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Shakespeare's Drama and Homosexuality
Shakespearova dramata a homosexualita

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Prohlášení (Declaration):

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Abstrakt:

Queer teorie se začala pomalu etablovat v 80. letech a stala se velmi důležitým prvkem genderových studií konce 20. století, který ovlivnil nejen genderové kategorie jako takové, ale i vnímání těchto kategorií v textech. Tato práce se soustřeďuje na queering dramát Williama Shakespeara a popis vztahů, které jsou obecně vnímány jako homosexuální – romantickou, či sexuální přitažlivost mezi jedinci stejného pohlaví, což zahrnuje rovněž homosociální, či homoerotické aspekty těchto vztahů. Po prozkoumání textových podkladů pro taková čtení se práce zabývá inscenacemi těchto interpretací na jevišti, ve filmu a televizi, a to jak z anglofonního, tak z Českého prostředí. Za účelem reprezentativního vykreslení problému je zachováno tradiční dělení Shakespearových dramát na komedie, tragedie a historické hry. Z každé z těchto skupin je pak dále diskutována jedna hra. Za komedie je to *Kupec benátský*, za tragedie *Othello* a za historické hry *Richard II*.

V *Kupci benátském* je rozebírán vztah Antonia a Bassania ve snaze najít možné důvody pro Antoniovu nevídanou štědrost k jeho mladému příteli. Nejznámější homosexuální interpretace tohoto vztahu je vyobrazena ve filmu Michaela Radforda z roku 2004, ale interpretace samotná je daleko starší a sahá až do 60. let. V *Othellovi* queeringu podléhá vztah Jaga k postavě Othella, jehož latentně homosexuální interpretace se opírá nejen o vybrané Jagovy promluvy, ale může být podpořena rovněž Jagovým chladným vztahem k manželce a celkovou misogynií postavy. V této tradici je pravděpodobně nejstarším zástupcem produkce *Othella* z roku 1938 v divadle Old Vic, kde Jaga ztvárnil Laurence Olivier. Vrchol těchto interpretací přišel v 80. letech s Jagem Davida Sucheta, který o svém čtení postavy napsal detailní pojednání. Situace je jiná v případě *Richarda II*, u něhož homoerotické aspekty pravděpodobně nejsou pouhým moderním konstruktem stojícím na psychoanalýze a queer teorii. Náznaky královny nejasné sexuální orientace byly zřejmě vždy v textu přítomny, stejně jako u *Edwarda II* od Christophera Marlowe, u něhož se Shakespeare inspiroval. Postavy nejvíce spjaté s homosexualitou jsou Bushy, Bagot a Green, královi oblíbenci, kteří kontrastují s upozaděnou královnou. Richard je často presentován jako dětinský, nevyzrálý král s náznaky zženštilosti. Ta samozřejmě přímo neimplikuje homosexualitu, ale může sloužit jako podpůrný argument pro takové čtení. Tradice těchto produkcí je jasně

nejstarší, se zajímavým vrcholem v roce 1996, kdy byla postava Richarda hrána Fionou Shaw.

Hlavní myšlenkou celé práce je vyzdvižení textových podkladů pro queer čtení Shakespearových her a zdůraznění jejich oprávněnosti, protože právě skutečnost, že je možné tyto hry převádět do různých soudobých kontextů, poukazuje na nadčasovost Shakespearova díla.

Klíčová slova: Shakespeare, Renesanční drama, queering, queer teorie, homosexualita, homosocialita, homoerotika, patriarchie, *Kupec Benátský*, *Othello*, *Richard II*

Abstract:

Slowly developing since the 1980's, queer theory became a very important sphere of gender studies of the end of the 20th century and affected not only the very perception of gender categories, but also interpretations of these in texts. The thesis concentrates on queering of the dramatic works of William Shakespeare, describing relations which can be broadly characterized as homosexual - romantic or sexual attraction between members of the same sex, including homoerotic or homosocial aspect of these relationships. After establishing the textual grounds for these readings the text goes on to describe various stagings in theatre, television and film of Anglophone and Czech origin.

In order to achieve representative illustration of the problem the established division of Shakespeare's drama is maintained, dividing the plays into three categories – comedies, tragedies and historical plays. One play of each of these categories is then discussed further. These are *The Merchant of Venice* for comedies, *Othello* for tragedies, and *Richard II* as a representative of historical plays.

In the *Merchant of Venice* the discussed relationship is the one of Antonio and Bassanio, examining the possible motivation for Antonio's incredible generosity towards his young friend. The most famous homosexual interpretation of the relationship can be found in the 2004 film version by Michael Radford, but the tradition of this view of the play is much older, starting in the 1960's.

In *Othello* the queered relationship is the one of Iago towards Othello, which can be demonstrated on certain lines spoken by Iago and supported by his coldness towards his wife and misogynistic views in general. This interpretation of Iago is probably the oldest of those that will be dealt with, as its tradition reaches back to the 1938 Old Vic theatre production with Laurence Olivier as Iago. The prime of this interpretation found its summit in the 1980's with David Suchet's portrayal of Iago as a repressed homosexual and his subsequent essay dealing with the problematic.

The case is a bit different when it comes to *Richard II*, as the homoerotic aspects are not merely a modern construct based on psychoanalysis, or queer theory. Hints at the king's dubious sexual orientation were probably always an issue with

Richard II, as well as Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, which was a chief source of inspiration for Shakespeare's text. The main figures related to homosexuality are Bushy, Bagot and Green, the king's favourites, contrasting with the overshadowed position of the queen. Richard is often presented as an immature and childish king, often displaying features of effeminacy, which does not necessarily imply homosexuality, but may support the argument for it. This tradition is by far the oldest one, culminating in the 1996 television version with Fiona Shaw portraying the king.

The chief point of the thesis is to show the textual grounds for queer interpretations of these plays and argue for their validity, as the fact that the plays can be translated into contemporary contexts only proves the timeless quality of Shakespeare's work.

Key words: Shakespeare, Renaissance drama, queer theory, queering, homosexuality, homosociality, homoeroticism, patriarchy, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello*, *Richard II*

Permission

Souhlasím se zapůjčením bakalářské práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the BA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Shakespeare's Drama and Homosexuality

1. Introduction

1.1. Contemporary Productions of Shakespeare – Queering

There is no doubt that the works of William Shakespeare are the most famous, most frequently staged and most influential dramas of all time. The great bard of the turn of the 17th century represents an immense force in the world of theatre that is valid and inspiring till this very day. In countless productions over the centuries actors and directors attempted to bring his plays closer to the contemporary audience. For example in 1681 Nahum Tate, a playwright, transformed the end of *King Lear* to a happy one, where Cordelia and Edgar fall in love, which proved to be more popular with the contemporary audience¹, or Thomas Otway, who, in his 1697 version of *Romeo and Juliet*, by allowed the lovers to have one last conversation in the tomb². Contemporary artists try to bring a new, fresh look on Shakespeare's drama as well, either by writing variations of his plays, such as Edward Bond's *Lear*, or Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, or by various attempts to interpret the plays in modern ways, often including references to the culture and society of the 20th century including the great changes that took place in the course of it. Those can be represented for example by historical allusions to totalitarianism and its social implications, referring to World War II (Richard Loncraine's *Richard III*, 1995) or the USSR (Rupert Goold's *Macbeth*, 2007 – stage version, 2010 film), or by themes associated with gender politics. The changing position of men, women and the relationships between them accompanied by the influence of psychoanalysis, showing people to be merely the slaves of their own complex subconscious, as well as post-structuralist thinking made directors search for new ways of interpreting Shakespearian characters. Many of these interpretations were concerned with same sex relationships, rooted in gay and lesbian studies at first and later enriched by the terms of queer theory, the

¹ Donna Woodford: *Understanding King Lear: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004) 18.

² eds. Barbara Hodgdon & W. B. Worthen: *A Companion to Shakespeare and Performance* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) 201.

concept of which will be described further on in the essay. Most of these productions emerged around the 1980's and their innovations have been a major influence ever since. Depicting the development of these productions is the main aim of the thesis.

In order to achieve a representative image of the queering of Shakespeare's plays, the essay will maintain the common division into comedies, tragedies and histories (leaving out romances as it is arguable whether they are to be considered a separate genre or merely a subgenre of comedies). One play of each type is to be analyzed in the essay, firstly looking for the textual basis for queering of the plays, secondly pointing out the most prominent productions using these interpretations. Based on the frequency and "visibility" of the productions of the plays that display features of queering, the plays chosen are *The Merchant of Venice*, *Othello* and *Richard II*. The thesis will discuss the most important Anglophone productions, as well as examples from Czech stages.

1.2. Terminology

Queer theory is a relatively new territory of academic thought that started to form in the 1980's and emerged in the 1990's as a legitimate area within literary and cultural studies, where it "deconstructs gender and sexual identities, primarily via interpretations of cultural texts"³. In other words by examining the construction of gender and sexual identities it tends to search for new ways of interpreting interpersonal relationships not in the strict categories of gay/straight, quite the opposite: "Queer theory has taken the post-structuralist opportunity of undoing the biological fixity of sex so as to expose the artificiality of a sexuality, which is always already mediated by language, discourses and the order of the symbolic."⁴ Any sort of a precise, rigid definition of queer theory is rather complicated because of the nature of the term:

"Unlike gay identity, which, though deliberately proclaimed in an act of affirmation, is nonetheless rooted in the positive fact of homosexual object-choice, queer identity need not be grounded in any positive truth or in any

³ Surya Monro: *Gender politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2005) 31.

⁴ Luciana Parisi: "The Adventures of a Sex," *Deleuze and Queer Theory*, eds. Chrysanthi Nigianni and Merl Storr (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) 76.

stable reality. As the very word implies 'queer' does not name some natural kind or refer to some determinate object; it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. *There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers.* It is an identity without an essence. [...] 'Queer,' in any case, does not designate a class of already objectified pathologies or perversions; rather, it describes a horizon of possibility whose precise extent and heterogeneous scope cannot in principle be delimited in advance.”⁵

The starting point of the development of queer theory can be found in the views on sexuality of the psychoanalyst and psychiatrist Jacques Lacan. During his “return to Freud” phase he was greatly concerned with reevaluation of “rediscovering all that is most strange and refractory – all that remains foreign to our normal, commonsensical ways of thinking – about human subjectivity”⁶. He examined different aspects of this problematic, even the gender aspect, where he argued against “heteronormativity”⁷, stressing that homosexuality does not present any danger to the norms of heterosexuality and patriarchy.⁸ That, from a contemporary point of view, would bring psychoanalysis very close to queer theory. In spite of the fact that he died in 1981, before the establishment of the queer theory in the 1990’s, his views on sexuality linked with psychoanalysis are key to the development of queer theory.

Michel Foucault also participated in the foundation of the queer theory in a similar manner, as he expressed the theory of homosexuality being a 19th century construct, created by the doctors in need of a definition for sexual abnormalities, stating that:

“As defined by ancient civil or canonical codes, sodomy was a category of forbidden acts; their perpetrator was nothing more than the juridical subject of them. The nineteenth-century homosexual became a personage, a past, a

⁵ Steven Seidman, Jeffrey C. Alexander: *The New Social Theory Reader: Contemporary Debates* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 297.

⁶ Jean-Michel Rabaté: *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 238.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ “Lacan, Jacques,” *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia, Volume 1*, Alan Soble, ed. (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006) 527.

case history, a life form [...] Nothing that went into total composition was unaffected by his sexuality. It was everywhere present in him: at the root of all his actions [...] because it was a secret that always gave itself away.”⁹

Another significant source of inspiration for queer theory was Jacques Derrida’s “deconstruction”. In the theory of deconstruction Derrida deals with binary oppositions, such as for example writing and speaking, where one is commonly seen as more valuable, thus a more positive one.¹⁰ Deconstruction comes with questioning and searching of new perspectives on these traditionally established categories, which is a perspective inspiring for the queer theory. James Creech claims that it is only logical that gay and lesbian theorists adopted Derrida’s deconstruction, which enabled them to advance to the less restricted field of queer, stating that “All identity, any sexuality, all presence to self of whatever kind are equally queer in that they are all undecidable when – as deconstruction allows us to do – we view them against the ceaseless and irreducible movements of *différance* and rhetoricity.”¹¹

The most prominent representatives of queer theory are Judith Butler, who criticized “psychoanalytic accounts of sexual difference, gender and desire” as they “are premised on an implicit framework of normative heterosexuality”¹² and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who famously started to use the neologism “homosocial” in modern gender studies.¹³ Overall queer theory attempts to perceive sexuality as a rather free matter, transcending the more common binary homosexual / heterosexual distinction, attempting to look at sexuality from different angles, by which it forms a third category to accompany gay and lesbian studies. Therefore queering refers to interpreting texts in a way that is not traditional, examining the constructedness of the concepts and categories of gender that are seemingly

⁹ Diane Richardson, Steven Seidman: “Introduction,” *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, eds. Diane Richardson, Steven Seidman (London: SAGE Publications, 2002) 4.

¹⁰ Mary Klages: *Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Trowbridge: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2006) 54.

¹¹ James Creech: *Closet Writing/Gay Reading: The Case of Melville’s Pierre* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993) 192.

¹² Gill Jagger: *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 2008) 10.

¹³ Jason Edwards: *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* (London: Routledge, 2008) 36.

“naturally given” and looking at love and desire from a maximally unrestricted point of view.

Other important terms used in this thesis, which should be explained in order to avoid confusion, are the following: homosociality, homosexuality, homoeroticism and patriarchy. Homosociality is a term used in social sciences to “describe the bonds between persons of the same sex; it is a neologism, obviously formed by analogy with ‘homosexual’, and just as obviously meant to be distinguished from ‘homosexual’”¹⁴, which means that these ties do not need to be of erotic, or sexual nature. The term itself has been first discussed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who decided to reject the established homo-, bi- and heterosexual distinction, and decided to use a much broader term of homosociality, as she believed that “what might be conceptualised as erotic depended on an unpredictable, ever-changing array of local factor”¹⁵.

A great way of reaching better understanding of homosociality is by contrasting it to patriarchy, another key term of this essay, as they display similar features as regards preference for the masculine aspect, which may lead to confusion. Patriarchy was described by Heidi Hartman as “a set of social relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women”¹⁶. The key difference though lies in the context of sexuality. Homosociality is not defined by its possible sexual aspects. In other words it can be applied on the relationships of homosexual as well as heterosexual males. Patriarchy, on the contrary, is very often related to homophobia: “Much of the most useful recent writing about patriarchal structures suggests that “obligatory heterosexuality” is built into male-dominated kinship systems”¹⁷.

Homoeroticism is a reasonably self-explanatory term, which is to be used in the history of art and literature for representations of same sex desire. As is demonstrated in Emanuel Cooper’s *The Sexual Perspective*, homoerotic features of

¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Between Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 1.

¹⁵ Jason Edwards: *Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* (London: Routledge, 2008) 36.

¹⁶ Marianne Hester: *Lewd Women and Wicked Witches: A Study of the Dynamics of Male Domination* (London: Routledge, 1992) 12.

¹⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick: *Between Men* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992) 3.

art are to be traced back to Ancient Greece and further on throughout the history of art, but the perception of these features is greatly influenced by the variations of the concept of the homosexual, which “has altered greatly over the last five hundred years and this has influenced the expression of homosexual desire”¹⁸. The alternations in perception of the borders of homosexuality and therefore even homoeroticism, where nowadays the latter is very much a physical demonstration of the former, are very important for the understanding of the contemporary queering of Shakespeare. Nevertheless it should be stressed that the link between homoerotic and homosexual is to be seen as relatively modern and based on “the belief of the homosexual as categorically distinct from heterosexual”¹⁹. Taking into account Foucault’s perception of the notion of the homosexual as a 19th century innovation, it is safe to say that homoeroticism vastly preceded the term homosexuality as it is interpreted today. This issue is very important for the following section, where the chances of the discussed characters of the works of William Shakespeare being actually gay will be dealt with.

1.3. Shakespeare’s Language Then and Today

Obviously it would be wrong to presume that language from the times of Shakespeare underwent no, or very little, change until today. There are two major obstacles when interpreting older texts, the first one being the diachronic linguistic changes – for this thesis most importantly the changes in the semantic range of a word - and secondly the changes in the cultural context. Even though the modern viewer may be familiar with the words spoken on stage, it is possible that the meaning has changed, or shifted over the four hundred years. As meanings change, the contemporary audience may interpret a word differently from the early modern one. What is important for the queering of Shakespeare is the fact that “the semantics of modern English will highlight the anatomical, scatological or sexual meanings in words such as “bottom”, “excrement”, “incontinent”, “gay” or “make

¹⁸ Emanuel Cooper: *The Sexual Perspective* (London: Routledge, 1994) xvi.

¹⁹ Nanny M. W. de Vries and Jan Best: *Thamyris Mythmaking from the Past to Present* (Amsterdam: Najade Press, 1996) 155.

love”, but such meanings were either absent in Early Modern English or much less prominent than today”²⁰.

Also the categories of perception of sexuality were radically different in the 16th century, when they would be much closer to the terms of queer theory than a simple gay/lesbian definition. As Mary Bly states in her *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage*:

“The term ‘homosexual’ does not appear in the English language until the 1890s, and there seems to be no equivalent seventeenth-century term. Early modern England apparently did not assign a ‘binarized identity’, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s term – a label of heterosexual or homosexual - to each man or woman.”²¹

Bly then goes on to explain that even ‘sodomite’ was not a category purely connected to the sexual, but a “term [that] was applied flexibly to atheists, traitors, women, or men attracted to their own sex”²².

Not only the sexual identities, but also the notion of friendship was rather different from the present one. In the book *Queering the Renaissance* Forrest Tyler Stevens explains the concept of the male friendship of the time, a relationship that would probably now be thought of as one displaying features of homoeroticism. Such friend was supposed to be someone “with whom you shared your feelings, prayers, dreams, bed, board, and books [...] though in another body, the counterpart of your soul”²³. As is most common in Renaissance thinking, this concept of friendship is based on that of Antiquity, i.e. Platonic love, obviously bearing in mind that a physical realization of such a relationship would be considered “sodomy”. To this point it should be added that some scholars argue that the level of prosecution of homosexuality was not as all-inclusive as may be presumed. Alan Bray in his *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* claims that the main issue in ostracising homosexuality was “primarily the maintenance of the social order, in

²⁰ Dirk Delabastita: “Wholes and Holes in the Study of Shakespeare’s Wordplay,” *Stylistics and Shakespeare’s Language: Transdisciplinary Approaches*, ed. Mireille Ravassat & Jonathan Culpeper (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011) 157.

²¹ Mary Bly: *Queer Virgins and Virgin Queans on the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 5.

²² *ibid.*

²³ Forrest Tyler Stevens: “Erasmus’s ‘Tigress’,” *Queering the Renaissance*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994) 128.

particular the maintenance of parental rights, and only secondarily the enforcement of the legislation against homosexuality”²⁴, that means that the potential homosexual encounter was generally overlooked unless it involved either violence, or contact with a son against his father’s will. He then points out the absence of “prosecutions for homosexuality between masters and servants unless undue violence was involved or for offences involving homosexual prostitution, although the literary evidence shows how common homosexual prostitution was.”²⁵ Nevertheless close physical bonding such as bed-sharing was considered to be a natural part of a male friendship.²⁶ In fact bed-sharing is one of the most prominent features of queering of the Renaissance plays. In *Othello* one of the most discussed passages is the one where Iago casually mentions sharing a bed with Cassio and describes the incident that occurred there. Michael Radford used a similar image for the initial scene of his film version of *Merchant of Venice*, where he sets the dialogue between Antonio and Bassanio into Antonio’s bedroom instead of a street in Venice.

It is safe to say that a lot of the textual features that are now considered to be of homosexual or homoerotic nature had a different meaning in the period of creation of the texts and their period authenticity can be a matter for discussion, yet it still allows new insight to the character building process in the modern theatre. Of course it is immensely important to note that it may not have been Shakespeare’s intention to interpret the characters as they are often read today, but these readings are not only justifiable, but also inevitable, because the cultural context cannot be disregarded and certain reactions of the audience cannot be eliminated. Making use of these contextual adaptations is greatly beneficial for the perception of the audience as it makes the texts more approachable and understandable. An interpretation stubbornly following with the Early Modern reading, trying to disregard the contemporary circumstances, if not performed as a scientific

²⁴ Alan Bray: *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) 74.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ Kenneth Borris: “Introduction to Chapter 8: Love and Friendship,” *Same-Sex Desire in the English Renaissance: A Sourcebook of Texts, 1470-1650*, ed. Kenneth Borris (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2003) 249.

experiment, would most likely bring a somewhat sterile result, with which the audience would struggle to identify.

Of course the extent to which the actor or director chose to take the interpretations popular at the time into consideration is up to them. The question of “to queer, or not to queer” is also mentioned by the actor Richard McCabe in his essay on Iago, which will be mentioned again in the chapter dealing with *Othello*. In spite of not choosing to play Iago as a homosexually repressed man, when talking about the queer interpretations, mostly based on the bed-sharing scene, he states that:

“The undeniable distasteful relish with which Iago relates the tale might be interpreted as denial of his own homosexuality; but in the absence of any overt textual evidence I cannot be convinced of its possibility. Such ideas are not harmful, however, and can add considerably to the richness of the characters in performance. There is an indeterminable quality in Shakespeare’s writing that can accommodate such interpretation (as well as all the latest developments in human thought), while at the same time allowing itself to be read in a more direct manner.”²⁷

That is indeed a very well put and extremely valid point for this entire thesis. It is essential to see these interpretations as a way to bring the texts closer to their audience and the actors themselves, not to butcher works that are perfect as they are. The most important feature of theatre is its organic quality, the fact that it is a dynamic type of art, which is never the same, keeps developing and evolving. And if a four-hundred-years-old piece of literature is not only still performable, but also easily adaptable to the modern context it is not a thing to avoid, quite the opposite, as it is a definite proof of the timeless quality of the plot and the writing.

²⁷ Richard McCabe: “Iago.” *Players of Shakespeare 5*, ed. Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 205.

2. The Merchant of Venice

2.1. Textual Evidence

A tight bond between two men may often pose questions. After all, feelings and emotions are traditionally constructed as mainly female domains. One of the most prominent examples of the dubious nature of a relationship between two men is the case of Antonio and Bassanio in *The Merchant of Venice*. After all it is only fair to question the basis of their friendship when they talk about their “love” for each other so frequently. In more old-fashioned or traditional productions their relationship is clearly homosocial: fairytale-like best friends one of whom is selflessly willing to lose his life to help the other one out. Nevertheless since the 1980’s there has been a large number of productions where the relationship is based on homoerotic attraction between the two, or to be more precise Antonio’s soft spot for Bassanio, who is ready to bluntly take an advantage of it.

To begin with the opening scene of act I, Bassanio comes to seek Antonio’s help yet again. This scene is crucial as it sets the tone for the whole production to come. To Bassanio’s plea for counselling Antonio replies: “My purse, my person, my extremest means/ Lie all unlocked to your occasions” (I, i, 137 - 138), by which he combines the offer of his financial support with the offer of his body.²⁸ To that Bassanio replies with a famous speech: “In my school days when I lost one shaft...” (I, i, 139), in which he tries to persuade Antonio to lend him money once again, although he is already his debtor. In order to succeed he uses a childhood reference, which may seem to be rather odd means to discuss business amongst grownup men. This might insinuate a special bond between Antonio and Bassanio – not necessarily of physical nature, but Bassanio is definitely aware of his ability to affect Antonio. He is “turning on the boyish charm” and uses the archery analogy in order to make Antonio see him as “a pretty, Cupid-like little archer”²⁹. This attempt fails as Antonio cannot be manipulated as easily as Bassanio thought. But even though he clearly sees through Bassanio’s act, not only does he offer to hear him out, but he also eventually does what he was asked to do.

²⁸ James C. Bulman: “Shylock, Antonio, and the Politics of Performance,” *Shakespeare in Performance: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Frank Occhiogrosso (London: Associated University Press, 2003) 38.

²⁹ Linda Woodbridge: *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) 97.

In the second scene of act III Antonio speaks to Bassanio, in spite of not being physically present, through the lines of a letter he sends him. In this letter he reports about the desperate situation Bassanio got him into: “[...] and since in paying it, it is impossible I should live, all debts are cleared between you and I if I might but see you at my death. Notwithstanding, use your pleasure. If your love do not persuade you to come, let not my letter.” (III, ii, 316 – 319) Antonio here applies a very gentle emotional blackmail³⁰, which may be the first signal for Portia that their relationship is not a mere friendship, but is something that she should seriously consider and potentially feel threatened by. Of course this theory can be easily dismissed, but it does give Portia’s character an interesting new level and affects her approach to Antonio for the rest of the play: “Historians might object that Portia’s understanding of the "love" between her husband and his friend is anachronistic, but it makes her motive for journeying to Venice more ambiguous than a simple desire to save the day.”³¹

The strong relationship and mutual attraction between Bassanio and Portia, followed by the decline of Bassanio’s interest in him might be the reason for Antonio’s melancholy throughout the play. The ratio of power in this reading of the play is much more complex, as each of the two – Antonio and Bassanio – possesses a different type of power and control over the other. Antonio’s power is based on his financial situation and because “money makes the world go round” especially in Venice, he is the one in control, at least at the beginning of his friendship with Bassanio. But as their relationship grows deeper, Bassanio gains emotional control over him. Antonio tries to give him what he can, yet unknowing that the result of that may be self-devastating, but starts to be painfully aware of the fact that Bassanio’s feelings for him could be solely based on a vision of profit.

In the first scene of act IV, where the trial takes place, Antonio’s melancholy seems to have escalated in an utterance full of despair and lack of self-confidence: “I am a tainted wether of the flock, / Meetest for death. The weakest kind of fruit / Drops earliest to the ground, and so let me.” (IV, i, 114 – 117) In this passage Antonio expresses a great deal of self-loathing. The main element potentially

³⁰ Bulman 42.

³¹ *ibid.*

relating to his sexual orientation is the word “wether”, which refers to a castrated male sheep³². The line then gets a new dimension, not only of an economic failure, but also of a very grave personal failure, which is to be linked with his sexual preference: “His sense that he is sick and therefore deserves death is his confession of sin, of sexual shame, his veiled admission that he deserved to die because he is a sodomite.”³³ In spite of all that he gathers strength for a very bold statement. In the face of death he, having nothing more to lose, speaks openly about the true nature of his relationship with Bassanio: “Say how I loved you. Speak me fair in death. / And when the tale is told, bid her be judge / Whether Bassanio had not once a love.” (IV, i, 270 – 273)

Even though Bassanio may seem to be just playing a game with Antonio in order to benefit from his wealth, doubt about the unilateral nature of Antonio’s affection rises in act IV scene i. There Antonio is getting ready to pay his debt to Shylock. He has a private moment with Bassanio, when he asks him to give him his hand. Bassanio then tells him in almost romantic fashion:

“Antonio, I am married to a wife
Which is as dear to me as life itself;
But life itself, my wife, and all the world
Are not with me esteemed above thy life.

I would lose all, ay sacrifice them all
Here to this devil, to deliver you.” (IV, i, 278 – 283)

Portia – in disguise as the doctor – reflects the speech as follows: “Your wife would give you little thanks for that, / If she were by to hear you make the offer.” (IV, i, 284 – 285). If looked at from the perspective of a possible romantic bond between Antonio and Bassanio the line would not only ease the tension of the courtroom scene and prepare the audience for the fifth act, but would also portray Portia’s behaviour as much less teasing and far more truly jealous. Even Shylock comments upon Bassanio’s and Graziano’s easiness with which they immediately forget their

³²Seymour Kleinberg: “Literary Visions of Homosexuality,” *Essays on Gay Literature*, ed. Stuart Kellogg (London: Routledge, 1983) 120.

³³ *ibid.*

wives, saying: “These be the Christian husbands.” (IV, i, 291), expressing fear for his daughter’s destiny as a Christian’s wife.

Later on in the same scene Portia demands for Bassanio’s ring as a reward for her services at the court. It could be interpreted not only as a clever piece of mockery towards her husband, a definite proof of a female victory on a male field, but also as a punishment, or maybe a little test based on Bassanio’s earlier speech. Bassanio refuses at first, but when Antonio explicitly asks him to give the doctor the ring, as Bassanio should “Let his deservings and [Antonio’s] love withal / Be valued ‘gainst [his] wife’s commandment.” (IV, i, 446 – 447) he surrenders. This once again proves the great influence that Antonio has on Bassanio. As soon as Antonio’s love for Bassanio is given as an argument for doing it, Bassanio does not hesitate and sends Graziano to give the ring to the doctor. This entire plot is very illustrative of Bassanio’s character, as it depicts him as rather selfish and superficial. His emotional ties are not very stable which is to be linked with the fact that the person he cares most about is probably himself. Whether it is deliberate calculation, or simply a flaw of character, he lives in a Bassanio-centred universe: “Out of sight, out of mind. When he was at Belmont, he forgot about Antonio until he was arrested. Now he is with Antonio in Venice, and Portia seems very far away.”³⁴

Taking into account this point of view it may also add another dimension to Antonio’s line in act V, where he says: “I am th’ unhappy subject of these quarrels.” (V, i, 238), as in this interpretation he is indeed the cause of the entire ring plot, not only by being the one whose life was paid out by the ring, but being the one who firstly made Portia jealous and secondly persuaded Bassanio to give the doctor what he asks for. The extent to which he can feel genuinely sorry for causing the bickering of the young couple is disputable. Yet when Portia is revealed not to be only his love-rival, but also the person who saved his life, it seems that he gentlemanly steps aside, not trying to cause any more hustle and when the couple manage to sort out their differences his only comment seems to be an expression of genuine gratitude to Portia: “Sweet lady, you have given me life and living; For here I read for certain that my ships Are safely come to road.” (V, i, 285 – 288)

³⁴ Kleinberg 123.

In a captivating and influential essay “Brothers and Others” W. H. Auden discusses the relationship of Antonio and Bassanio in homosexual terms. Nonetheless he also describes the very interesting underlying analogy of the outsider status of Shylock and Antonio – the two characters that in the traditional reading are the most obvious of antagonists. In Dante’s *Divine Comedy* usurers and sodomites were to be placed in the same circle of hell, because as Graham Holderness further explains, “both sins represented an ‘unnatural’ way of doing a ‘natural’ thing. It is natural to create wealth and prosper, but unnatural to make money breed money; it is natural for opposite sexes to combine in procreation, but unnatural for members of the same sex to combine.”³⁵ It should be said that this part of the theory is rather speculative.³⁶ Apart from that, one more link between Antonio and Shylock is to be found according to Auden. When Bassanio participates in the casket plot, he chooses the leaden casket, which says that “Who chooseth me must give and hazard all he hath.” (II, vii, 10) With regard to the entire plot of the play this statement is much more applicable to both Antonio, who does not risk only his finances by supporting his confidant, but also a great deal of emotional suffering connected to the potential loss of his exclusive attention, and Shylock, who painfully unknowingly risks and in the end effectively loses all he has. In the words of W. H. Auden: “Shylock, however unintentionally, did, in fact, hazard all for the sake of destroying the enemy he hated, and Antonio, however unthinkingly he signed the bond, hazarded all to secure the happiness of the friend he loved.”³⁷ Seymour Kleinberg has also considered Antonio and Shylock’s relationship based on inner similarity and described the problematic relationship of the two as follows: “What Antonio hates in Shylock is not Jewishness, which, like all Venetians he merely holds in contempt. He hates himself in Shylock: the homosexual self that Antonio has come to identify symbolically as the Jew. It is the earliest portrait of the homophobic homosexual.”³⁸

³⁵ Graham Holderness: *Shakespeare and Venice* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2010) 72.

³⁶ Jonathan Bate & Eric Rasmussen: “Introduction,” *Merchant of Venice*, by William Shakespeare (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

³⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸ Kleinberg 120.

2. 2. Notable Productions

The first homosexual readings of *The Merchant of Venice* began to emerge in the 1950's and were influenced by psychoanalysis.³⁹ At the same time it was “argued that Antonio's latent homosexuality was really a defense of Shakespeare's, as was the anti-Semitism of the play: Antonio and Shylock were two defenses of the poet against the anxiety he had portrayed in the sonnets, where homoeroticism and usury were complicated metaphors for each other.”⁴⁰ Even though the biographical readings connected to sonnets were later on “dismissed as naive”⁴¹, the theories about the possibility of a homosexual relationship between Antonio and Bassanio remained, even though not as wide-spread as they are now.

It did not take long for these theories to translate from page to stage. The first major production dealing with the homosexual implications of the text was the 1965 Royal Shakespeare Company production directed by Clifford Williams.⁴² In spite of the fact that some of the contemporary critics did not manage, or possibly allow themselves, to see the homosexual bond between the two men, some critics succeeded in doing so, such as Penelope Gilliatt from the *Observer*, who wrote that “‘Antonio's homosexual love for Bassanio’ was ‘as plain and simple in the play as the blocks of Ralph Koltai’s beautiful sets’”⁴³, or R.B. Marriott from *Stage & TV* stating that ‘the homosexual thread of the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio is revealed naturally and easily’⁴⁴. One of the most illustrative reviews of this play was written by B.A. Young and was published in the *Financial Times*:

“[Antonio] is the counterpart of today's wealthy bachelor stockbroker with a big house in Surrey and aberrations so tidily exercised that only his more intimate friends know about them ...Even in imminent danger from Shylock's knife, he keeps his eyes affectionately fixed on the boyfriend whose extravagance has brought him to this situation. Peter McEnery, a graceful, handsome, very young Bassanio, [is] fond of his old protector, who

³⁹ Kleinberg 114.

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² Penny Gay: “Portia Performs: Playing the Part in the Twentieth Century Theatre,” *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, ed. John W. Mahon, Ellen Macleod (London: Routledge, 2002) 439.

⁴³ Miriam Gilbert: *The Merchant of Venice: Shakespeare at Stratford Series* (London: Thomson Learning, 2002) 54.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

has given him so much – fonder, in fact, than he is of Portia. I suspect he's not really very fond of Portia at all; but she's a rich and 'with it' girl and marrying her will be a smart thing to do. So when he is with her, when he is actually professing his love for her, his eyes wander round the company to see what kind of impression he's making. There is a lot of Lord Alfred Douglas in this Bassanio...⁴⁵

The comparison of Bassanio and famous Oscar Wilde's "Bosie" is quite specific and paints a certain picture of the depiction of the character. The approach described by Young is rather extreme when compared with the subsequent versions that will be described further on in the essay. Bassanio is depicted as a greedy egoist who is willing to marry a woman in spite of his possible homosexual orientation just in order to profit from it. The reason behind it can be seen in the timing of the production. It precedes the first signs of queer theory by approximately twenty years. Many contemporary critics and even artists were still tied by the binarity of homosexual / heterosexual orientation and it seemed rather odd, nay impossible that a man would be able to love a woman and a man at the same time, each in a different way. By this logic Bassanio would have to be deceiving either Portia, or Antonio, and as Bassanio's overt proclamation of love for Antonio in act IV does not seem to be able to bring Bassanio any financial or other profit it has to be a genuine overflow of emotion, which makes it much easier to depict Portia as the deceived one.

Throughout the seventies productions dealing with Antonio's homosexuality started to flourish and became "a fairly standard reading"⁴⁶. The next groundbreaking production including the homosexual link between Antonio and Bassanio was performed again by The Royal Shakespeare Company in 1987 and was directed by Bill Alexander.⁴⁷ The production did not only make it absolutely clear that Antonio is truly in love with his young protégé, it also differed in its depiction of Bassanio, who turned around completely when compared with the 1965 version, as "this production also strongly implied that Bassanio knew of Antonio's

⁴⁵ "In Performance: RSC and Beyond," ed. Jonathan Bate & Eric Rasmussen: *Othello*, by William Shakespeare (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 137.

⁴⁶ Gilbert 55.

⁴⁷ Gilbert 56.

love and was willing to exploit it in order to get the money he needed.”⁴⁸ This can be demonstrated by the contemporary reviews, which described John Carlisle’s Antonio as “a repressed homosexual” (Time Out, 6 May 1987), “a man hopelessly in love with Bassanio” (Sunday Telegraph, 23 May 1987) or a “tormented closet gay” (Guardian, 1 May 1987), whereas Nicholas Farrell’s Bassanio became a “bisexual opportunist” (The Listener, 14 May 1987)⁴⁹.

As was already mentioned, the first scene is always the key to understanding the direction of the interpretation of *The Merchant of Venice*. Bill Alexander’s version is no exception. The following description of the scene is demonstrative of the overall tone of the production:

“Bassanio initiated all the approaches to Antonio, moving towards him as he spoke of his debts, taking his arms on ‘to you Antonio / I owe the most in money and in love’ (130 – 1), the physical gesture inevitably emphasizing the debt of love. Antonio kept moving away, Bassanio kept following him, almost as if he knew that his physical proximity would help to convince Antonio to listen to him. When Bassanio finally spoke of Portia, he nonetheless kept physical contact with Antonio, standing behind him and putting his hands on Antonio’s shoulders, then kneeling beside him. [...] This first scene ended with Bassanio’s hugging Antonio in exuberant pleasure, and being kissed by Antonio.”

Alexander also introduced a very interesting mirroring of the relationship of Antonio and Bassanio in the relationship of Salerio and Solanio, where the older middle-aged Salerio was in love with the young Solanio and demonstrated his affection on numerous occasions, for example act II scene viii, where the two discuss Jessica’s elopement and Bassanio’s departure:

“In the second half of the scene [...] as Salerio described the parting of Bassanio and Antonio he used the physical details as an excuse to try to touch – and seduce – Solanio. [...] The offstage action described and the action taking place on stage merged in a disturbing way, not necessarily because of the mirroring effect, [...] but because we saw how Salerio was

⁴⁸ Gilbert 56.

⁴⁹ Bulman 40.

exploiting – perhaps even inventing – the description for his own purposes.”⁵⁰

Gregory Doran who starred in the production as Solanio remembers the process of giving “the Salads” – Salerio and Solanio a new meaning in his essay on Solanio on *Players of Shakespeare 3*:

“The salads are parasites [...] They seem to live vicariously through the lives of other people and to have little function on their own. By making them lovers we paralleled the central relationship [...] and thereby fuel the cold embers of their own affair. At one point we had a sentimental Salerio attempt to kiss his young toy-boy. It seemed a valuable moment, neither gratuitous nor provocative – but it was hell on schools’ matinees.”⁵¹

By this time the queer productions of *The Merchant of Venice* have already naturalized on stage and the next field to conquer was film. There are two major film versions of *The Merchant of Venice* with an evident homosexual tie between Antonio and Bassanio – a 2001 television version of Trevor Nunn’s award-winning earlier stage production and the much more famous, star stunned 2004 silver-screen version by Michael Radford.

To start with the first mentioned – its stage version took place in 1999 performed by Royal National Theatre firstly in Cottesloe Theatre, then in the Olivier.⁵² The production is set in the 1920’s – 1930’s, the time of cabarets, more relaxed approach to sexuality on one hand, and rising anti-Semitism on the other. The play had generally positive reviews, mostly thanks to Henry Goodman’s Shylock, who later won the Olivier Award for the part.⁵³ Thanks to its great success the decision was made to create a film version of the play as a part of the *Masterpiece Theatre* series. If a stage production is translated into film it usually keeps some of its stage quality and that is most definitely the case of Nunn’s *The Merchant of Venice*. The whole project keeps its theatrical quality, which is mostly

⁵⁰ Gilbert 57.

⁵¹ Gregory Doran: “Solanio,” *Players of Shakespeare 3*, ed. Russell Jackson, Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 71.

⁵² John W. Mahon: “The Fortunes of *The Merchant of Venice* from 1596 to 2001,” *The Merchant of Venice: New Critical Essays*, ed. John W. Mahon, Ellen Macleod (London: Routledge, 2002) 70.

⁵³ Vicki K. Janik: *The Merchant of Venice: A Guide to the Play* (Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2003) 240.

welcomed. Nevertheless what could be seen as a problem of the production is the disproportionate performance of Antonio, portrayed by David Bamber. From the very beginning he is obviously very depressed and more melancholic than is usual, but in the contrast with the setting of a cabaret it works perfectly. However the more time is spent with him the more pathetic and slightly irritating he starts to be, which may make it more difficult to identify with him. This and other deficiencies of the production were not overlooked by the critics, who, from the film version, mostly praised only Goodman:

“Goodman makes an effective Shylock, menacing and formidable as the action begins. However, the amateurishness of the players portraying Antonio and Portia gives the scene the feel of a high school production. Portia overacts during the ‘mercy’ speech, with awkward pausing and overexaggerated hand movements. At the farewell between Antonio and Bassanio, Antonio cries and collapses in fear, completely undercutting the courageous words he speaks.”⁵⁴

The production plays a lot with the queer themes and allows Portia to get really jealous and make up the ring plot in order to make her husband promise that he is hers and hers only. Bassanio may seem a bit too butch and occasionally lacking expressiveness, but that is to an extent a matter of taste. The clear high-points of the production are the performances of Shylock and Jessica, who carry the theme of anti-Semitism more consistently and effectively than Antonio and Bassanio do that of homosexuality.

The second film version was made in 2004 under Sony Film Classics, directed by Michael Radford and starring Al Pacino as Shylock, Jeremy Irons as Antonio and Joseph Fiennes as Bassanio.⁵⁵ This production also uses the queer reading of *The Merchant of Venice*. The hints at homosexuality are portrayed tastefully, mainly thanks to the stunningly delicate performance of Irons and overall great type-casting of Fiennes. Based on an interview with Joseph Fiennes in the magazine *Out*, this version clearly works with the queer approach, rather than simple gay / lesbian terminology. He stated there: “We love to pigeonhole people in

⁵⁴ James Bemis: “*The Merchant of Venice* on Film,” William Shakespeare, Joseph Pearce ed.: *The Merchant of Venice: With Contemporary Criticism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009) 136.

⁵⁵ Bemis 137.

their sexuality – gay, straight, this, that. In Elizabethan times, I don't think that was the case.”⁵⁶ This approach of Fiennes was greatly beneficial for the entire production, as neither Radford nor Irons initially intended to portray their relationship in a homosexual fashion – as Irons stated in an interview: “‘It's important that there be a strong love. I didn't want it to be a homosexual love because that's an easy option. I didn't feel there were any clues. [...] I was very surprised when Bassanio kissed me. And he only did it in one take.”⁵⁷ The kiss refers to the finale of the final moments of act I scene i. The scene is overall very well executed, but the mentioned kiss sticks in one's mind most of all, mainly because of this wonderful facial expression of Irons. The element of surprise and reluctance to portray Antonio as a gay stereotype resulted in this delicacy of performance which was mentioned earlier. Fiennes then should be praised for his input, because it gave the film another level of complexity without overplaying and cheapening the sexual aspects of the relationship. Fiennes himself said about the matter: “I would never invent something before doing my detective work in the text. [...] If you look at the choice of language ... you'll read very sensuous language. That's the key for me in the relationship. The great thing about Shakespeare and why he's so difficult to pin down is his ambiguity. [...] I feel there has to be a great love between the two characters ... there's great attraction. [...] I don't think they have slept together but that's for the audience to decide.”⁵⁸ The criticism of the film was mostly positive, mostly stressing the masterful acting. The New York Times aptly described the film as: “better-than-average screen Shakespeare: intelligent without being showily clever, and motivated more by genuine fascination with the play's language and ideas than by a desire to cannibalize its author's cultural prestige.”⁵⁹

2.3. Czech Stages

Even though in the Czech Republic productions which include homosexual implications as part of the portrayal of the relationship between Antonio and

⁵⁶ Jason Lamphier: "Joseph Fiennes: What Is Queer About This Pretty-boy Star." *Out* [New York] – Jan. 2006: 36

⁵⁷ Reuters, "Was the Merchant of Venice Gay?" *ABC News Online*, 29 December 2004, 26 April 2013. <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2004-12-29/was-the-merchant-of-venice-gay/609696>>.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ A. O. Scott: “Putting a Still-Vexed Play in a Historical Context”, *The New York Times Online*, 29 December 2004, 26 April 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/12/29/movies/29veni.html?_r=0>

Bassanio are not (yet) as mainstream as they are in the English-speaking countries, there were two notable productions which included it. The first one took place in Prague on the stage of Národní divadlo (The National Theatre), or to be more precise its smaller stage Stavovské divadlo in 2009, directed by Martin Čiřvák, the second one in Jihočeské divadlo (South Bohemian Theatre) in České Budějovice, directed by Michal Lang. The Prague production had mixed reviews. Antonio was portrayed by Igor Bareš, whose performance was described as “decadently self-pitying”⁶⁰. Probably the most prominent Czech theatre periodical *Divadelní noviny* described the production in comparison with the version of Jihočeské divadlo as:

“at first sight more effective and thought through than the one of Jihočeské divadlo, and also much broader considering the motives, but sadly [...] frequently difficult to read, as the summarizing plot line seemingly loses logic at places. The vigorous interpretation of the text remained mostly in the heads of the creators.”⁶¹

The lack of easily identifiable logic of the performance must have been prominent, as can be judged based on a much more critical review by Radmila Hrdinová for *Právo*, published electronically at novinky.cz:

“There is no conception to be read from the three hours long production of the director Martin Čiřvák (apart from the accented homosexuality). [...] A rich homosexual Antonio (Igor Bareš) sponsors a gang of youngsters, among whom his favourite is Bassanio (Jan Hájek). At the moment he is in a bit of a weepy mood, but refuses to say why. Maybe he suspects that his little friends are just a bunch of calculating mannequins.”⁶²

Nevertheless Jana Paterová from *Divadelní noviny* reflected the production much less critically and praised the subtlety in the application of the motif of homosexuality in comparison with the version of Jihočeské divadlo, stressing that the relationship between the two is not exaggerated: “Hájek’s Bassanio is bound to tearful and narcissistic Antonio of Igor Bareš by a more than warm friendship, but when he decides to change his life situation he apparently enters a new relationship.

⁶⁰ *Divadlo žije*, Česká televize, Prague, Czech Republic, 5 Dec. 2009.

⁶¹ Jana Paterová: “Dvakrát Shylock versus Antonio,” *Divadelní noviny* [Praha] – 7 Jan. 2011: 5.

⁶² Radmila Hrdinová: “Kupci benátskému v Národním divadle chybí poezie a tragika Shakespeara.” *novinky.cz*. 26 Jan 2009, 15 Mar 2013. < <http://www.novinky.cz/kultura/184462-kupci-benatskemuv-narodnim-divadle-chybi-poezie-a-tragika-shakespeara.html>>

[...] After all at the end of the play he abandons him fairly easily in his self-pitying pose and goes on to get married.”⁶³

The second version mentioned – the one of Jihočeské divadlo – seems to have taken the motif of homosexuality much more seriously and wanted to have it present on stage as visually as possible. The director Michal Lang even “brings a half naked Antonio (Ondřej Volejník), on stage, not to leave the audience in any doubt.”⁶⁴ But what Paterová criticizes the most is the lack of apparent motivation for Bassanio (Ondřej Veselý) to search for a new life with Portia, and doubts that love was the real motivation.⁶⁵ The reason behind the in-your-faceness of the homosexual elements of the production may be explained by the director’s statement: “I perceive “*The Merchant*” as a romantic – racist comedy about prejudices of which I make fun”⁶⁶, which can of course be applied not only onto the anti-Semitic, but also to the homosexual features of the play.

⁶³ Jana Paterová: “Dvakrát Shylock versus Antonio.” *Divadelní noviny* [Praha] – 7 Jan. 2011: 5.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ Kamila Dufková: “Recenze: Kupec benátský.” 23 Dec. 2010, 15 Mar 2013.
<<http://www.mezinami.cz/zkulturni-se/recenze-kupec-benatsky/>>.

3. Othello

3.1. Textual Evidence

Possibly the most burning question in both staging and critical writing about the character of Iago in *Othello* is the issue of motivation. The text itself primarily leads the viewers to believe that it is possible that Iago thinks Othello slept with his wife: “For that I do suspect the lusty Moor / Hath leaped into my seat” (II, i, 220 - 221), which would explain Iago’s cold behaviour towards her and subsequent distrust in women in general. Moreover in the same scene where he complains that Othello might have had intercourse with Emilia, he expresses his love for Othello’s wife Desdemona. But the twentieth century brought a different way of interpreting Iago’s deeds, based less on textual and more on subtextual features. As Bruce R. Smith stated in his *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics*:

“Latent homosexuality has become virtually a cliché in how twentieth-century actors interpret the part. Instructed by Freud, directors, actors, and critics have looked at Iago from an essentially twentieth-century point of view and discovered “repressed” sexual desire. What, indeed, should we think when Iago tell Othello that he had recently shared a bed with Cassio (a common enough happenstance in the sixteenth century).”⁶⁷

There is a number of factors that support the reading of Iago as a latent homosexual. To start with Iago’s views of women, he is rather misogynistic. That by itself is not necessarily a decisive factor, but it may be interpreted as caused by his suppression of his sexual desire for the same sex. His tendency to disregard or look down at women is quite obvious throughout the text. His most famous description of women is the following: “You rise to play and go to bed to work.” (II, i 121) This passage may not only prove his animosity towards women, but because of the sexual hint can be explained as a

⁶⁷ Bruce R. Smith: *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare's England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press , 1991) 61.

reference to “his sexual shame and his envy for women.”⁶⁸ One of the key texts dealing with Iago as a homosexual is Martin Wagh’s essay “Othello: The Tragedy of Iago”, in which he explains that it is Iago’s homosexual interest in Othello which makes him attack and diminish the role of the person who shares bed with him – Desdemona.⁶⁹ He also adds another element to the characteristic of Iago – paranoia: “Throughout the play Iago’s behaviour reflects that of a paranoid personality whose repressed homosexual tendencies have erupted under stress in the form of delusions of grandeur, persecution, and jealousy”⁷⁰.

Iago’s behaviour can also be reflected on the homosocial level. Through his hatred of women it is quite clear that he prefers the company of men. The men of Venice promote patriarchal dominance over women. Men are presented as heads of households and regard women as their property, regardless whether they are their daughters, or wives. Barbantio calls Othello a “foul thief” (I, ii, 64) for taking his daughter away, as if he had robbed him of a pair of shoes. Moreover, from the very beginning it is clear that women are not to be trusted, as Barbantio explains: “Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see: / She has deceived her father and may thee.” (I, iii, 291 – 292). This distrust is usually presented in connection with the alleged promiscuity of the women of Venice resulting in their husbands’ frequent fear of cuckoldry. In act III scene ii in discussion with Cassio Iago chooses to speak rather suggestively about Desdemona claiming that “[he]’ll warrant her, full of game” (III, ii, 16) and describing her seductive eyes: “What an eye she has! Methinks it sounds a parley to provocation.” (III, ii, 18) Depending on the reading he can be either putting Desdemona down by stressing the lustful aspect of her sexuality, or trying to show some sexual interest in her. Based on the rest of the play the audience is aware of his approach to women, which seems to clash with the latter reading of the speech, regardless of the fact that it is once again merely his scheming. Nevertheless this reading is not to be

⁶⁸ Melvin R. Lansky: “Jealousy and Envy in Othello,” *Jealousy and Envy: New Views about Two Powerful Feelings*, ed. Leon Wurmser & Heidrun Jarass (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2007) 38.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ Robert Rogers: *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970) 82.

dismissed because by using this kind of language Iago may attempt to associate himself with the contemporary community of men “competing with each other, in this case, for women”⁷¹. His homosociality is very probably homosexually motivated, as based on psychoanalysis “it can be argued that Iago uses this heterosexual competition as a way of getting closer to men, his real sexual objects.”⁷²

The most important speech for queering of *Othello* is to be found in the already mentioned scene iii from act III, where Iago describes his recent experience of sharing a bed with Cassio. Iago states the following:

“In sleep I heard him say “Sweet Desdemona,
Let us be wary, let us hide our loves.”
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, lay his leg
Over my thigh, and sigh, and kiss, and then

Cry “Cursed fate that gave thee to the Moor!” (III, iii, 428 - 435)

Looking at the account of what was supposed to have happened that night, it seems rather strange that Iago would in factual terms let the situation go as far as it did and allow Cassio to kiss him, or lay his leg over Iago’s thigh. Obviously the audience at this point knows that this incident never happened and is merely Iago’s fabrication. But the motivation of telling such a story, and telling it without any obstacles or potential shame, may point not only to Iago trying to make Othello jealous of his wife, but also him planting “images of homoerotic activity”⁷³ into Othello’s mind.

Another striking question connected to Iago’s sexual orientation is what is his relationship with his wife? And what is hers to him? The character of Emilia and her perception of her husband, as well as men in general, are

⁷¹ Coppélia Kahn: *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981) 142

⁷² *ibid.*

⁷³ Stanley Wells: *Shakespeare, Sex and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 177.

very important, because Iago's behaviour towards his wife and her reactions to it are illustrative of Iago's character as well as Emilia's. Iago certainly does not care for her, so she is trapped in a loveless marriage and yet from various demonstrations of obedience and trust, as can be seen when she docilely steals Desdemona's handkerchief, it is obvious that Emilia is reasonably fond of Iago. Also, in spite of having much insight into what is going on, for a long time Emilia is not able to identify her husband as "the bad guy": "I know thou didst not, thou'rt not such a villain." (V, ii, 185). These aspects of her character are rather in keeping with the overall image of women in the play, reflecting the conventions of the time – they do not need to show much intelligence, seem rather foolish, romantic and absolutely subordinate to their husbands. Yet there is another aspect in Emilia, which distinguishes her from other women in the play. She has a certain sense of scepticism, possibly caused by the deprivation of an unsuccessful marriage, or maybe a natural character trait that devious Iago found appealing in her in the first place. One of the most prominent displays of this feature of Emilia's character is to be found in the conclusion to her discussion of faithfulness in marriage with Desdemona in act IV scene iii. Here, after explaining to resentful Desdemona that she would consider infidelity if the price was right and that it is the case of many women, she justifies her point of view by pointing out the husbands' deficiencies in that matter, saying:

[...] Let husbands know

Their wives have sense like them; they see and smell

And have their palates both for sweet and sour,

As husbands have. What is it that they do

When they change us for others? Is it sport?

I think it is. And doth affection breed it?

I think it doth. Is't frailty that thus errs?

It is so too. And have not we affections,

Desires for sport, and frailty, as men have?

Then let them use us well; else let them know,

The ills we do, their ills instruct us so. (IV, iii, 98 - 108)

In this distinctive speech Emilia refers to the misogynistic perception of the world that is not present only in Iago's speeches, but is a principle which is reasonably valid for all the Venetians. This double standard is closely connected to the principles of patriarchy: "Women, she argues, are neither the saints nor the whores that men would have them be; in sense (desire), frailty, and affections they are like men. Thus their husbands cannot expect, merely because they are men, to enjoy or to own women's sexual fidelity by patriarchal right."⁷⁴

Even though Emilia is aware of the problematic position of women, unlike Katherine from *The Taming of the Shrew* she remains relatively obedient and until the very end, when she finally sees through her husband's scheming, keeps her loyalty to him, instead of Desdemona. When looking at Emilia's motivation for doing so, the most likely alternative seems to be the plain fact that, in spite of all things, she still loves him. This would be true at least to a modern viewer who would question her obedience based on mere social order, even more so after hearing her powerful equalitarian speech. For contemporary stages love offers the easiest access to analysing Emilia's motivation. In the 1999 Royal Shakespeare Company of *Othello* directed by Michael Attenborough Iago's motivation for despising his wife was her presumed unfaithfulness, not his closet homosexuality, thus the production cannot be discussed in the chapter on the notable productions, yet it should be mentioned at this point, as it presented an intriguing play with balance in the Iago-Emilia relationship. Richard McCabe who starred in the production as Iago described the scene where Emilia gives Iago Desdemona's handkerchief in his formerly mentioned essay on Iago in *Players of Shakespeare 5*:

"The exchange between Iago and Emilia is important not only in furthering the plot through the transfer of the handkerchief to him, but also in showing the state of their relationship. [...] Emilia uses the handkerchief as a bargaining tool with Iago. It gives her power over him and guarantees his attention. We had Iago trick it from her with a kiss. Such a rare display of affection caused Emilia to drop her guard, during

⁷⁴ Kahn 146.

which time the handkerchief was snatched. I tried to convey the impression that Iago achieved the kiss only by the mightiest effort of will. Emilia's following line, 'Give't me again' (1.iii.314), with clear sexual need, was accompanied by an embrace from which I would recoil in disgust, the pretence of affection now redundant."⁷⁵

Even though this production read Iago without the homosexual implication, the scene, as described, would be equally valid in a production that includes his homosexuality, as it tells us a lot about the relationship of two people in a dysfunctional marriage, where one loves and one hates.

3.2. Notable Productions

One of the most influential modern performances portraying Iago's relationship to Othello as a homosexual one was staged already in 1938 in The Old Vic. 1937/38 was the season when the star of young Laurence Olivier began to rise at the stage of the famous London-based theatre, as he was cast in six major Shakespearian parts including Hamlet, Macbeth, Henry V and Iago.⁷⁶ In this production both Olivier and the director Tyrone Guthrie have "under the influence of Freudian psychology"⁷⁷, namely by one of the greatest experts in the area and Freud's biographer Ernest Jones⁷⁸, agreed on a portrayal of Iago as "motivated by repressed homosexual desire"⁷⁹. Overall this production was not considered to be a critical success. The new approach was not decipherable for the contemporary audience, in spite of the fact that "in the first few performances [Olivier] responded to Richardson's simulated fit by falling on the ground beside him and simulating an orgasm"⁸⁰. Also Ralph Richardson in the part of Othello failed to take this approach into account, which resulted in Olivier's performance coming across as rather overpowering in the physical stylization of the performance, which can be demonstrated by the reviews of the production: "Othello is aggravated by the

⁷⁵ McCabe 204.

⁷⁶ Victoria and Albert Museum. "Laurence Olivier as Iago." *Introduction to early 20th century theatre*. Feb 28 2013. <<http://www.vam.ac.uk/users/node/8628>>

⁷⁷ "In Performance: RSC and Beyond," ed. Jonathan Bate & Eric Rasmussen: *Othello*, by William Shakespeare (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 156.

⁷⁸ Stanley Wells: *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 86.

⁷⁹ Bate & Rasmussen 156.

⁸⁰ Lois Potter: *Othello: Shakespeare in Performance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) 92.

excessive liveliness of the Iago ... We are shown, not a lion killed by a viper, but a virtuoso toreador playing a bull. And it is his exquisite accomplishment that we concentrate upon, not the blind process of the victim.”⁸¹ Olivier later spoke about the rehearsals as follows: “losing all control of myself, I flung my arms round Ralph’s neck and kissed him. Whereat Ralph, more in sorrow than in anger, sort of patted me and said, “Dear fellow, dear boy”, much more pitying me for having lost control of myself than despising me for being a very bad actor.”⁸² In spite of it being years ahead of its time, this performance is to be considered a milestone in portraying Iago, bringing a new motivation for what was usually interpreted as sheer hatred, greed and thoughts of a generally twisted, spiteful mind.

For the following half-century the portrayal of Iago remained the traditional portrayal of personalized evil, whose main interest is to plot against the others for his own benefit. A change came in 1985 with Terry Hand’s Royal Shakespeare Company production, in which the part of Iago was taken by David Suchet. Nearly fifty years after the Tyrone Guthrie version this 1985 production came back to explaining Iago’s motivation by his repressed homosexual attraction towards Othello. Bearing in mind that homosexuality was decriminalized only in the 1960’s, the 80’s approach to a “queer” interpretation of Shakespeare was much more accepting than the one of the 30’s. In her account of the 1985 production Lois Potter states: “My suggestion was that audiences weren’t used to seeing gay behaviour depicted onstage before 1968 except in a comic context, thus actors didn’t have shorthand by which to communicate it.”⁸³ That is a very fair point to be made when comparing the circumstances of the two productions. The success of Suchet’s portrayal of Iago did not lie only in the mere fact that the timing of the production in the historical context was right, but also in his ability not to physically overplay his interpretive input. Lois Potter recalls: “I think that some idea of gayness crossed my mind, mainly because of Suchet’s horrified grief when Othello finally committed suicide. But this was a surprise for me, which is why it was the thing I remember best from the production; in other words, he had not come across as being in love with Othello. It was more like a cat feeling upset that the toy it has

⁸¹ “In Performance: RSC and Beyond,” 157.

⁸² Stanley Wells: *Shakespeare, Sex and Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) 176.

⁸³ Stephen Orgel: “*Othello* and the End of Comedy,” *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 56, Shakespeare and Comedy*, ed. Peter Holland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 114.

been playing with (a live mouse) has stopped moving. [...] It also struck me that no one was remotely interested in Desdemona.”⁸⁴ Though the production was largely perceived in the homosexual context Suchet’s approach to Iago was much more complex than a simple claim that he was gay. He later described it in his essay on Iago in *Players of Shakespeare 2*: “So, who is Iago, what is he? Is he a simple “label”? In this “supermarket” world of ours it’s hardly surprising that he has been labelled. But I chose not to label. My “jar” is just called Iago with one main ingredient – Jealousy.”⁸⁵ Having said that, he does spend quite a large part of the essay searching for hints of homosexuality in the play. Yet still he stresses the ambiguity of some of these lines, which allows the actor to go either way. Suchet’s sophisticated approach to the part and professional research put into an immensely interesting essay made a pathway for further productions dealing with Iago as a homosexual or bisexual character.

In 1995 Kenneth Branagh directed a film version of *Othello* which was commonly critically regarded as homosexual interpretation of Iago’s relationship to Othello. And indeed there are grounds for looking at his interpretation in the queer light. The account of the evidence supporting the hypothesis is as follows:

“When speaking to Roderigo of Desdemona’s ‘foul lust’ for Cassio, he places his face immediately next to Roderigo’s and then gropes his genitals (‘lechery, by this hand?’) while a heterosexual couple has vigorous intercourse on a cart above them; Emilia demands sex in return for the handkerchief and Iago turns her over on her stomach before having what appears to be anal sex with her; and after Othello kills himself, Iago crawls onto the bed and lies at Othello’s feet.”⁸⁶

Branagh himself, though, dismisses the idea of implied repressed homosexual attraction of Iago towards Othello in his portrayal of the character. In an interview for the *Advocate* in 1996 he stated: “Well, you know, a rather distinguished critic said he was annoyed with my performance because I’d clearly played Iago gay. I

⁸⁴ Orgel 114.

⁸⁵ David Suchet: “Iago,” *Players of Shakespeare 2*, ed. Russell Jackson & Robert Smallwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 199.

⁸⁶ Richard Burt: “Love That Dare Not Speak Shakespeare’s Name: The New Shakesqueer Cinema,” *Shakespeare, the Movie: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV*, ed. Lynda E. Boose & Richard Burt (New York: Routledge, 1997) 241.

had no consciousness of doing that at all, but I did play as though he loved Othello. But I don't mean in a sexual sense. I just meant that he absolutely loved him. And frankly, that's the way I am with my male friends: I say 'I love you' when I feel it."⁸⁷

3.3. Czech Stages

It is quite difficult to find queering of *Othello* on Czech stages. Seymour Kleinberg described Antonio as a "homophobic homosexual"⁸⁸, whose contempt of his own sexuality which excludes him from the traditional heterosexual model is translated into his hatred for the other outsider of the play – the Jew Shylock. Similar perspective may be applied in the interpretation of the character of Iago and his hatred of women and people in general. His homosexuality would be well hidden and not meant to be seen as it once again opposes the traditional model and can be seen as shameful. He is a married man who hates his wife as well as anybody who seems to threaten his privileged position in Othello's company. The latent homosexuality is used as a tool helping the actor understand his motivation, avoiding Coleridge's motiveless malignity. It cannot be said with certainty that Iago haunted by his unfulfilled sexual desires did not appear on Czech stages, as judging hidden motivation can be tricky. It certainly did not appear in any critical article, or interview with a Czech Iago. The only production which included homosexual references in Iago's behaviour took place at the 2004 festival *Zlomvaz*, which gathers performances of students of a number of Czech and foreign theatre faculties. The production of *Othello* was performed by the students of VŠMU from Bratislava. The production was described for *Divadelní noviny* by Richard Erml in an article titled "Utajený gay Jago" – "The Secret Gay Iago". Erml states the following: "The high standard of the Slovak students was confirmed by the production of *Othello*. Nevertheless the interpretative point in which Iago passionately kisses Othello before stabbing him with a knife can only be painfully hissed at."⁸⁹ From this review it is obvious that queering of *Othello* is not yet naturalized on Czech stages and is overruled by the traditional readings concerning jealousy and racism.

⁸⁷ Mark Huisman: "Prince of Players." *Advocate* [Dallas] 20 Feb. 1996: 127.

⁸⁸ Kleinberg 120.

⁸⁹ Richard Erml: "Utajený gay Jago." *Divadelní noviny* [Praha] – 8 Jun. 2004: 6.

4. Richard II

4.1. Textual Evidence

Richard II is one of the most remarkable history plays by William Shakespeare. With its skilful depiction of the society leaving the medieval norms behind and moving on to the early modern ones it marks the beginning of a new age. The key moment of the play is the development of the character of the king from a foppish youngster of the first half of the play to the broken, yet profoundly wiser man of the second half. There is a number of evidence for reading *Richard II* as a play with a homosexual or at least prominently homosocial protagonist. Firstly there is the king's relationship to his favourites that effectively weakens Richard's affection towards the queen and her position at court. Another important aspect is the connection to Shakespeare's inspiration – Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*, where the presence of homosexual love of the king and his favourite is very significant. And finally there is the effeminate nature of the character of Richard II, which obviously does not insinuate homosexuality on its own, but when combined with the previous arguments can be used as a supportive argument for the theory. This doubtlessly was the case when staging the play as is to be seen in the chapter on notable productions.

For queering of the play the most interesting relationships are the ones between the king and his favourites Bushy, Bagot and Green. It is important to note that the aspect of favouritism in the play was a highly political matter for Elizabethan England, as a parallel could be seen between Richard, a king without a clearly nominated heir, manipulated by his favourites, and Elizabeth I, which could have had serious political repercussions: "In the 1580s and 1590s the comparison was used to score political points chiefly about advice from favourites, but in the 1590s deposition also came into question."⁹⁰ Because of that *Richard II* had to face the contemporary censorship.⁹¹ The most prominent utilization of the play for political reasons came with the rebellion of Earl of Essex against Queen Elizabeth. A few days prior to the plot of 8th February 1601 some of the rebels asked for a

⁹⁰ William Shakespeare, ed. Brian Gibbons: "Introduction," *King Richard II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 6.

⁹¹ *ibid.*

production of Richard II, offering a generous payment.⁹² In spite of the failure of the rebellion Elizabeth was well-aware of the comparisons that were made between her and Richard, which can be demonstrated by the following quotation describing the events of 4th August 1601 – more than half-a-year after the rebellion:

“On 4 August 1601, as the Queen perused some of the historical archives of the Tower of London, presented to her by her Antiquarian, William Lambard, documents pertaining to Richard II's distant reign are said to have carried for her an immediate contemporary resonance: ‘so her Majestie fell upon the reign of King Richard II. saying, ‘I am Richard II. know ye not that?’”⁹³

Before moving on to the aspects of queering itself it is valid to point out that the relationships in *Richard II* in general are based on loyalty. The central problem of the play is that every character understands loyalty differently and acts accordingly. Four basic types of loyalty can be distinguished: family ties, loyalty to the king, loyalty to the nation and loyalty to the country. Of course these types often overlap. A great example of this is the Duke of York, who when hearing about his son's part in the conspiracy against Henry stays loyal to the king and disregards the interest of his son, asking Henry to “Forget to pity him, lest pity prove / A serpent that will sting thee to the heart.” (V, iii, 56 – 57) The most important loyalties for this essay are family ties and loyalty to the king – i.e. the king personally, that is Richard, not the title itself. For those who remained loyal to Richard as their king the enforcement of his abdication was a clear sign of treason.

The position of the favourites in contrast with the position of the queen can be easily compared in the following passage: In act II scene ii the queen expresses her fear of what is to come, unable to name the reasons for her fear. She is aware of the potential danger in which her country and her husband are, yet cannot speak up because she promised to Richard, as Bushy instantly reminds her, “To lay aside life-harming heaviness / And entertain a cheerful disposition.” (II, ii, 3 – 4) In other words, the queen, who is supposed to be the king's close advisor, is not heard

⁹² Martin Hilský: *Shakespeare a jeviště svět* (Praha: Academia, 2010) 345.

⁹³ Jean-Christophe Mayer: “The "Parliament Sceane" in Shakespeare's King Richard II”, *XVII-XVIII. Bulletin de la société d'études anglo-américaines des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles* [Paris] 24 Oct. 2003: 59.

because of the prominent voice of the king's favourites. Nevertheless to be fair to Bushy and Green, they both remain loyal to King Richard and in the end pay for this loyalty with their lives.

While Richard is still drunk with power, his favourites have already been captured and hanged by Bolingbroke's men. Here, in the opening of act III, the most prominent critique of the status of Bushy and Green at the royal court takes place in Henry Bolingbroke's speech:

“You have misled a prince, a royal king,
A happy gentleman in blood and lineaments,
By you unhappied and disfigured clean:
You have in manner with your sinful hours
Made a divorce betwixt his queen and him,
Broke the possession of a royal bed
And stain'd the beauty of a fair queen's cheeks

With tears drawn from her eyes by your foul wrongs.” (III, i, 8 – 14)

Here Henry virtually accuses the king's favourites of liaisons of homosexual nature with Richard, which caused estrangement from his wife and allowed them to plant ideas into the king's mind. It is the most open critique not only of the king's favouritism, but also of his sexual preference. Unlike his source Holinshed, who claims that “‘the filthy sin of lechery and fornication’ led God to ‘shred him off from the sceptre of his kingdom’ (p. 508), but does not accuse Richard of sodomy”⁹⁴, Shakespeare has Bolingbroke rather explicitly insinuate that the relationship between the king and his favourites was not merely platonic, when he puts “the royal bed” into play. Of course this innuendo may be only rhetorical, trying to undermine the king's position, nevertheless it introduces a strong element of homoerotic imagery.

The character of the queen and her function are immensely interesting in connection to Shakespeare's sources. In fact, Queen Isabella is not a part of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which Shakespeare used as his chief source for the play.⁹⁵ The figure of the queen that is present in the play is “a conflation of Richard's first

⁹⁴ William Shakespeare, ed. Anthony B. Dawson & Paul Yachnin: *The Oxford Shakespeare: Richard II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011) 203, note 11-15.

⁹⁵ Goran Stanivuković: “Beyond Sodomy,” ed. Vin Nardizzi, Stephen Guy-Bray & Will Stockton: *Queer Renaissance Historiography: Backward Gaze* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2009) 60.

wife, Anne of Bohemia, and his second, Isabella of France, who was barely ten when the events of the play took place.⁹⁶ The character of the queen is also to be linked with Shakespeare's inspiration for the play, which was Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*:

“Shakespeare re-imagines Queen Isabella from *Edward II*, a character full of sexual exuberance, in Queen Isabel, who, by controlling her sexuality and questioning her husband's emotional loyalty keeps the symbolic order in check while also questioning its stability. Isabel notices her husband's sexual ambiguity. [...] By not pairing Richard off with a male subordinate, and by instead isolating Richard and directing the coded language of queer desire between him and Isabel, Shakespeare re-envisioning homoeroticism in an original way. He renders homoeroticism as rhetorically playful and as opaque in order not to make it the reason for the king's fall, as it is in *Edward II*.”⁹⁷

The figure of the queen is not the only one that links *Richard II* and *Edward II*. Very similar are also the characters of king's favourites. In *Richard II* they are Bushy, Bagot and Green, in *Edward II* it is Gaveston. In *Edward II* the homosexual imagery is much more prominent than in *Richard II*. For instance when the king is reunited with “his Gaveston” he says:

“For, as the lovers of fair Danae,
When she was locked up in a brazen tower,
Desired her more, and waxed outrageous,
So did it sure with me: and now thy sight
Is sweeter far than was thy parting hence
Bitter and irksome to my sobbing heart.”⁹⁸

There are countless examples of affectionate scenes between the two men, which often include a simile in which one of them is presented as a female, as in the extract above where Gaveston is compared to Danae. This relationship is in fact

⁹⁶Brian Gibbons: “Introduction,” *King Richard II*, by William Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 65.

⁹⁷ Stanivuković 60.

⁹⁸ Christopher Marlowe: *Edward II* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 2004) 51.

present and visible from the very first line of act I, where Edward starts with “My father is deceas’d! Come Gaveston / And share the kingdom with thy dearest friend”⁹⁹. In Marlowe’s text homosexuality is definitely much more present. That can be at least partially caused by the fact that, unlike Shakespeare “the models that Marlowe has used in drawing his characters have, after all, been appropriated from a highly unsympathetic source: not from classical biography or Hellenistic romance, as they are in Shakespeare, but from satire.”¹⁰⁰ In spite of that the two plays share so many similarities that it is quite possible that the unconcealed homosexuality present in *Edward II* might have affected the subsequent readings of *Richard II*, where the textual basis for these interpretations is not as extensive. Nevertheless there are also grounds for reading Richard II as character displaying features of prominent homosociality and possibly even homosexuality.

Richard himself displays characteristics traditionally associated with the feminine, rather than masculine aspect. Mainly his tendency to surround himself by flatterers and his deep self-pity throughout the second half of the play gives a certain idea of effeminacy of the character. In spite of the fact that effeminacy does not directly imply homosexuality it was nevertheless largely employed in queering of the play as a trait supporting Richard’s homosexual tendencies, as can be seen in the following chapter on notable productions.

The main issue of the first half of the play, which prepares the scene for the subsequent downfall, presents the viewers with an egocentric king, who truly believes in his sovereign position granted by God. Bushy, Green and Bagot are the king’s shadows here, saying what he wants to hear. As John of Gaunt remarks when talking to Richard: “A thousand flatterers sit within thy crown, / Whose compass is no bigger than thy head” (II, i, 100 – 102). Richard though, until he is forced to give up his crown, still firmly believes in his function as God’s deputy on Earth. Even in act III, when Bolingbroke is already back in the country and starts to gain more and more power Richard says about the traitors: “They break their faith to God as well as us.” (III, ii, 101) Richard’s self-confidence, imprudence and vanity eventually

⁹⁹Marlowe 2.

¹⁰⁰Smith - 221.

cause his painful awakening from the vision of his absolute worldly power and invincibility.

A dramatic change in Richard's behaviour occurs shortly after he receives the message about the deaths of Bushy and Green. After this discovery Richard, with the exceptions of a few stronger moments, becomes generally defeatist: "Let's talk of graves, of worms and epitaphs" (III, ii, 145). From the king who is the God's gift to his land in the scope of just about 40 lines he turns into the man who says:

"Throw away respect,
Tradition, form and ceremonious duty,
For you have but mistook me all this while.
I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends. Subject thus,
How can you say to me I am a king" (III, ii, 172 – 177)

With the loss of his closest supporters Richard's inner weaknesses begin to surface. It is up to interpretation whether Richard at this point mourns the loss of his supreme position, or indeed the death of his dearest ones. Carlisle quickly comes with supporting and rousing words: "My lord, wise men ne'er sit and wail their woes, / But presently prevent the ways to wail." (III, ii, 178 - 179), but Richard's revived willingness to fight does not last for long, as he finds out that the little army he has left is no competition for Bolingbroke. Since then Richard more or less drowns in self-pity and hysteria.

There is only one major exception, which occurs during his dialogue with the queen, who for a while manages to suppress his effeminate side. There Richards seems more manly not only in his words, but also in his affection to his wife: "Doubly divorced! Bad men, you violate / A twofold marriage, 'twixt my crown and me, / And then betwixt me and my married wife." (V, i, 80 – 82) Based on this passage it can be said that he really loves his wife. His preference for male company of whatever character seems to have been an aspect of his injudicious and short-sighted past, whereas his reunion with his wife seems to have brought also a renewal of clarity of judgement. If taken in this context Richard's supposed homosexual relationships are presented in a clearly homophobic way. They did not effectively cause his ruin as in *Edward II*, his apparent sexual preference in the first

half of the play is more likely a manifestation of his mental state, but all this supports Bolingbroke's argument from the third act about favouritism being connected to the success rate of Richard's government. This obviously goes back to the point made earlier about the importance of Isabelle from *Richard II* in contrast with the one from *Edward II* – when the favourites are gone and nothing stands between the royal couple they reunite peacefully, unlike Edward II, whose only interest remains Gaveston.

4.2. Notable Productions

The tradition of reading Richard II as a sexually ambiguous character is long and has roots in the portrayal of his effeminate side. One of the initial critical impulses for this reading of *Richard II* was given by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who stated that Richard displays features of “intellectual feminineness, which feels a necessity of ever leaning on the breast of others”¹⁰¹. The play was not particularly popular in the 19th century which, as Stanley Wells argues in his book *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare*, was probably caused by the fact that it was “particularly easy to identify with homosexuality”¹⁰². Richard simply was not manly enough. This approach started to change in 1896 because of the actor Frank Benson:

“[Benson] was said by the reviewers to have stressed what was described as the ‘effeminate’ side of Richard’s nature. This does not necessarily imply homosexuality, but it sounds like a euphemistic attempt to avoid mentioning the subject at a time when anything more explicit might have been unacceptable in polite circles.”¹⁰³

A string of actors subsequently stressed Richard's effeminacy, one of them being John Gielgud in 1929 at the Old Vic Theatre, where he co-starred with Michael Redgrave as Henry Bolingbroke.¹⁰⁴ Gielgud's success in the part became legendary and he remained tied with the play until his later days when he played John of Gaunt in the 1978 film version. The lyricism of Gielgud's performance

¹⁰¹ Charles R. Forker: “*Richard II* on the Screen,” ed. Sarah Hatchuel & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin: *Shakespeare on Screen: The Henriad* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2008) 28.

¹⁰² Wells: *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* 73.

¹⁰³ Wells: *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* 73 – 74.

¹⁰⁴ University of Berkeley: “Performance Galleries.” *Shakespeare's Stagings* 30 Nov. 2009, 3 May 2013. <http://shakespeare.berkeley.edu/gallery2/main.php?g2_itemId=18275>.

inspired Redgrave so much that in 1951, when he played Richard II, he became “one of the first actors to make [Richard] overtly homosexual”¹⁰⁵. Redgrave himself admitted that he took some of the aspects of Gielgud’s performance, saying: “If you have seen a performance which you consider definitive you cannot help being influenced by it - and why not?”¹⁰⁶ Redgrave’s portrayal of Richard was described as “effeminate, foppish king in the first half, pathetic in the second half, and always highly lyrical”¹⁰⁷. By doing this he apparently brought the character much closer to homosexuality, at least for the contemporary audience, as can be seen on the following statement of Sir Laurence Olivier, who said about Redgrave’s Richard that he is “an out-and-out pussy queer, with mincing gestures to match.”¹⁰⁸

A very important stage version took place in 1968 in Prospect Theatre, directed by Richard Cottrell and starring Ian McKellen in the leading role.¹⁰⁹ When reminiscing about the part McKellen largely refers to its political context, which to him was made even more prominent after the experience of touring Czechoslovakia with the play shortly after the “Prague spring” – an experience which he describes in the essay “The Czech Significance”.¹¹⁰ In spite of the importance of the theme of political struggle, homoerotic aspect was also a feature of this production. Ronald Bryden from *The Observer* described McKellen’s performance as follows: “Eyes glazed with egoism, voice floating high and remote out of the gay circle of courtiers ringing him like bright, empty-headed marigolds, he is a singing gold doll, gloves raised in a marvellous gesture at once saintly, complacent and hopeless.”¹¹¹ This feature of the play was only emphasized by the fact that McKellen was also starring in a production of *Edward II* at the same time.¹¹² This however should not affect the reflection of the plays far too much as it was not intentional – McKellen stepped in

¹⁰⁵ William Shakespeare, ed. Stanley Wells: “Introduction,” *The Oxford Shakespeare: Richard II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011)

¹⁰⁶ Jonathan Croall: *Gielgud: A Theatrical Life* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2001) 245.

¹⁰⁷ “Richard II: Selected Criticism,” *A Shakespeare Encyclopaedia*, 1966 ed.

¹⁰⁸ Wells: *Looking for Sex in Shakespeare* 74.

¹⁰⁹ Margaret Shewring: *Shakespeare in Performance: King Richard II* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996) 198.

¹¹⁰ Shewring 29.

¹¹¹ Joseph C. Tardiff: *Shakespearean Criticism: Excerpts from the Criticism of William Shakespeare's Plays and Poetry, from the First Published Appraisals to Current Evaluations* (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1994) 407.

¹¹² Lois Potter: “Marlowe in Theatre and Film,” ed. Patrick Cheney: *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 273.

only “after the original Edward had dropped out”¹¹³. Nevertheless the claim that his reading of one, of *Edward II* to be more precise, could have affected the other is valid.

In 1973 The Royal Shakespeare Company staged a production of *Richard II* directed by John Barton and starring Ian Richardson and Richard Pasco as Richard and Bolingbroke, who would “alternate as Richard and Bolingbroke on successive nights to underline the ritualized similarities between them”¹¹⁴. This approach did not only show the similarities between the two characters, but also the differences between the two actors. As the American director Paul Barry remembers seeing the production on tour in America: “Shakespeare wrote no explicit homosexuals. *Richard II* tradition swings both ways. [In the] splendid 1974 RSC production that toured America, [...] alternated two excellent actors Ian Richardson and Richard Pasco, as Bolingbroke and Richard. Depending on which actor you saw as Richard, the king was either gay or straight.”¹¹⁵ The difference between the two performances has been captured in contemporary press as well, i.e. in the article “Richardcrantz and Bolingstern are Dead” by John Simon from *New York Magazine*, who says that: “Richardson’s King is distasteful, flaming queen (no wonder Barton cut out the character of Bagot, for fear of slangy rhymesters), while Pasco’s Bolingbroke is adequate; in reverse, Pasco’s King is an often falsettoing, at times cretinous, yokel, and Richardson’s Bolingbroke is a slimy, effete villain.”¹¹⁶

Another important performance of *Richard II* took place in 2000 in The Other Place in Stratford, a production directed by Steven Pimlott with Samuel West as Richard.¹¹⁷ The queer interpretation here did not concentrate on Bushy and Green but on the Duke of Aumerle, one of those who stand by Richard the longest. Maxwell Cooter from WhatsOnStage.com stated the following in his review of the production: “Aumerle is fashioned as his lover, an interesting twist, which makes

¹¹³ Potter: “Marlowe in Theatre and Film” 273.

¹¹⁴ Andrew Dickson: *The Rough Guide to Shakespeare* (London: Rough Guides Limited, 2009) 311.

¹¹⁵ Paul Barry: *A Lifetime with Shakespeare: Notes from an American Director of All 38 Plays* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010) 138.

¹¹⁶ John Simon: “Richardcrantz and Bolingstern are Dead.” *New York Magazine* [New York] - 28 Jan. 1974: 62.

¹¹⁷ Samuel West: “Richard II,” ed. Robert Smallwood: *Players of Shakespeare 6* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 85.

Aumerle's participation in the anti-Henry plot more credible.”¹¹⁸ As West later describes in his essay on *Richard II* in *Players of Shakespeare 6*, he logically stressed the king's and Aumerle's proximity of class:

“The little scene with Richard's hangers-on (I.iv) has always been important. We shied away from the bath-house [referring to the Derek Jacobi film version as will be explained further on] and turned it into a mock-interrogation, where Aumerle magnificently defended himself against charges of fraternization with the enemy, and I tried to keep a straight face. Bushy, Bagot and Green weren't so sure of his innocence – the closeness that Richard and Aumerle share is one of royal blood, and others aren't members of that particular club. At one point when I couldn't keep up the pretence I kissed Aumerle, which seems to have been taken as an explicit indicator of homosexuality. While I've no doubt that Richard and Aumerle slept together at Eton all I was expressing was closeness and love to one of my class.”¹¹⁹

This approach is fascinating, firstly because it stresses a relationship that is usually overlooked and whose part in the beginning of the play is mostly overshadowed by Bushy, Bagot and Green, and secondly because it puts class into play and differentiates the relationships between the king, the duke and the favourites on that basis, claiming that, in Orwellian terms, the aristocrats are “more equal”, which affects their relationship.

To move on to the film versions, there are two queered versions of *Richard II*. The first one was filmed in 1978 for BBC, directed by David Giles and starring Derek Jacobi in the leading part¹²⁰, who repeated the success ten years later in a stage production.¹²¹ His portrayal of Richard was greatly influential for generations of actors to come, including the latest announced Richard of The Royal

¹¹⁸ Maxwell Cooter, "Richard II (RSC)" *WhatsOnStage.com*, 8 Jan. 2001, 5 May 2013. <<http://www.whatsonstage.com/reviews/theatre/london/E01183966028/>>.

¹¹⁹ West 92 – 93.

¹²⁰ Ace G. Pilkington: *Screening Shakespeare from Richard II to Henry V* (Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1991) 44.

¹²¹ Michael Hattaway: “Politics and *Mise-en-Scène* in Television Version of *King Richard II*,” ed. Sarah Hatchuel & Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin: *Shakespeare on Screen: Television Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of Michèle Willems* (Mont-Saint-Aignan: Publications des Universités de Rouen et du Havre, 2008) 97.

Shakespeare Company, David Tennant, that is set to play the part from December 2013 to January 2014, who said in a recent interview: “I saw Derek Jacobi playing Richard II when I was at drama school. He was touring and he came to Glasgow, and it was one of those formative experiences for me.”¹²² The notorious scene from this version of the play is the bathroom scene, which was previously mentioned in Samuel West’s essay. In this scene – fourth scene of the first act – Richard talks to his favourites in the intimate spa-like setting. The scene is prominently homoerotically charged, as is described in the following description: “The king lies under a masseur’s towel while Green kneads his back and Bagot sits presumably naked in a wooden bath-tub.”¹²³ But the production does not, in spite of his evident effeminacy, present Richard as a homosexual, which is evident from his treatment of the queen: “[The] caterpillars [as the favourites are referred to in the play] had not wrought a complete divorce between Richard and Isabella: she was at his side in the lists in act I and the farewell between them was movingly done.”¹²⁴ Thus what is to be seen in this production is homosociality with features of homoeroticism, but not an explicit homosexual link. A different case would be the 1988 stage production, which “was predicated upon a deep and painful love between the king and courtiers – a love that by that year dared to speak its name”¹²⁵ The last part of the quote is immensely important. It does not suggest that Jacobi’s reading changed dramatically, but it was simply more acceptable to have a gay king in the 80’s than it was in the 70’s. It has also been suggested that the bathing scene was supposed to be an allusion to Jacobi’s recent television success in *I, Claudius*, reminding the viewers of the Roman baths.¹²⁶ But that interpretation, however shaky, probably loses most of its validity when put into context with the 1988 stage production.

The second important film version made in 1997 was directed by Deborah Warner and had a woman in the part of Richard II – Fiona Shaw.¹²⁷ This film version was preceded by a stage version from the same director and with nearly the

¹²² TheGuardian, " David Tennant on returning to the RSC to play Richard II after Hamlet" *YouTube.com*, 23 Jan. 2013, 5 May 2013.

<<http://www.whatsonstage.com/reviews/theatre/london/E01183966028/>>.

¹²³ Hattaway 97.

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ Shewring:148.

¹²⁷ Shewring:180 – 181.

same cast that premiered in 1995.¹²⁸ It was often argued what was meant by the casting of a woman in a male part: stressing the sexual ambiguity, implying homosexuality via a relationship acted out by a male and female protagonist, or even bringing the figure of the king closer to Elizabeth I¹²⁹. Shaw herself explains it as follows: “King Richard is not really a man, he is god ... The way I look at it is that I am a non-man playing somebody who perceives himself to be a non-man.”¹³⁰ The relationship that is stressed in this production is the relationship of the two kings – Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke, Henry IV to be. David Threlfall was cast as Bolingbroke, an actor who “bore an uncanny resemblance to Fiona Shaw”¹³¹ Irving Wardle from *Independent on Sunday* described the two as “a platonically divided creature seeking to unite”¹³². The production presents Richard and Bolingbroke as two people in love:

“When Richard gives Bolingbroke a lingering kiss in the opening scene, the King seems to be flaunting his sexual orientation in the open court. He turns with a smirk and resumes a white, "designer" throne surrounded by the group of male favorites. Richard takes off his crown before the trial by combat to kiss (not just "fold him in [his] arms") Bolingbroke one more time, suggesting again a doffing of the political and the personal role. [...] Bolingbroke’s accusation of Bushy and Green before he has them executed mentions, of course, the “divorce” that these favorites have wrought between Richard and Isabel, but it picks up further energy from the possibility that the two were Bolingbroke’s rivals for Richard’s affections. Bolingbroke was ‘near in love Till [they] did make [Richard] misinterpret [him].’ (II. iv.17-18)”¹³³

Love it or hate it the production brings a very bold idea to the table. Not only does it play with the gender of the monarch, it also treats the analogy of the characters of Richard and Bolingbroke in a very fresh way, full of love, supported by the commonly overlooked affection starting in the shared childhood: “a story of [...] the

¹²⁸ Hattaway 103.

¹²⁹ Shewring 182.

¹³⁰ Hattaway 104.

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² Carol Chillington Rutter: “Deborah Warren,” ed. John Russell Brown: *The Routledge Companion to Directors' Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2010) 488.

¹³³ H. R. Coursen: *Contemporary Shakespeare Production* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010) 46 - 47.

runt-prince protected on the playground by his hunky cousin, sharing a secret language, ‘one of those languages’ says Shaw, ‘that exists *underneath* language’, that ‘discloses secret histories.’”¹³⁴

As can be seen on the long list of productions, the tradition of queering *Richard II* is the longest one, in spite of the textual evidence being rather scarce. That is partly to be linked with effeminacy, which possibly even now and definitely so in the past insinuated homosexuality, partly with the connection with *Edward II*, with which *Richard II* bears many similarities, but in which the homosexual element is much stronger. In 2012 Derek Jacobi hosted an episode of *Shakespeare Uncovered*, the one that dealt with *Richard II*. Apart from presenting his own views of the character, he also gave space to other prominent Richards to describe the part. One of them is particularly remarkable because of its illuminating contemporary reference regarding the ambiguity of the character. Rupert Goold, who portrayed Richard II in 2012, said: “For a long time I was really interested in Richard II as a sort of a Michael Jackson figure – sort of sexually ambiguous, separate, playful, capricious, a diva.”¹³⁵

4.3. Czech stages

Richard II is definitely not the most popular Shakespeare play in the Czech Republic. Based on the data of The Theatre Institute – Divadelní ústav there were only three productions of the play – the first in 1972 in Komorní divadlo in Prague, second in 1984 in Divadlo Zdeňka Nejedlého in Ostrava and third in 2006 in Divadlo na Vinohradech.¹³⁶ The last one mentioned was directed by Lucie Bělohradská¹³⁷ who presented the character of Richard as sexually ambiguous. The production was filled with homoerotic gestures – for instance: In the very beginning Richard seems to disregard Bolingbroke’s argument with the Duke of Herford and meanwhile enjoys intimate conversations with Bushy and Green, while smoking waterpipe. When Richard gets the message about John of Gaunt’s decaying health, he high-fives both Bushy and Green and then all of them touch one another’s crotch

¹³⁴ Rutter 489.

¹³⁵ *Shakespeare Uncovered - Episode 3 – Richard II*, BBC4, Greater London, United Kingdom, 30 June 2012.

¹³⁶ "Inscenace" *Divadelní ústav*, 15 Apr. 2012 <<http://db.divadelni-ustav.cz/Inscenace.aspx>>.

¹³⁷ Saša Hrbotický: “Vinohradský Richard II. se obrací k dnešku.” *Hospodářské noviny* [Praha] – 26 Nov. 2006: 9.

area, running away laughing childishly. Before making the decision to leave for Ireland, Richard walks away from his wife to Bushy and Green and kisses the former on the lips.

The character of the queen seems to be in constant development, with regard to her appearance as well as sexuality. For the first part of the play she is portrayed as a child, always carrying a teddy bear, dressed and coiffured accordingly. In act III her skirt is lengthened and hairstyle matured. Here she sits on the ground and has a dialogue with her lady-in-waiting. During the dialogue she kisses her three times on the lips and ostentatiously touches her breasts, yet none of it seems overtly erotic, it is more of a strange need for consolation, or affection which her husband fails to give her. In act V the queen is already a mature lady, whose inner strength helps Richard to pick up the pieces of his previous strength and fearlessness. In this scene the couple finally gains a level of emotional and physical connection.

The criticism of the production mostly dealt with the motif of the politics of power, rather than the sexual ambiguity of the leading character. Nevertheless, because of its prominence, it did not go completely unnoticed. Saša Hrbotický in *Hospodářské noviny* described Richard as “an effeminate ruler, who venomously glosses the happenings around and, surrounded by his two companions, provocatively shows off his homosexual tendencies. Only after the unexpected loss of the throne, is he capable of bitter self-knowledge and manages to find a way to his wife as well.”¹³⁸ Zdeněk Hořínek from *Divadelní noviny* described the portrayal of Richard as follows: “Richard in a richly decorated robe is presented by Jan Šťastný since the very beginning as a character that is careless and sissy, who during important judicial proceedings pets and jokes around with a pair of heavily made-up lovers (which also explains his alienation from the queen – Andrea Elsnerová)¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Saša Hrbotický: “Vinohradský Richard II. se obrací k dnešku.” *Hospodářské noviny* [Praha] – 26 Nov. 2006: 9.

¹³⁹ Zdeněk Hořínek: “Politická taktika v nedbalkách.” *Divadelní noviny* [Praha] – 12 Dec. 2006: 7.

5. Conclusion

When comparing the aspects of queering in the three plays the most striking thing seems to be that in each of the plays the “queer” relationship seems to have a different function and purpose. In *The Merchant of Venice* queering gives new depth to the relationship of Antonio and Bassanio, justifies Antonio’s constant support of his young friend, regardless of him being a prodigal dandy, explains Antonio’s melancholy and gives more motivation for Portia’s jealousy and the entire ring plot. The traditional approach, portraying the two simply as “best buds” is still to be seen, for example in the production that was part of Letní shakespearovské slavnosti (Summer Shakespeare Festival in Prague) in 2006, yet when compared with the queered version it will necessarily seem one-dimensional.

In *Othello* the aspect of repressed homosexuality can help any actor dealing with the part to avoid the trap of “motiveless malignity”, which can easily lead to a portrayal of a character that is just a caricature of pure evil. The dynamics of Iago’s relationship with Othello are overall dramatically different from the ones that are to be seen in *The Merchant of Venice*. Even though the relationship of Antonio and Bassanio may not have been physically consumed it is still a bond they both know about. In *Othello* the desire is one-sided as there is no real reason to believe that Othello is not heterosexual and Iago himself does all he can to suppress his latent homosexuality, including getting married – Antonio never does. Of course there are many other possible logical motivations for Iago’s actions, but this one can proudly compete with them.

The situation in *Richard II* is entirely different than in both of the previous plays. Primarily, the homoeroticism is something that was probably always there, if not based on the textual features, than thanks to the analogy with *Edward II*. What is interesting here is the extent to which actors are willing to “go for it”, and the ability of the directors to find new, creative ways to tackle the problem of a sexually ambiguous character. Because of this ambiguity the term suitable for most of the depictions of the relationships in *Richard II* is homoeroticism, which does not need to be connected to any physical liaison, definitely not so when discussing a history play.

As for the productions, it is widely known that in the 80's homosexuality on stage was a big hit, yet it may seem quite surprising how long before actors had actually tried to work with what is now called "queering", but did not succeed, as the audience was far from ready for it. Even more surprising is the speed with which these readings became standard, at least on the Western stages. In the Czech Republic the first pioneer productions try to test Czech openness to depictions of homosexual relationships on stage. Maybe their refusal to see these interpretations as relevant is not unjust. In a survey in the Czech high schools in 2007 72% of boys and 24% of girls expressed their "negative attitude towards gays"¹⁴⁰. How many of them go to the theatre is of course an entirely different matter.

What was already mentioned at the beginning and should be stressed yet again is the fact that this possibility of various valid interpretations only shows the quality of Shakespeare's texts, the multitude of their layers. In none of the plays homosexuality is generally regarded as the key theme: in *The Merchant of Venice* it is anti-Semitism, the reflection of which got much more complex after World War II, in *Othello* it is jealousy accompanied by the issue of racism, and then there is *Richard II* with his end of one world and beginning of another and the shock of such a change. Nevertheless the theme of homosexuality can help the understanding of the characters depicted, get the audience closer to them, see the characters' motivations in their full complexity. It is not the only reading possible, but it is a justifiable reading and as long as it helps the performance there is no reason to disregard it only because in the character list there is not stated: Antonio – a merchant of Venice and a huge queen.

¹⁴⁰ Pavla Kubálková, "Školy 'sužuje' homofobie." *lidovky.cz*, 29 Apr. 2009, 5 May 2013.
<http://www.lidovky.cz/ln-skoly-suzuje-homofobie-09y-/zpravy-domov.aspx?c=A090429_191811_ln_domov_mtr>.

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