his point of view, either in long shot or two-shot, but always surrounded by other people. Although Juliet is the object of Romeo’s gaze, Romeo remains the object of Zeffirelli’s gaze. Instead of focusing on Juliet, the camera repeatedly returns to close-ups of the enthralled Romeo. Juliet’s first consistent and recurrent close-ups occur only when she, like Romeo, becomes bearer of the gaze, seeking out his face among the guests who listen to the singing troubadour. Later, when Romeo removes his mask and kisses Juliet’s hand, he regains his status as preferred object of the gaze. Zeffirelli emphasizes this by having Romeo step back in response to the intensity of Juliet’s look. Throughout the next sequence Zeffirelli’s camerawork corresponds to the mutuality of the love sonnet by allowing Romeo and Juliet to function reciprocally as both bearers and objects of the gaze. Such a bisexualized approach saves the scene from degenerating into the sort of one-sided objectification associated with more conventional, phallocratically-slanted camerawork. This is essential inasmuch as the play is predicated upon a belief in true love, not mere object narcissism. Nevertheless, Juliet does function more fully as object of the gaze in the beginning of the balcony scene, when Romeo eavesdrops on her from the garden below. The situation itself is implicitly charged with a power dynamic, as according to Lacanian psychoanalysis, the invocatory drive reverberates with the same alienated agenda for control that characterizes scopophilia. However, even at this juncture, Zeffirelli’s homosexual sensibility prevails, the camera as likely as not maintaining its distance from Juliet, and intercutting shots of her with close-ups of Romeo as he watches. Although Juliet receives her share of close-ups during the film (she has the most extreme close-up in the film when Romeo kisses her hand), Shakespeare did not conceive of her as a mere object for Romeo’s gaze. She is an active heroine, whose initiative and will power virtually take over the action of the play once Romeo has been banished to Mantua.

Perhaps more than any other Shakespearean character, Mercutio embodies the quintessentially ambivalent Elizabethan attitudes toward homosexuality. As Joseph Porter has pointed out in his study Shakespeare’s Mercutio: His History and Drama, Zeffirelli’s film is of historical importance if only for its recuperation of the “semiotic complexities” of Mercutio, such “complexities” deriving from the character’s homophobic homosexual identity. Predictably, the noted homophobe John Simon assailed such an interpretation as being “creepily played by John McENERY” (in Alpert 208). Still, this approach not only explains Mercutio’s tragic sense of self-alienation, but also, and perhaps most importantly, adds a critical intensity to his relationship with Romeo, making more credible Romeo’s reflex to kill or be killed for him. As
Jorgens has commented, "There is a deep friendship, even love, between Romeo and Mercutio" (84). While Romeo and Juliet share four tight close-ups, Romeo and Mercutio share almost as many, three, indicating a strong intimacy in their relationship as well. In contrast to centuries of performance tradition, the Queen Mab speech in Zeffirelli's version does not degenerate into a vacuous exercise in Elizabethan rhetoric. Instead, it functions as a means for externalizing Mercutio's own internal conflicts. When Mercutio berates women for their victimized status in a male supremacist world, he actually tacitly chastises himself for his own victimized status as a repressed homosexual. As the true cause of Mercutio's misogyny threatens to break the surface, the inner conflict inherent in the speech escalates to near hysteria. Alone and separated from his peers, this "freaked-out Mercutio" suffers an emotional collapse (Kael 153).

At this point, Romeo runs to him and, taking his head consolingly in his hands, the two share their first tight close-up, forehead to forehead. Moments later when Benvolio and the others pull Mercutio away to the Capulet ball, his gaze remains longingly fixed upon Romeo. After the ball, Mercutio searches for Romeo, who has already made his way into the Capulet garden. The following morning Mercutio interrogates Benvolio, displaying an inordinate interest in Romeo's whereabouts the previous night.

Nevertheless, despite the mutual affection of Mercutio and Romeo, Mercutio can speak of love only in disparaging terms as "French slop" (II.iii.48). For him, a homophobia repressed homosexual, real love constitutes a potentially traumatic discourse. Consequently, Mercutio takes refuge in humor and can express affection in only an alienated, nullifying manner, as he does before the Capulet ball when he mockingly makes as if to kiss one of his cohorts. Mercutio caustically bemoans the love-stricken Romeo:

Alas, poor Romeo, he is already dead—stabb'd with
a white wench's black eye, run through the ear with
a love song, the very pin of his heart cleft with the
blind bow-boy's butt-shaft. (II.iii.15-18)

Here Romeo has been "stabb'd," "run through," and "cleft" with a "butt-shaft." From Mercutio's homosexual-phallocentric perspective, love is tantamount to sodomy, as both threaten emasculation by rendering the male submissive and feminine. Mercutio's obsessive phallic punning carries with it a corresponding devaluation of women and all things female. In his encounter with the Nurse, he greets her with an obscene gesture to accompany his line "the prick of noon" (II.iii.119). He then grabs her veil, using it to improvise a pair of false breasts with which he parades desirously about the square. This done, he proceeds to crawl beneath the Nurse's skirts only to make a hasty retreat, as he feigns passing out from the supposed stench.

Zeffirelli's camera finds an opportunity to contemplate the servant Peter's crotch when on the steps of the church he kicks up his heels and laughs at the Nurse. In a later scene in Mantua, Zeffirelli's direction creates an intimate moment when Romeo takes Balthasar's head in his hands before kissing him good-bye. While Zeffirelli's homosexual gaze manifests itself in such sensitive attentiveness to minor characters, his filmic handling of Mercutio remains relatively uncomplimentary. The least attractive young male in Zeffirelli's cast of otherwise pretty boys, with his spindly legs and his haggard face, McEnery never bears the burden of sexual objectification. His close-ups repeatedly detail either an unappealing grimace or a squint. His tightest, longest held solo close-up occurs with his face completely masked by a white handkerchief as he talks gibberish to Benvolio. Such treatment keeps the audience at an ambivalent distance from Mercutio in accordance with the character's own sense of self-alienation. As empathy for Mercutio is largely contingent upon his relationship with Romeo, they share tight close-ups during the brawl scene in which Mercutio is killed. In fact, Zeffirelli presents the deaths of both Mercutio and Tybalt as the result of overly intense male bonding. Tybalt's inflammatory pun that Mercutio "consorts" with Romeo helps
precipitate their duel. At one point during their flight, Mercutio salivates and sharpens two rapiers on one another like knives, as if he is about to carve up Tybalt and eat him. As they confusingly attempt to assess the earnestness of their own duel, Mercutio and Tybalt function reciprocally as both objects and bearers of the gaze, much as Romeo and Juliet did during the Capulet ball. When Mercutio is killed, it is his intimate bond with Romeo that inadvertently causes the accident. With regard to Mercutio’s death Donaldson has noticed that “he experiences Romeo’s touch rather than Tybalt’s as the fatal contact” (173).8 In fact, Zeffirelli virtually presents Mercutio’s mortal wound as being one of the heart when it is finally exposed from beneath his handkerchief. In a similar manner, through his use of fight choreography and the camera, Zeffirelli attributes Tybalt’s death to an excessiveness of male intimacy as well. When both Romeo and Tybalt lose their rapiers, they fall to the ground writhing in an impassioned wrestling match. Their shirts are torn and open, exposing their torsos to the gaze of Zeffirelli’s homoerotic camera. They separate, and Tybalt rears himself. As he charges Romeo, Romeo quickly raises his rapier from his crotch in phallic similitude, a reiteration of Mercutio’s earlier “Here’s my fiddlestick” gesture (III.i.49). Accidentally impaling himself on Romeo’s rapier, Tybalt falls on top of him into yet another intimate and fatal male embrace.

In comparison to Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet is a relatively conventional work, falling firmly within the then already-established tenets of the genre of revenge tragedy. Hamlet reifies the exact same patriarchal ethic that Romeo and Juliet renders dubious. By its very nature revenge tragedy is implicitly conservative, presupposing a perennial playing out of justice’s tit for tat, a metaphoric correlation between the actions of man and the universal order as a whole. In fact, as Zeffirelli’s film clearly shows, the entire action of Hamlet takes place, in a Lacanian sense, “in the Name of the Father.” Hamlet, driven by grief, attempts to re-establish this ostensibly “right” authority of “the Law of the Father” by avenging the murder of his own. A similar sense of nostalgia for the father characterizes the bulk of the Zeffirelli filmography. Both Jesus of Nazareth and Brother Son, Sister Moon recount the quest of their respective protagonists, Jesus and St. Francis, for their spiritual fathers. Jesus’s crucifixion ultimately results in his reunification with God, the Father, while Brother Son, Sister Moon concludes with St. Francis’s meeting with the Pope. In Endless Love, Jade’s family disintegrates into disaster largely because her father resists the traditional patriarchal role, exercising too little authority too late. Finally, The Champ (1979) culminates in a poignantly sentimental scene wherein the child T.J., played by Ricky Schroeder, screams for his dead father to wake up. As a child, Zeffirelli had seen the original 1931 version of the film with Wallace Beery, which left him quite affected. As the illegitimate son of Ottorino Corsi, Zeffirelli’s very existence was something of an embarrassment to his father and they had at best a problematic relationship. Corsi essentially neglected his son, only taking an active interest in him when he became an adult. Zeffirelli rejected such belated affection: “I felt the moment had passed for the kind of father-son relationship he now wanted” (Zeffirelli 60). Not surprisingly then, a preoccupation with an absent or near-absent father becomes a hallmark of Zeffirelli’s films. In his life, Zeffirelli turned to a number of surrogates, namely Visconti, the opera director Tullio Serafin and the writer Donald Downes, to each of whom he dedicates his Autobiography. In emulating these three mentors, Zeffirelli attempted to evolve into a father to himself. Similarly, in his role as a director Zeffirelli saw himself as “father to the kids,” namely his actors, designers and crew (Zeffirelli 227).

Like Zeffirelli, Hamlet responds to the absence of his father by attempting to become a father to himself. In his book, Identity in Shakespeare, James P. Driscoll speaks of Hamlet’s maturation process in precisely these terms.9 Some of the most sensitive camerawork in Zeffirelli’s film occurs during Hamlet’s dimly-lit first encounter with
his father’s ghost. Paul Scofield’s deep voice creates a sense of intimacy to which Zeffirelli’s camera responds by filming the two characters in a series of tight interchanging close-ups. At one point, in a variation of the classic Hollywood over-the-shoulder shot, Zeffirelli’s camera shoots the elder Hamlet’s ghost from beside Hamlet’s thigh from what could only be called his crotch’s point of view. Such camerawork indicates the phallocentric bias of the patriarchal order Hamlet intends to champion. Zeffirelli’s use of the gaze in Hamlet reverberates throughout with a traditional phallocratic-patriarchal agenda of control, as Polonius, Claudius, Gertrude, Hamlet, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern all repeatedly spy upon one another from between porticoes, within windows, around corners, behind columns, arrases and walls. Such situations provide Zeffirelli with a third-party perspective, allowing his camera to assume an almost omniscient point of view of the action being watched. In addition, Zeffirelli’s distinct predilection in the film for shooting down upon his subject matter from above similarly contributes to its pervasively patriarchal, ostensibly omniscient, God-the-Father sensibility.

As standardbearer of such patriarchal phallocentricity, Hamlet carries a sword with him throughout much of the film. Unlike the more elegant rapiers of Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet’s weapon appears both formidable and heavy. This sword functions as much as a crucifix as it does a phallic symbol, which, given Hamlet’s medieval view of a metaphorical universe, are ideologically the same thing. Accordingly, Hamlet repeatedly holds his sword upright with the blade pointed down, so that it appears as a cross. He holds the sword in precisely this manner both in the movie poster and when Horatio and the castle guards swear themselves to secrecy regarding the appearance of the elder Hamlet’s ghost. In this scene, the camera even prefers a tight close-up of the sword to one of Hamlet’s face, something which also occurs when he contemplates killing Claudius. Zeffirelli’s camera continually prioritizes the sword as enforcer of “the Law of the Father” throughout the film. Even in a relatively lyrical scene, such as when Hamlet lies on the ground in a lush field, his sword must stand conspicuously erect from out of the grass.

Hamlet’s obsessive attempt to take his father’s place extends to his interaction with Gertrude, their relationship in the film bordering on the explicitly incestuous. Zeffirelli’s Gertrude continually frets over Hamlet, gazes upon him, fondles him, touches him, kisses and caresses him, so that Claudius’s line “The Queen his mother/Lives almost by his looks” rings especially true (IV.vii.11-12). Zeffirelli has defined Hamlet in terms of this potently incestuous bond: “He is a boy taken in just the moment when his affections would move away from his mother, but he dies too soon” (qtd. in Cole 440). While Shakespeare’s youthful Hamlet supposedly studies at Wittenberg University, Zeffirelli’s casting of the bearded Mel Gibson as a practically middle-aged “boy” attached to his mother is at best odd. The relatively close proximity in the ages of Gibson and Glenn Close actually argues for their identity as a couple. Furthermore, Close received top billing for the film alongside Gibson, indicating that she, not Helena-Bonham Carter, is really Gibson’s leading lady. In contrast to the more womanly Close, Carter, with her chubby cheeks and pouty mouth, appears as a mere girl, and her scenes with Gibson generally lack what Hollywood critics call “chemistry.” For instance, the most intimate use of the gaze between Hamlet and Ophelia occurs in a crowded public place, at the performance of the playlet. Hamlet places his head on her lap, sitting submissively or even boyishly at her feet. An abrupt interchange follows between the two, especially mocking on Hamlet’s part. A corresponding sequence of shot-countershots alternates close-ups of Ophelia from his point of view with close-ups of Hamlet from hers. At this junction they exchange the lines:

OPHELIA: ’Tis brief, my lord.
HAMLET: As woman’s love. (III.ii.148-49)
Despite Hamlet’s physical closeness to Ophelia during this and similar passages, his focus returns obsessively to Gertrude, to whom his comments are actually addressed. Ophelia merely serves Hamlet here as she served Claudius and Polonius before, as bait, her role in Hamlet’s life subordinated to Gertrude’s. The faithlessness of Gertrude, like that of Ophelia, provides both Shakespeare and Hamlet with a rationale for venting the misogynistic impulses epitomized in Hamlet’s blanket characterization: “Frailty, thy name is woman (I.i.146). The text itself offers Zeffirelli the opportunity of transferring his reactive focus from homophobia to its phallocentric corollary, misogyny. To this end, he privileges Gertrude, editing her role far less than he does the parts of either Claudius or Horatio. Zeffirelli’s preferential handling of the Hamlet-Gertrude relationship, with its incestuous undercurrents, is particularly evident in the scene wherein Hamlet confronts Gertrude with her treachery. The most warmly lit scene in the film, Gertrude’s bedchamber is an intimate space whose thick walls and heavy draperies create a sense of privacy. Hamlet enters, his sword again conspicuously at his side. When he accuses Gertrude of complicity in his father’s death, he throws her onto the bed, mounts her and violently thrusts his hips into her groin. The amulet with Claudius’s portrait that she wears around her neck not only ties her metaphorically to her husband, but also chains her to Hamlet himself, as he uses it to strangle her into submission. This impassioned confrontation culminates in an explicitly sexual mouth-to-mouth kiss between the two, which only the Oedipal apparition of the elder Hamlet’s ghost brings to an end. When they pull apart, Zeffirelli’s homosexual gaze prefers a close-up of Hamlet’s face to one of Gertrude’s, an inversion of standard Hollywood practice.

In Zeffirelli’s film the patriarchal father-son bond fully displaces the homoerotic tensions and intimate male friendships of his Romeo and Juliet. For instance, whereas Shakespeare in his text fully develops the character of Horatio as Hamlet’s one true friend and confidante, Zeffirelli’s film renders him a shadow figure, practically neutralizing his relationship with the title character. While Shakespeare’s original gives Horatio almost twice as many lines as either Ophelia or Gertrude, Zeffirelli severely edits and almost obliterates the role. Shakespeare’s Horatio and Hamlet share at least a true Renaissance friendship, if not more, a relationship of such intimate intensity that by the end of the play Horatio wants to accompany Hamlet in death, threatening his own suicide. Traditionally Hamlet dies in Horatio’s arms, Horatio’s famous “Good night, sweet prince” functioning as the empathetic climax of the play. Instead, Zeffirelli represses any potentially homoerotic tensions in the relationship of Hamlet and Horatio by undermining its intimacy. The two share none of the tight close-ups that characterized Zeffirelli’s treatment of Romeo’s relationship with Mercutio. Zeffirelli’s Hamlet and Horatio hardly ever touch, and often do not even look at one another while conversing. Gibson’s relatively more advanced age also serves to distance him from the noticeably younger actor playing Horatio, who, in Shakespeare’s text, is either Hamlet’s peer or near senior. For instance, when Hamlet wishes Horatio farewell after their first scene together in the play, his line “Your love is as mine to you” rings noticeably formal, even hollow (I.iii.254). At this point, instead of embracing they shake hands in a similarly stilted manner. By contrast, Hamlet’s sworn enemy Laertes embraces Hamlet in forgiveness before dying in his lap. However, the homophobia-determined treatment of the relationship of Hamlet and Horatio refuses to risk an embrace between the two men even at Hamlet’s death. Instead, Zeffirelli’s closing shot shows Hamlet lying alone on the floor, Horatio seated far enough from him so as not to touch him. The camera further enhances this sense of Hamlet’s ultimate alienation by shooting the scene from the patriarchal above and slowly pulling away.

When Hamlet encounters Polonius in the library, he sits atop a bookshelf, affording the camera a crotch shot ostensibly from Polonius’s point of view. Later, as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern bow in greeting to Claudius, Zeffirelli’s sodomizing camera presents
them quite literally from behind. At this moment Zeffirelli goes on to create an instance of visual-verbal montage by editing Shakespeare's text in such a way as to give Hamlet the line “What an ass am I.” Nevertheless, such examples of the homosexual gaze are relatively scarce and do not determine the overall visual tone of Zeffirelli's film. Instead, he recants the homoeroticism so prevalent in his treatment of the Verona youth and finds no occasion in Hamlet for the exhibitionistic display of shirtless torsos or nude buttocks. In contrast to the brightly-colored tights and prominent codpieces of Romeo and Juliet, the sombre-toned medieval tunics of Hamlet merely serve to desexualize the male anatomy and render it shapeless. In fact, throughout the film Zeffirelli reactively suppresses his homosexual sensibility by generally disparaging the eroticization of the male. The youth who portrays the role of the queen with the players, for example, appears particularly unattractive in a garish red wig and hideous make-up. In a critical reference to the inherent narcissism of homosexuality, Zeffirelli's camera presents this adolescent in a derisively tight close-up mirror shot as he applies his copious cosmetics in preparation for the play. Later in Ophelia's mad scene Zeffirelli makes an even more derogatory comment on the eroticization of the male as tantamount to insanity itself. Here Ophelia brazenly accosts a castle guard whose marked youth, attractiveness, and formidable dominant physique contribute to “burden” him with Ophelia's “sexual objectification.” Zeffirelli's camera further identifies him as such in one of the few overt instances of the homosexual gaze in the film, by shooting him in a close-up from Ophelia's desire-laden point of view. As bearer of the gaze, she grabs a cylindrical piece of leather which is attached to his belt and hangs down toward his crotch. The most explicit phallic symbol in the film, it is fondled by her in a provocatively masturbatory manner. Zeffirelli's repressive stance in the film regarding the homosexual aesthetic even extends to Osric, a character whom Shakespeare provides in his play primarily as an object for homophobic derision. Theatrical productions frequently costume the effeminate Frenchified Osric in pastels, lace and ruffles, and the character is portrayed with effusively effete gestures and affected speech. Instead, Zeffirelli neutralizes him, dressing Osric in muted tones and eliciting a subdued interpretation of the role from John McEnery, an actor who otherwise could have certainly exploited the character's homosexual overtones.

Arguably, the good-looking face of Mel Gibson as Hamlet serves Zeffirelli as the preferred object of his homosexual gaze. Particularly when Gertrude stares longingly at her son, Zeffirelli's camera does not hesitate to respond accordingly. However, in frame after frame, in close-up after close-up, in soliloquy after soliloquy, Hamlet looks at everything and nothing. His own gaze is disengaged, and Gibson's disengaging performance in the soliloquies further detach these scenes from the visual politics of desire. By their very nature, these soliloquies preclude the presence of other characters who might “burden” Hamlet with sexual objectification. During such passages, Zeffirelli's camera has no character's gaze with which it can empathize, nor does it autonomously eroticize Gibson as it did Whiting and York. Unlike them, Gibson's Hamlet does not play the role of male exhibitionist, at least not in the sexual sense. Instead, what Hamlet exhibits in soliloquy after soliloquy, in the crypt and at the cemetery, is his preoccupation with death, his concern whether “To be or not to be” (III.i.56). In his Hamlet, Zeffirelli replaces the eros of his earlier Shakespearean films with thanatos. He subverts the entire Lacan-Metz-Mulvey tradition by associating scopophilia not with the sexual drive, but with the other basic Freudian drive, the death instinct. He opens his film with an image of death, the corpse of the elder Hamlet, as primary object of the shared gaze of Gertrude, Claudius and Hamlet himself. The intimacy of the scene between Hamlet and his father's ghost, as has already been discussed, is also noteworthy within this context. Still, Hamlet shares an even more intimate and extensively-held close-up with the skull of Yorick in the cemetery scene. Lying upon the ground, Hamlet holds the skull close to his face, almost as if to kiss it, staring at it eye socket to eyeball. At this point, Zeffirelli even provides a close-up of Hamlet from the point of view of the skull. As eros gives way
to thanatos, the climax of the play, Hamlet’s duel with Laertes, distinguishes itself sharply from Zeffirelli’s hot-blooded cockfight of a Verona brawl. In contrast, Laertes is notably cold-blooded, a willing but calculating pawn in Claudius’s plot. He and Hamlet fight not out of excessive passion, nor as a display of virility, but from a sense of patriarch-inspired moral rectitude. Theirs is a rigidly formalized duel, and the two, costumed in hoods and chain mail, function mutually as their own executioners. Hamlet thus reaffirms Freudian thought, as Zeffirelli’s thanatized vision supersedes and represses his homosexual gaze.

More than two decades intervened between Zeffirelli’s earlier Shakespearean films and his Hamlet. His more advanced age partially accounts for his obsessiveness with death in this more recent work, as does his survival of a life-threatening automobile accident in 1969. In fact, this incident proved something of a turning point in Zeffirelli’s life, prompting a sort of reconversion to his Catholic faith. He even made “a vow to dedicate my work to God whenever possible” (Zeffirelli 238). Such recommitment to religious roots led to his production of both Brother Son, Sister Moon and Jesus of Nazareth. This stance helps explain the privileging of the sword-crusifex in Hamlet, as well as Zeffirelli’s comparative abandonment in the film of his earlier homoerotic sensibility. In his film La Traviata (1983) Zeffirelli reflected his own transgressive sexuality in that of Violetta. He argued that “it is her sacrifice and religious sense of self-denial for a higher and impossible love that must ultimately make us weep for her” (Zeffirelli 323). Zeffirelli thus asserts an ideological renunciation of his own sexuality, a renunciation that is evident in his latest Shakespearean film, a renunciation which corresponds to Hamlet’s own renunciation of sexuality as proffered by Ophelia. To this end, Zeffirelli gives them a mute scene wherein Hamlet interrupts her embroidery and starts to kiss her, but decides not to.

Zeffirelli’s phallicentrically conservative version of Hamlet should not be seen as an isolated case. In contrast to his filmmaking compatriots Pasolini and Cavani, the relatively reactionary Zeffirelli has almost always eschewed the role of cultural provocateur. Despite his opera films, he has generally spurned the art film circuit in favor of commercial viability. No other Italian film director has been as successful in crossing over into the American marketplace. For example, his Romeo and Juliet cost a mere 1.5 million dollars to make, yet earned over 50 million dollars in its first few years of release, making it Paramount’s largest grossing movie up to that time.11 In contrast to Pasolini’s intimate The Gospel According to Matthew (1964), Zeffirelli’s version of the life of Christ turned to Hollywood conventions dating back to Cecil B. DeMille. His Jesus of Nazareth is on a classically epic scale, full of long shots and pans, replete with a blue-eyed Aryan Jesus and a cast of thousands, and populated with a long list of such big name stars as Sir Laurence Olivier, Anthony Quinn, Rod Steiger and Anne Bancroft. In his quest for box office, Zeffirelli has often used such proved film commodities. Unfortunately, this same commercial impulse has marred the artistry of his filmmography with such performances as those of the uneven Mel Gibson in Hamlet and the wooden Brooke Shields in Endless Love. However, Zeffirelli has never limited himself to established stars and it would be unfair to dismiss him out of hand as a conventionally commercial filmmaker merely because of his self-proclaimed conservative stance on such issues as women’s rights, leftist politics, the Church, and homosexuality. Both his own homosexuality and his Italian heritage have subverted his tendency toward Hollywood conventionality, giving his filmmography a distinctively recognizable signature. This paper has attempted to reveal the undeniably homosexual sensibility that permeates his work, both in his use of the camera and in his subject matter. Zeffirelli’s Shakespearean films, in particular, bespeak this homosexual sensibility. Like homosexuality, the forbidden love of Romeo and Juliet must remain closeted, taking root beyond the realm of social sanction.12 Similarly, the survival of the marriage of Petruchio and Katherina seems contingent upon their spurning the equally repressive small-mindedness of Paduan society. As Petruchio sarcastically remarks, “Padua offers
nothing but what kind” (V.ii.14). In its transgression of social mores, the inter-racial marriage of Othello and Desdemona in Othello also echoes the homosexuality of the film’s director. Finally, the sexually-charged interaction of Hamlet and Gertrude also lies uncomfortably outside the bounds of social acceptance. The incestuous undercurrents of their relationship verge on transgressing an even greater taboo than that of homosexuality.

In referring to Zeffirelli’s homosexual gaze, it should be kept in mind that no worthwhile camerawork is ever too heavy-handedly one-sided. For instance, throughout The Taming of the Shrew the emphatic presence of Elizabeth Taylor’s cleavage, as costumed by Irene Sharaff, advertises her “burden” of sexual objectification. Virtually the sole function of Natasha Pyne’s Bianca, with her array of suitors, is as object of the male gaze. Consequently, Zeffirelli’s primary concern was with the actress’ physical appearance. Similarly, he had originally rejected a chubby Olivia Hussey as Juliet, casting her only later because “she had lost weight dramatically. Her magnificent bone structure was becoming apparent, with those wide expressive eyes and her whole angular self” (Zeffirelli 226). Zeffirelli tellingly mentions neither talent nor training in this passage. However, as film is first and foremost a visual medium, Zeffirelli’s preoccupation with the appearance of his actors is not necessarily misplaced. The film critic Kenneth Tynan has remarked that “too much has been written about how actors feel, too little about how they look” (in Mast 657). Zeffirelli’s general preference for close-ups of the bearer of the gaze, rather than the object of the gaze, mostly allows his homosexual sensibility to privilege the youthful faces of such actors as Leonard Whiting and Michael York. This holds equally true for the older but still handsome face of Mel Gibson, particularly in his numerous endless monologues. It could be argued that to characterize Zeffirelli’s camerawork as homosexual because of its predilection for close-ups of male actors is an arbitrary and subjective distinction. Nevertheless, such subjectivity does not mediate against the validity of the designation. As the film theorist Béla Balázs notes, “Good close-ups are . . . the most subjective manifestation of man” (in Mast 256-57). Despite certain standard film conventions, many of which Zeffirelli subverts, how a film director shoots an actor, in close-up or medium shot, in harsh or flattering light, in or out of make-up, in soft or hard focus, from an angle or straight on, even in cold or warm colors, all is ultimately determined by an unavoidable selectivity and subjectivity of vision.

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Notes

1 Andrei Serban’s 1989 production of Twelfth Night for the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts, provided just such a gender deconstructive reading. In Serban’s version Orsino and Cesario repeatedly reclined in bed together, the “Elephant” tavern where Sebastian and Antonio arranged to meet was identifiably transformed into a gay bar, and Viola and Olivia shared an openly sexual kiss after Viola discarded her disguise and revealed herself to be female.

2 The sexual historian James M. Saslow writes, “Montaigne reported several ‘marriages’ between Portuguese men celebrated in a Roman Church in 1578; the couples lived together for some time before being arrested and burned” (in Duberman 95). A number of extant wills survive and attest to the homosexuality of these relationships (see Olivieri in Aries 100-02). See also David F. Greenberg, The Construction of Homosexuality (301-46).

3 Schatz comments, “Through the calculated use of point-of-view shots, reaction shots, glance-object cutting, and shot-reverse shot exchanges, Wyler orchestrated the viewer’s identification with and sympathy for Julie, which were so essential if the story were to ‘play’” (225).
4 Nevertheless, the film did receive its share of critical praise. The film critic Roger Manvell writes, "In the same tradition, if far more effective, is the film version of the sexist knockabout farce The Taming of the Shrew" (189-90). The film critic Hollis Alpert was even more unbridled in his acclaim, calling the film at once both "a quintessential rendering of the play" and "an inspired improvement on the original" (qtd. in Schickel 166-67).

5 The William J. Rolfe editions of the play from 1881 to 1909 are a prime, if somewhat Victorian, example.

6 In a classically homophobic manner, Simon offensively insists on the conflation of homosexuality and pederasty. Zeffirelli's decision to cast adolescents, as opposed to the long tradition of geriatric Romes and Julets, deserves praise, but is not as original as many scholars and film critics have believed. In the mid-1950s Dario Nieciodemi had already mounted an Italian production of Romeo and Juliet with adolescents in the leading roles.

7 Unfortunately, for the purposes of this paper, the most blatant example in the Zeffirelli filmography of a shared homosexual gaze occurs not in one of his Shakespearean adaptations, but in Brother Sun, Sister Moon. When Francis enters a room full of working peasants, he encounters a young, muscular man whose chest emerges from his open shirt. For a moment, they share an unmistakably homoerotic look which is then broken off. Francis then looks for him again among the wool dyers, but instead finds only an old man whose hands he takes into his own.

8 For a more extensive discussion of both Mercutio and the homosexual-phallic gaze as applied to the Verona youth, see Peter S. Donaldson, Shakespearean Films/Shakespearean Directors. It was not my intention merely to repeat the arguments of his excellent chapter, "Let Lips Do What Hands Do," but some overlap has been unavoidable.

9 See James P. Driscoll, Identity in Shakespeare (50-67). Driscoll speaks of Hamlet's rite de passage as essentially an attempt to integrate the various father figures in his life, specifically the elder Hamlet, Fortinbras and Horatio.

10 In his film The Manchurian Candidate (1962) John Frankenheimer employed this same tactic to emphasize the incestuous relationship between the characters played by Laurence Harvey and Angela Lansbury. Although Lansbury played Harvey's mother in the narrative, the actress was actually only one year his senior.

11 Zeffirelli's film has been considered so definitive that no other film versions of the play have received a major release since. Another film version of Romeo and Juliet, directed by Paul Bosner, was released in 1977, but its impact at the box office was as negligible as its critical reception.

12 The relationships of Jade and David in Endless Love and Alfredo and Violetta in La Traviata also fall neatly within this context.

Works Cited


Zeffirelli Filmography