

Representations of  
Masculinity in  
Literature and Film:

*Focus on Men*



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## *Focus on Men*

By

Sara Martín

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Chapter Eleven: 2019. “Obi-Wan Kenobi and the Problem of the Flawed Mentor”. *Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction* 48(1), #132: 37-53.

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## INTRODUCTION: WHY WE SHOULD FOCUS ON MEN

It is almost compulsory for a book dealing with men to begin with a justification of why yet another volume on this topic is necessary at all. I believe that the typical complaint that we have already given men too much attention is misguided, for we have only started looking at men as such a few decades ago. As a feminist woman who practices Masculinities Studies, I am very much aware that, in the words of British scholar and activist Victor Seidler, “Consciousness-raising has a different significance and meaning for men than for women, but it is no less important” (1991, 12). However, whereas for women an awareness of the main feminist issues is almost unavoidable, regardless of the position we occupy in relation to them, men need not use their personal mental energy to engage in consciousness-raising about masculinity. They should because, Seidler points out, “Many of us felt ambiguous, even oppressed by the image of masculinity we were forced to live up to” (17).

The present book is, therefore, part of my ongoing contribution to this process of consciousness-raising, which was started in the late 1980s mainly by sociologists in the UK, the USA, and Australia but that is still in its early youth as regards the examination of men’s representation in fiction. Berthold Schoene’s *Writing Men: Literary Masculinities from Frankenstein to the New Man* (2000) is, arguably, a main departure point as regards print fiction although both men and women had been writing about men in film in the previous decade. Yvonne Tasker’s *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (1993) and Steve Cohan’s *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties* (1997) are often cited as outstanding examples of this trend. These are not only highly valuable volumes but also an example of an unsolved issue: the place that the study of men and masculinity should occupy in Gender Studies, too often narrowly focused on women. Tasker’s monograph demonstrates that some gendered issues (in this case the cultural construction of the muscled body exhibited in US movies) are relevant for all genders. Cohan’s volume shows that it is necessary to make men visible as men in major areas of culture and, most importantly, from a historicized point of view that denies any monolithic, universal view of gender across place and time.

Yet while gendered representation has become a vast field of research, there is still much resistance to seeing men's authorship from a gendered perspective. Plenty of academic work on female authors of fiction in any branch carries the word 'women' in the title, but there are no references so far to men's gendered authorship. To cite a couple of random examples, Alison Butler's title *Women's Cinema: The Contested Screen* (2002) stresses the existence of a cinema made by and for women, whereas Catherine Ingrassia's edited volume *The Cambridge Companion to Women's Writing in Britain, 1660–1789* (2015) presumes that there is a recognisable entity called 'women's writing'. It is, nonetheless, right now almost impossible to imagine a volume called *Men's Cinema: The Contested Screen* or *The Cambridge Companion to Men's Writing in Britain, 1660–1789*. Without this kind of visibility men's authorship still remains the norm and women's the exception.

It is not, however, the purpose of the current volume to examine this question (I hope it will be of others to come) but to continue examining representation in the wake of similar texts, such as Brian Baker's *Masculinity in Fiction and Film: Representing Men in Popular Genres 1945-2000* (2006) and two collective volumes to which I have contributed chapters: Carabi & Armengol's *Alternative Masculinities for a Changing World* (2014) and Armengol *et al.*'s *Masculinities and Literary Studies: Intersections and New Directions* (2017). Unlike Baker's volume, which is a monograph, the book here presented is a collection of essays, half of which had been previously published (see the Acknowledgements section). Unlike the two collective volumes mentioned, however, this is not miscellaneous work around the concept of how to find alternatives models of representation and expand the study of men's representation, but the result of systematic work on these issues which I have carried out since the early 2000s. The main result is not only the twelve articles here presented (together with my other articles and book chapters)<sup>1</sup> but also the volume *Masculinity and Patriarchal Villainy in British Fiction: From Hitler to Voldemort* (2019).

Although I have benefitted enormously from the work done in Masculinities Studies to deconstruct gendered oppression, I have been recently gravitating back towards the feminist notion of patriarchy (as I explain in the cited 2019 volume), but with an important twist. I do follow Michael Kimmel in his fundamental perception that feminism made a mistake in treating all men as equally empowered patriarchs. In fact, he notes, although men "may be *in* power everywhere one cares to look, individual men are not 'in power', and they do not feel powerful" (2004, 100, original italics). Those who are at ease with this situation usually lead happy lives as satisfied men, but those who feel entitled to the power which they believe is due to them as men are

the source of conflict at all levels, from war to domestic abuse. I have taken Kimmel's theorization of power one step forward to see gendered relationships as a power continuum, with abuse resulting from power differences even when the persons in question belong to the same gender (think of a lesbian woman battering her wife).

What I have been claiming, therefore, is that one thing is masculinity and another patriarchy, which is the social organization built on a sense of hierarchy that privileges power. So far men have accrued most power, but as feminism progresses women find themselves in positions of power over other women and men; the same applies to what Connell has called subordinate masculinities, such as that of the gay men who have been gradually empowered. Most of my academic work deals, therefore, with looking into how power determines who imposes his or her rule, and who adopts an anti-patriarchal position. In my view, there is no reason why men could not defend anti-patriarchal positions; in fact, I think they should do so. This is a process that may well begin with consciousness-raising about representation in fiction.

This belief leads me to a second issue, which is one of nomenclature. I use patriarchy in a sense which is not gathered in Pavla Miller's quite comprehensive *Patriarchy* (2017). Patriarchy, she writes, "meant different things to different feminist activists, and was employed in different—and sometimes incompatible—projects" (54). Miller uses the past tense because she associates the use of the word 'patriarchy' with the radical feminism of the 1970s, but even though this concept was somehow abandoned in the 1980s I believe, like many other women and men, that patriarchy needs to be made visible again. Arwa Mahdawi's column 'The Week in Patriarchy' for *The Guardian* is an example, among many others, of that new visibility, now more important than ever after the eruption of the #MeToo campaign in 2017. What has changed (at least for me) is that we can no longer refer to patriarchy as a system of oppression built exclusively against women but as a social structure which rewards those with the highest sense of entitlement to power. Most of these individuals are white, heterosexual, middle- or upper-class men, but not all. Non-white, non-heterosexual, and non-male persons can also be patriarchal as long as they have power emanating from their social, political, and economic positions and believe that society should be arranged along hierarchical principles based on supremacy.

My use of patriarchy, however, clashes to a certain extent with Raewyn Connell's controversial notion of hegemonic masculinity (which I do use in some of the chapters). Dissatisfied with how the radical feminist definition(s) of patriarchy ignored that there is a "gender politics within masculinities"

(2006, 37), Connell came up with the Gramscian concept of hegemonic masculinity (later masculinities). This is the set of social practices that constructs the “relations of alliance, dominance and subordination” (37) on which the system of power relies to maintain the gender division that oppresses women and the hierarchical network that positions men in privileged or unprivileged positions. Connell believes that the hegemonic masculinities can and should be disrupted, and I very much agree. I do not call, however, the positions from which they can be disrupted alternative, or positive as she does, but anti-patriarchal, for it seems to me that the hegemonic masculinities are patriarchy by another name in its current masculinist incarnation. In my view both feminist women and men who oppose the workings of the hegemonic masculinities can engage in a common anti-patriarchal front which rejects hierarchy and power in favour of an equal rights citizenship for all, based on truly democratic principles. This is the main tenet that I defend as a feminist scholar and in my personal life.

The present volume is organized following a chronological scheme, running from William Shakespeare’s early 16<sup>th</sup> century plays to Richard K. Morgan’s 21<sup>st</sup> century science fiction, and on the principle that plays, novels, and films can be discussed together if necessary. I was the author of the first book about a complete TV series published in Spanish (on *The X-Files*), in 2006, but my deep disappointment with *Lost* (2004-2010) has made me stay away from any narrative which cannot be enjoyed within a limited time-span. I know little about comics and graphic novels, and I have never played a videogame (though I try to keep up with the main novelties in the field), which also explains other gaps in my corpus. A novelty is that I have incorporated documentaries to my research, a film genre which still is unfairly undervalued and in which the most exciting current filmmaking can be found, particularly for spectators interested in the human element often missing from blockbusters. The authors I deal with are mostly men (with the exceptions of Emily Brontë and J. K. Rowling), white, and mostly British, though the USA are represented by Isaac Asimov and the *Star Wars* saga. I am Catalan (a native bilingual speaker of Catalan and Spanish, born and raised in Barcelona), which explains the presence here of a Catalan documentary (*Son & Moon*) and a Catalan novel (*Typescript of the Second Origin*). I hope that my perspective as a woman and as a non-native specialist in English Studies may offer a refreshing point of view.

Chapter One, “Queerying Antonio: Michael Radford’s *The Merchant of Venice* and the Problem of Heterosexism”, focuses on the intense homoerotic relationship between Antonio and Bassanio and on the heteropatriarchal meaning of the subplot involving Portia’s ring as presented in Shakespeare’s

play and in the film adaptation. Radford's accomplished version solves well the problem of how to update Shylock's representation for our post-Holocaust times but highlights other problems that *Merchant* poses for a contemporary audience, connected with Antonio. Portia's tight binding to the ruthless laws of patriarchy and her brief sojourn in the world of men as a lawyer in drag bent on imposing an exemplary punishment on Shylock have always seemed strange companions for the Jew's case. However, Radford's decision to queer up Shakespeare by queering Antonio makes perfect sense of this apparent mismatch. By suggesting that Antonio is gay and in love with Bassanio, a deliberate misreading introduced to validate Antonio's decision to risk his life for a friend, Radford gives new coherence to the play. His film integrates into a solidly interconnected discourse Shylock's vicious attack against the merchant, Portia's key role in the trial against Antonio, and the often overlooked ring plot by which she separates the merchant from Bassanio to guarantee the patriarchal normativity required for her marriage to the latter.

Hareton Earnshaw is, arguably, the less appreciated character in Emily Brontë's masterpiece. Chapter Two, "Heathcliff's Blurred Mirror Image: Hareton Earnshaw and the Reproduction of Patriarchal Masculinity in *Wuthering Heights*" attempts to correct this omission by arguing that, in fact, Hareton is essential to understand the connection between the two parts of the novel and the two romances narrated in it. Most critics (and film adaptations) have focused on the toxic love story between Cathy and Heathcliff, and exhibited a general animosity against the supposedly bland romance between her daughter Catherine and her cousin Hareton. This hostility needs to be dispelled. As I argue, Cathy's awareness of Heathcliff's deficiencies as a man and her own selfishness are the main hindrances for their love to succeed. In contrast, spurred by Catherine's resistance against Heathcliff's patriarchal abuse, Hareton manages to extricate both gradually from his foster father's rule until Heathcliff grants his defeat. Hareton remains emotionally loyal to his adoptive father, though his better personal nature and willingness to learn from Catherine suggests that theirs will be a happy marriage, though not necessarily a marriage of equals, for patriarchy will be still embodied by Hareton, albeit in a reformed version.

*The Invisible Woman* (2013), the film directed by Ralph Fiennes and written by Abi Morgan, adapts the controversial biography of Victorian actor Ellen Ternan (1990) by Claire Tomalin. In it the secret affair between a Charles Dickens at the peak of his fame and the much younger Ellen, which allegedly caused the scandalous separation of the author from his wife, is presented as fact, despite the lack of material evidence. Fiennes's biopic tackles its contentious subject matter with remarkable elegance but

in Chapter Three, “In Bed with Dickens: Ralph Fiennes’s *The Invisible Woman* and the Problematic Masculinity of the Genius”, I question that we learn anything of value from this film, specifically from the representation of the male genius as, basically, a selfish man and a sexual predator. The voyeurism that Fiennes’s film promotes, no matter how subtly, undermines Dickens’s right to protect his privacy without offering an insight into his literary genius, for the key to this should be his books and not his bedfellows. Dickens’s relationship with his wife and his mistress reveals the less savoury aspects of his masculinity, but because of its gossipy nature this portrait of his mid-life crisis does not really contribute significantly to a better understanding of how patriarchy should be opposed. It just reproduces clichés associated to the male author and his long-suffering but also accommodating muse.

Dickens reappears in Chapter Four, “Recycling Charlie, Amending Charles: *Dodger*, Terry Pratchett’s Rewriting of *Oliver Twist*”, as a main inspiration for this neo-Victorian YA novel. World-famous for his Discworld series, in this stand-alone novel Pratchett plays a singular game by placing young Charlie Dickens among his cast of characters, together with his own creation, the Artful Dodger. A child thief in the original, Pratchett’s Dodger is a teen sewer rat or ‘tosher’, a transformation inspired by Pratchett’s reading of Henry Mayhew’s massive *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-1862). Undoubtedly Dickens’s disciple, Pratchett corrects nonetheless the problematic anti-Semitic bias in Fagin’s characterization by rewriting him as pogrom refugee Solomon Cohen. Likewise, the boy Dodger is presented as a survivor rather than, in Dickens’s classist view, a crook deserving transportation to Australia. Pratchett, a reluctant neo-Victorian sentimentalist, cannot help rescuing Dodger from extreme poverty by means of powerful gentlemen, thus stressing that, like Oliver in the original, this boy could have benefitted from the help of more privileged men and from the author’s compassion.

*Oliver Twist* together with *Great Expectations* are discussed in Chapter Five, “Between Brownlow and Magwitch: Sirius Black and the Ruthless Elimination of the Male Protector in the *Harry Potter* Series”, as major sources for J. K. Rowling’s popular heptalogy. Although no direct influence can be proven, Sirius Black, one of Rowling’s main secondary characters, combines in his characterization intertextual traits that connect him with two key Dickensian secondary characters: John Brownlow in *Oliver Twist* and Abel Magwitch in *Great Expectations* (1860-1861). These two male characters are given the role of protecting a young, orphaned boy, a role which they share with Sirius, Harry’s godfather. Like Brownlow, Sirius is a rich bachelor and also the best friend of the boy’s deceased father. Like

Magwitch, Sirius is an escaped prisoner, unfairly sentenced for life, who finds himself unable to recover his freedom due to a faulty system of justice and whose redress never reaches him before he dies. The intense mourning which many readers describe in relation to Sirius's strange demise may thus reflect the broken hope that, like Oliver, Pip, and other literary orphans, Harry might be rescued by a father figure. However, Rowling's own systematic destruction of this possibility in her series, with the deaths of Sirius, Dumbledore, Snape, and, indeed of Harry's father James, reveals a feminine, androphobic distrust of the male protector, which connects with Rowling's defence of idealized motherhood.

Chapter Six, "Odysseus's Unease: The Post-war Crisis of Masculinity in Melvyn Bragg's *The Soldier's Return* and *A Son of War*", examines how man's role as head of the 20<sup>th</sup> century patriarchal family was altered by WWII in Britain. Melvyn Bragg's autobiographical novels narrate the problematic homecoming of Sam Richardson, a working-class English ex-serviceman from Wigton (in Cumbria), mainly from the point of view of his young son Joe (Bragg's *alter ego*). By reading this new Odysseus's return in the light of the analysis of hegemonic patriarchal masculinity carried out in Masculinities Studies, this chapter shows that the trauma endured by many veterans did not result in better communication with wife and children, quite the opposite. The experience of the veteran's return to civvy street is central for the re-articulation not only of his individuality as a man but also for the continuation of the patriarchal family in Britain at the expense of women's budding liberation. Like many other veterans, Sam regains his lost patriarchal authority by gradually forcing his wife Ellen to give her grudging consent to his rule. What does change in relation to pre-WWII times is Sam's more flexible understanding of fatherhood, though his bonding with Joe also contributes ultimately to further disempowering Ellen as wife and mother.

Chapter Seven, "A Demolition Job: Scottish Masculinity and the Failure of the Utopian Tower Block in David Greig's Play *The Architect* and Andrew O'Hagan's Novel *Our Fathers*", also considers the aftermath of WWII but from a different angle: how British architecture was altered by the impact of the male-dominated strategies followed to house the many left with no homes by the war. The post-WWII reconstruction of British cities was partly based, as regards public housing, on a mixture of Socialist Utopian ideals and the example of Le Corbusier's Unité d'Habitation. In Scotland, this process was also connected with widespread slum clearances resulting, particularly in Glasgow, in a seriously distorted application of Modernist tenets to blue-collar tower blocks. Focusing on two outstanding Scottish literary texts, the play by David Greig *The Architect* (1996) and the

novel by Andrew O'Hagan *Our Fathers* (1999), I argue here that the dystopian disaster which many tower blocks became is rooted in the still too invisible patriarchal ideology defended by the paternalistic politicians that built the blocks. By foregrounding the masculinity of their protagonists in contrast to women (as in Greig's play) or younger men (as in O'Hagan's novel), both authors contribute an important gendered critique to the Scottish debate on Utopia. This critique highlights the need to redistribute power in processes of decision-making that have a high impact on the community. As these two texts reveal, so far these decisions have been carried out on the basis of a masculinist Utopia which actually lacked the necessary empathy to succeed.

The focus moves from the UK to the USA in Chapter Eight, "Rewriting the American Astronaut from a Cross-cultural Perspective: Michael Lopez-Alegria in Manuel Huerga's Documentary Film *Son & Moon*". Although little known, this film is of particular interest as a quality documentary about space exploration but also from the point of view of Masculinities Studies. Huerga's film, made in English by a Catalan production team and focused on the magnetic personality of Spanish-American astronaut Michael Lopez-Alegria (active in NASA 1992-2012), is a singular hybrid. *Son & Moon* documents specifically Lopez-Alegria's worries as the father of a seven-year-old son, Nico, who resists his attempts to stay in touch and feels no interest in his father's exciting seven-month stay in space on board the International Space Station. Astronaut and film defend the idea that a father has the right to sacrifice part of his family life for the sake of his career but also that this choice *must be* justified to children, in this case to the son. I believe that this approach may offer a relevant post-patriarchal angle from which to re-consider the contemporary representation of the male astronaut, both in the light of his golden age patriarchal predecessors and of the gaps in Huerga's film in relation to female astronauts (and indeed, to daughters).

Chapter Nine moves from the science documentary to science fiction, which is the focus of the remaining chapters as well. "Discovering the Body of the Android: (Homo)Eroticism and (Robo)Sexuality in Isaac Asimov's Robot Novels" examines the presentation of the android in Isaac Asimov's *The Caves of Steel* (1954), *The Naked Sun* (1957), *The Robots of Dawn* (1983), and *Robots and Empire* (1985) to argue that this tetralogy anticipates current concerns about the eventual use of ultra-realistic humaniform robots for sex. *The Robots of Dawn* deals with the happy romance between Gladia and her 'husband' robot R. Jander Panell, a copy of R. Daneel Olivaw, arguably the protagonist of the series. Here I explore how Daneel's erotic appeal conditions Gladia and Jander's unique 'marriage' as well as his own exceptional friendship with his investigative

partner, Detective Elijah Baley. I show, thus, that Asimov's representation of the gendered male robot has undeniable (homo)erotic overtones which are negotiated through Gladia's unconventional hetero/robosexuality. On the other hand, Asimov issues a warning about the erotic idealization of the android through robot R. Giskard Reventlov, Daneel's main companion. Provided with a basic humanoid body but in possession of an accidentally enhanced positronic brain, Giskard is much superior to Daneel (and also far less controllable). His unattractive body helps him to deflect attention from his potentially dangerous abilities whereas Daneel and Jander are a constant object of curiosity because of their beautiful male bodies.

Chapter Ten, "Educating Dídac, Humankind's New Father: The End of Patriarchy in Manuel de Pedrolo's *Typescript of the Second Origin*", is intended to call readers' attention to the representation of masculinity in other languages and cultures. In Pedrolo's Catalan-language science-fiction masterpiece, published in 1974 and which I myself translated into English in 2018, Earth is devastated by an extraterrestrial attack, though the aliens eventually abandon the projected colonization of the planet. Fourteen-year-old Alba and nine-year-old Dídac embark then on the project of rebuilding human civilization. Courageous Alba can be read as the predecessor of the current YA adult female hero, but Pedrolo made an even more singular choice for the role of new Adam with Dídac. Given the extreme circumstances, Pedrolo forces Dídac into a unique process of very fast growth, from little boy to pre-teen father in just a few years. The boy's mixed-race genetic legacy plays, besides, a key role in the future of humankind. I examine here how Alba educates Dídac and what expectations regarding masculinity Pedrolo expresses through her teachings. Alba's mettle finds full expression only because Dídac turns out to be an apt pupil. It is also my belief that Pedrolo chose as his male protagonist a child rather than a teen boy to facilitate Alba's control of the situation and of the couple's decisions: in short, to end patriarchy for good.

George Lucas's *Star Wars* saga is also a product of the 1970s, though in Chapter Eleven, "Obi-Wan Kenobi and the Problem of the Flawed Mentor: Why Anakin Skywalker Fails as a Man", I examine the prequel trilogy: *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999), *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), and *Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005), together with some episodes of the animated TV series *The Clone Wars* (2008-2014). The chapter considers the role of Obi-Wan Kenobi as Anakin Skywalker's mentor, arguing that both the Jedi Code and Kenobi himself are irrationally inflexible regarding the injunction to avoid emotional attachment. This rule, essential to understand Jedi knighthood and chivalry, has peculiar medieval roots, particularly in reference to celibacy, that are completely at odds with

the development of a well-adjusted masculinity. Since Obi-Wan, however, blindly obeys the Jedi Code, he cannot adequately process his own attachment to Anakin, which results in his flawed mentorship of the young man and, most dramatically, in his terrifying mutilation on Mustafar in *Episode III*, from which the villain Darth Vader emerges.

Finally, Chapter Twelve, “The Anti-Patriarchal Male Monster as Limited (Anti)Hero: Richard K. Morgan’s *Black Man/Thirteen*”, approaches this overlooked but remarkable science-fiction novel by the author of the far more popular *Altered Carbon*. Feminist criticism tends to neglect the work of male writers aware of gender issues and *Black Man* presents many challenges in this sense, as Morgan claims to be pro-feminist and anti-patriarchal. His choice of a black male protagonist genetically modified to feel no inhibitions when using violence is controversial and problematic, as Morgan is himself white and has often commented on the disgust that male violence should generate. My main thesis here is that (anti)hero Carl Marsalis has the paradoxical potential, because of his monstrosity and his victimization, to be an apt anti-patriarchal hero. Yet, Morgan himself limits that potential by choosing a narrative sub-genre, the sf thriller, that keeps his own gendered political agenda subordinated to the needs of the dynamic plot; this choice ultimately undermines both *Black Man* and Carl Marsalis’ characterization. Morgan’s novel turns out to expose indirectly what is missing in men’s anti-patriarchal stance, namely, that the process of consciousness-raising which Seidler highlighted may lead to actual activism in demand of anti-patriarchal justice also for men, both in fictional self-representation and in real life.

Lynn Segal concludes “Beyond Gender Hierarchy: Can Men Change?” the new chapter added in 2007 to the third edition of her seminal volume *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (1990), speculating that

with women today permanently entrenched in the Western workforce, the absurdity of the traditional gendered divide between public and private is daily more apparent. Men could continue to strive to maintain their privileges and dominance in both spheres. But it is unlikely they will increasingly be battling all the way. (259)

The presence of authoritarian men in key positions of power, as heads of the American, the Russian, and the Chinese Governments suggests that, contradicting Segal’s optimism, patriarchal men are indeed “battling all the way” to stay in power in public institutions. Private relationships may be slowly changing, with men being far more aware than ever of women’s rights and of the discrimination suffered by less privileged men. This new

21<sup>st</sup> century awareness of privilege, however, is not necessarily leading to a significant erosion of patriarchal structures (or of hegemonic masculinities). A major problem is that, as I have been arguing, what needs to be attacked is patriarchy, not masculinity, and for that who men really are needs to be made visible—hence the need to focus on men.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See for all my other publications on masculinity, my website <<http://gent.uab.cat/saramartinalegre>>. I also write frequently on gender in my blog *The Joys of Teaching Literature*, which I have been publishing since 2010. See <<http://blogs.uab.cat/saramartinalegre>>

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## CHAPTER ONE

# QUEERING ANTONIO: MICHAEL RADFORD'S *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE* AND THE PROBLEM OF HETEROSEXISM

Michael Radford's productive (mis)reading of *The Merchant of Venice* for his film adaptation tells a new story: how two outsiders—Shylock the loathed Jew, Antonio the closeted homosexual—are brought under the heterosexual norm of their Christian Venetian community by a woman. Portia is so certain about the validity of the patriarchal rules she obeys that her only excursion outside them (the courtroom scene) aims just at securing her husband Bassanio exclusively to herself, a process which, precisely, the ring plot culminates. By attempting to clarify Shylock's obsession for Antonio, Radford wittingly or unwittingly reveals that the main silenced issue of the play is Antonio's own obsession for Bassanio, which triggers the fierce war waged by Portia against the merchant for the exclusive rights to Bassanio's body and love. This is a heterosexist turn that actually conceals a misogynistic twist, with Portia representing an asphyxiating normativity that leaves no place for outsiders, whether on grounds of religious faith or sexual preference. Not bad for a first major film adaptation of *Merchant*.<sup>1</sup>

Radford's queering of Antonio not only elicits Portia's heterosexist jealousy and patriarchal zeal; it also forces the audience, supposedly free from antisemitic prejudice, to confront contemporary homophobic prejudice, particularly regarding friendship between men. Producing *Merchant* in the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands that we try to understand the context of antisemitism in Shakespeare's times, which is why Radford includes a prologue in which we are shown in painful detail how Jews were mistreated in 1596 Venice, the year when Shakespeare possibly wrote the play. Yet, neither the film nor the academic specialists in the play succeed in fully contextualising the friendship between Antonio and Bassanio, which is why

reading it as gay simplifies matters too much and blurs the essence of the conflict articulating the triangle that the two men form with Portia.

The Elizabethan dilemma that Bassanio faces in having to choose between marrying Portia and loving Antonio as his bosom friend worked adequately for Shakespeare's audience but it is quite confusing in our day. Their deep male bonding is typical of patriarchal societies in which women play a negligible public role; whether it includes sex or not is irrelevant, for it is *not* the same as homosexuality. In contemporary Western societies, however, homophobic fears make intimate friendships like Antonio and Bassanio's far less frequent so that, in a sense, these relationships are more stigmatised than homosexual love, which seems more clearly defined. If Antonio and Bassanio's friendship is chaste, their declaration of mutual love in the courtroom scene seems quite extravagant and Portia's jealousy quite absurd. After all, we tend to agree today that even though love may be the main focus of our sentimental life, no person—whether man or woman, queer or heterosexual—can be truly happy without friendship, the deeper the better.

In our context there is absolutely no reason why Bassanio should have to choose between wife and friend, unless his relationship with Antonio is indeed gay on both sides, because it is quite possible to contemplate a (nonetheless difficult) situation in which a married heterosexual man could sustain a friendship with a homosexual man in love with him. Nevertheless, despite its apparent sexual freedom current Western society still tolerates rampant homophobia. Our inability to understand Bassanio's plea except by characterising Antonio as gay in a certainly anachronistic reading leads thus to a blatantly heterosexist interpretation of Shakespeare's play, which reduces to contemporary parameters a situation far more complex in the original text.

### **(Mis)reading Renaissance Male Bonding: How Antonio Loves Bassanio**

The academic criticism of *Merchant* has been dealing for decades with the 'problem' of Antonio's sexuality. In an essay published in 1962, the poet W. H. Auden characterised Antonio as "a melancholic who is incapable of loving a woman" (229), a man quite unlike his counterpart in Shakespeare's main source, *Il Pecorone*.<sup>2</sup> In the Italian version the equivalent of Antonio and Bassanio are godfather and godson; the former ends up married to the equivalent of Portia's companion, Nerissa, whereas in *Merchant* Bassanio's buddy Gratiano marries her. According to Auden, Shakespeare "deliberately avoids the classical formula of the Perfect Friends by making the relationship

unequal” (229, original capitalized initials). This inequality and the introduction of usury as one of the main plot issues lead Auden to classify *The Merchant of Venice* as a problem play rather than a comedy. Making the point boldly, Auden observes that, surely, Shakespeare must have been aware of the link between usury and sodomy as described by Dante in the “Eleventh Canto” of his *Inferno*, which is why “It can, therefore, hardly be an accident that Shylock the usurer has as his antagonist a man whose emotional life, though his conduct may be chaste, is concentrated upon a member of his own sex” (231). Auden, himself gay, does not clarify, however, why he assumes that Antonio is chaste and carefully avoids using the word ‘homosexual’.

Antonio’s sexual preferences also worried Lawrence W. Hyman, probably the first to read *Merchant* as a love triangle among Antonio, Bassanio, and Portia. Like Auden, he shies away from openly discussing Antonio’s homosexuality, alluding instead to his “unconscious sexual feeling for Bassanio” (1970, 110). Hyman, writing from a somewhat homophobic position, explains that

What we are concerned with is not a matter of right or wrong conduct, but with the insistent and altogether natural desire of a woman to possess her lover completely coming into conflict with the desire of Antonio to hold on to the love of his friend. We need not concern ourselves with the question as to whether Antonio’s desire is equally ‘natural’. For our purposes all we need recognise is that his desire is equally strong. (113)

In Hyman’s view, at the end of the play Antonio is acknowledged by Portia to be “no longer a rival but a willing accomplice in his friend’s marriage” (113) which is why, in a sense, his lost ships must return, as the success of his business ventures removes “the last sacrifice that Antonio has suffered for Bassanio” (115). Radford’s film questions this reading by having Portia make no reference at all to the returned ships.

Since the 1980s, thanks to the revolution started by Gay and Queer Studies, critics interested in Antonio are finally free to interpret his love for Bassanio as homosexual passion, though this clashes quite badly with the feminist readings of Portia as a heroine. Joan Orzack Holmer claims that the alterations made on *Il Pecorone* turn Portia into a “judge and educator” of men, morally much sounder than the “whimsical Lady of Belmont” (1985, 329). Holmer insists that Portia shows her generosity in forgiving Bassanio and Antonio for the way they misuse her ring, and also by “emphatically and harmoniously” including the merchant in her marriage “by handing Antonio the ring to give Bassanio” (331). She also claims that by leaving Antonio unmarried, Shakespeare grants him “the role of the ‘dear friend’,

the ‘true friend’ (III.ii 290, 307)—Bassanio’s and now Portia’s as well” (333). This opinion, however, only shows Holmer’s disregard for how Antonio’s exclusion from the general happy end signifies that he is forced to remain chaste, since living publicly as a gay man (if that *is* what he is) is not an option available to him.

In an article published shortly after Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s seminal volume *Between Men: English Literature and Men Homosocial Desire* (1985), Karen Newman reads *Merchant* in the light of Luce Irigaray’s criticism of Marcel Mauss’s and Claude Lévi-Strauss’s anthropological studies describing how the exchange of women regulates male bonding in patriarchal societies. Irigaray criticised this system of exchange for using women as an instrument to prevent generalised homosexuality among men. Seeing Portia’s father as the originator of the “ur-exchange” that triggers the plot (he sets up the casket riddle which motivates Bassanio to borrow money from Antonio), Newman argues that whether they are just bosom friends or lovers, “Irigaray’s reading of Lévi-Strauss allows us to recognise in Antonio’s relationship with Bassanio a homosocial bond, a continuum of male relations which the exchange of women entails” (1987, 22). For Newman, Portia is the real heroine because “In giving more than can be reciprocated, Portia short-circuits the system of exchange and the male bonds it creates, winning her husband away from the arms of Antonio” (26). Newman, however, does not see that Portia’s triumph is a victory for patriarchy, the system which forces her to cease being an independent lady to become a dependent wife.

In a book devoted to contrasting Renaissance views of homosexuality with our own, Jonathan Goldberg reacts strongly against Newman’s argument that cross-dressed females figures like Portia carry the weight of Shakespeare’s (alleged) alternative sexual discourse. Interpreting Antonio and Bassanio’s love as yet another version of the bisexual plot of the sonnets, Goldberg protests that Portia’s success, “described by Karen Newman as woman-on-top” is driven “by the misogyny that shapes her as the dark lady” (1992, 142). In his view, “her power as boy is directed against and serves to police Antonio and Bassanio and to separate them”; Portia’s rescue of the merchant and her defeat of Shylock is secured by “unleashing energies that are racist and homophobic” and that “secure in his/her transgressive body the acceptable limits of marriage and homosociality under regimes of alliance close to those of heterosexual privilege” (142). This might be the reason why the actor that plays Portia in Radford’s film, American Lynn Collins, shows an evident discomfort when commenting on her role in an interview.<sup>3</sup> In Collins’s view, Portia passes from girl to woman and understands who she really is through her impersonation of masculinity,

which clearly suggests that Portia acknowledges herself to be part of patriarchy, not its alternative.

This disagreement as to what Portia actually does to Antonio and Bassanio stems from the fact that reading the play from a feminist position is actually easier than reading it from a queer or pro-queer position. Alan Sinfield, writing openly as a homosexual man, ironizes about his own task as a critic when he notes that “If Antonio is excluded from the good life at the end of the *Merchant*, so the gay man is excluded from the play’s address” (1996, 128). He sees the bonding system criticised by Newman as a reflection of the social pecking order of Venice (or, more widely, of Shakespeare’s time) and claims quite rightly that “whether the friendships of men such as Antonio and Bassanio should be regarded as involving a homoerotic element or not is not just a matter of what people did in private hundreds of years ago; it is a matter of definition within a sex-gender system that we only partly comprehend” (131). The quandary we face is that the alienness of the Elizabethan bonding system and the fact that no one “would have labelled himself a ‘homosexual’” in Shakespeare’s time (Smith 1995, 9) problematise any queer reading of Antonio. Vindicating Antonio is incompatible with celebrating Portia: whether as a patriarchal dupe or a feminist heroine, heterosexual woman carries the day and whether gay or not, excluded or included, Antonio loses.

Homosexuality as we know it today is ultimately a product of the Victorian obsession for ruling out so-called deviation from normative heterosexual practice on spurious clinical and scientific grounds. We must not forget that up to 1973 the American Psychiatric Association still classed homosexuality in the category of mental illnesses, which possibly explains the unease of commentators like Auden (writing when gay sex was still a criminal offence in Britain) and Hyman (in 1970) about Antonio’s inclinations. The current queer project to rewrite the history of homosexuality is, in any case, complicated by the fact that same sex partnerships have meant different things at different historical times.

As Bruce R. Smith reminds us, in the Renaissance period engaging in homosexual practices would not make a man “fundamentally different from his peers. Just the opposite was true. Prevailing ideas asked him to castigate himself for falling into the general depravity to which all mankind *is* subject” (1995, 9, original italics). This included the practice of sodomy, seen as part of generalised ‘vice’. In order to avoid sinful fall into temptation, Elizabethan society endorsed a system of homosocial bonding remotely based on, as Smith contends, the myth of combatants and comrades.<sup>4</sup> This socially sanctioned intimacy allowed men to form strong bonds which might include gay sex but need not be homosexual. As Smith writes,

Young men of a certain age in Renaissance England, had, then, to reconcile two conflicting demands: the emotional intensity of male bonds as they were fostered by Renaissance patriarchy and the necessity of marrying to acquire full status within that patriarchy. The question confronting a young man at sexual maturity in Shakespeare's day was not, am I heterosexual or am I homosexual, but where do my greater emotional loyalties lie, with other men or with women. (65)

For Smith, Antonio is "the most pathetic of these severed friends" (67), though Portia gains just a Pyrrhic victory in the patriarchal contest for Bassanio. After all, she is a mere link in the chain binding her father and her husband; her function is simply to pass on the property she inherits from the former onto the latter, and to beget eventually Bassanio's son and heir.

Steven Patterson remarks quite frankly that "Antonio's love is a frustrated sexual desire for Bassanio and, further, that his passionate love falls into an early modern tradition of homoerotic friendship, or amity" (1999, 10). The inequality that Auden detected and the reason why this amity fails is due only partly to the fact that Bassanio does not return Antonio's homosexual passion. As Patterson contends, their relationship is also doomed because their relationship has no place in "a radically shifting mercantile economy—an economy that seems better regulated by a social structure based on marital alliance and heterosexual reproduction" (10), as I have already suggested. Patterson explains in detail how amity, which in his view may have included homosexual intercourse, blended the ideals of "heroic masculinity and good citizenship" (11) to offer the men of the Elizabethan court a model to cling to at a time when many lacked the necessary aristocratic credentials. In his view, "*Merchant* takes to task the ideals of homoerotic male friendship, even as it raises doubts about the ability of romance and marriage to offer any radical improvement to society or to be any more inclusive" (14). This need to relinquish male bonding for marriage is justified by characterising Antonio and Bassanio as men of different social classes. Essentially, Antonio's mistake is to foolishly suppose that a (rich) merchant can aspire to being in a relation of amity with an (impoverished) aristocrat. "Whether in or out of the circle", Patterson concludes, "Antonio stands dumbfounded—awed by the wife's magnanimity but perhaps also by the way he has been betrayed by his own faith in amity, a system that has contained mechanisms to exclude him" (31).

This suggests that individuals who work to make money—whether they are called Antonio or Shylock, merchant or usurer—do not belong to the happy circle of the privileged persons who inherit money. This reading would add snobbery to the sins of antisemitism and homophobia which Shakespeare arguably commits in his play. Antonio's rejection is thus even

more pitiful because it exposes Bassanio's mercenary nature: penniless and endowed only with his good looks, this young man exploits Antonio's belief in amity in order to marry rich heiress Portia. Antonio, of course, pretends not to see how crude and unfeeling his friend is because, as his unwise deal with Shylock hints, he is desperate to coerce Bassanio into being emotionally indebted to him, perhaps in the hopes that his rash deed will finally make the young man return his love. Portia, on her side, must relinquish her power to her husband, as neither her father nor Venice are ready to accept that she remains single; like Antonio, though, we choose to believe that she gains in Bassanio a loving husband and not a selfish exploiter. The snobbishness of the play is also clear as regards the fact that Portia is only wooed by noblemen: respectable, rich Antonio could never be her suitor, supposing he felt attracted towards her, for he belongs to the wrong social class. Bassanio, in contrast, has the right social background but lacks the money. Why he should be a desirable match for Portia and the love object of two people is never clarified, and seeing how selfishly he behaves one wishes that Portia and Antonio would marry each other and leave him as stranded as Shylock and in the same complete poverty. Since this is impossible within the narrow social and gender economies of the play, we must conclude with Cynthia Lewis that Antonio "lingers on the stage to remind us that alienation and suppression are, for some men, the inevitable consequences of social cohesion" (1983, 30).

### **Intertextual Casting and Method Acting: Pacino, Irons, Fiennes**

These issues are articulated in Radford's film not only through the scenes added to depict the antisemitism of Renaissance Venice but also through the casting of the three main male roles. Although he is possibly too harsh on Joseph Fiennes, reviewer James Berardinelli makes the point clearly when he states that although Shylock is just a secondary character and Bassanio the apparent hero, "if there's any doubt about whom Radford considers to be the draw, consider the cast. Second-rate actor Joseph Fiennes plays Bassanio, while the legendary Al Pacino is Shylock" (2004, online). English reviewer Peter Bradshaw, "fearing the worst" about Pacino, comments with relief that

his is a cool, considered Shylock, retaining an icy good humour while the Christians hold their noses and solicit loans from him, who finally forces the issue of how they pay for credit: a flourish of socio-professional suicide that Pacino endows with ferocious calm. And in case we were thinking of patronising the American interloper, Pacino gives an object lesson on

speaking the verse, matching and often outclassing our native Brits who sometimes breathily over-emphasise and over-interpret the lines. (2004: online)<sup>5</sup>

Bradshaw finds the “sonorous languor” of Jeremy Irons as Antonio to be “beautifully suited to the character’s melancholy: the Venetian entrepreneur who has all his capital hazarded in various adventures, and in middle age is beginning to feel how precarious and how short life really is” (2004). Happy that Fiennes is avoiding “his smirking”, this reviewer commends Radford for “keeping the tics and mannerisms [of Fiennes and Pacino] under control, scraping away the spangly encrustations of star quality and allowing something warmer and more intelligent to come through” (2004).

These three actors contribute to Radford’s adaptation not only excellent performances but also a wealth of associations connected to previous roles, some of them with direct bearings on Shakespearean films. Al Pacino produced and directed one of the most singular films ever made on Shakespeare—the postmodern, ironic documentary *Looking for Richard* (1996) about his alleged difficulties to film *Richard III*—while Fiennes was the Bard himself in the witty, highly acclaimed fantasy biopic *Shakespeare in Love* (John Madden, 1999). Jeremy Irons, a former Royal Shakespeare Company actor though without previous experience in playing Shakespeare on the screen, lends Antonio his landmark sensual ambiguity, which so deeply colours his controversial roles in films such as David Cronenberg’s *Dead Ringers* (1988) and *M. Butterfly* (1993).

*Looking for Richard* arose over Pacino’s frustration that nobody had offered him a major Shakespearean role in a film because he is a popular American actor. Despite this, Pacino was initially reluctant to play Shylock, since the role has “the stink of antisemitism”.<sup>6</sup> Pacino had already rejected playing the role on the stage several times but finally accepted Radford’s offer as he convinced himself that, unlike most stage productions, this film would make sense of the play’s antisemitic context thanks to its additional visual material. Pacino plays Shylock as a character mostly depressed and deeply human, for which he based aspects of his performance on his most famous role, that of Michael Corleone in the *Godfather* saga (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, 1974, 1990). Above all, Pacino borrowed the adamant attitude that Corleone assumes in the second film at the time when he decides that the need to kill his brother may be insane and irrational but, in the actor’s own words, “makes perfect sense to him”.<sup>7</sup> This perfectly agrees with Peirui Su’s analysis of how Pacino used his former roles, above all Corleone, as the basis for his *Richard III*. Pacino usually plays characters who

live at the edge of society physically and psychologically: the drug dealer, the Mafia don, the blind soldier, the veteran CIA agent, and finally, the Devil himself [in *Devil's Advocate*]. Each character exhibits various and complex aspects of human nature: they are evil and violent but at the same time, charismatic, earthy, and vulnerable. They are mysterious and antiheroic, but also emotionally intense and explosive. (2004, online)

This description also fits Shylock, to whom Pacino gives in addition a mournful dignity that transpires even at his very worst, when his hysterical demand of the flesh nearest Antonio's heart alienates him even from his peers in Venice's Jewish community. Pacino's miserable Shylock is appalled by Jessica's religious and filial betrayal and by Antonio's callousness. He uses the famous speech in Act III not at all to stress that Jews are as human as Christians can be but to stress very forcefully that Antonio's religion-based racism justifies Shylock's own racism, for

If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute. (III.i, 28-32)

Shylock is not born a villain but provoked into becoming one; that he ends up ruined by Portia's harsh sentence and cast out of his community due to Antonio's demand that he must convert shows the depth of *Christian* villainy.

Pacino made a second contribution to Radford's film as crucial as his excellent performance. He used his status as Hollywood film star to impose on Radford and the other actors—awed into full complicity by Pacino's magnetism—a typically American way of performing, based on his training in method acting. This entails, as shown precisely in *Looking for Richard*, constant rehearsing before shooting inspired by the communal discussion of the peculiarities of the text. Thomas Cartelli, who admires *Looking for Richard* as a genuine post-colonial rendering of Shakespeare, praises Pacino for succeeding in giving to his American, populist vision of the Bard the authority so far enjoyed only by British icons like Kenneth Branagh. This vision is based, Cartelli observes, on the “commitment to a conspicuously cinematic (and Method-oriented) dissolving of the distance between word and feeling as a way of getting at the truth of the experience” (2003, 190).

In accordance with Pacino's acting method, which supposes that all characters have a back story, Irons and Fiennes were asked to play Antonio and Bassanio assuming that they had been lovers at some point. Asked in an interview whether his “idea about the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio [was] a hard sell at all to your actors”, Radford answers: “Not at

all. Jeremy, who was very proud about his heterosexuality, would admit that Antonio and Bassanio had actually done it. But we all agree that he was in love with Bassanio” (in Epstein 2005, online). The odd phrasing suggests some disagreement between director and actor, which surfaces in Irons’s own words when he explains that Antonio is “a man who’s really subjugated his emotional life, a man who’s put all his time and energy into his work” and who is very successful but not happy except in the company of young men like Bassanio, who is “everything he’d like to be”: noble, good-looking, wild, fun. In contrast to Radford’s words and most reviewers’ impressions Irons claims that “I didn’t play Antonio gay”, not because Irons himself is homophobic but because he wants to criticise our reductionist view of sexuality: “I think we’re terribly two-dimensional about our understanding of sexuality nowadays. [...] If we have a male friendship today, we’re gay. The Elizabethan didn’t have that problem because your relationships with women were something else”.<sup>8</sup>

The reviewers of Radford’s film—mostly men—tend to either ignore the gay subtext or comment on it only superficially. The opinions on Antonio’s homosexuality, nonetheless, are generally positive, with Roger Ebert arguing that “Irons finds the perfect note for the treacherous role of Antonio; making his love for Bassanio obvious is the way to make his behavior explicable, and so Antonio for once is poignant, instead of merely a mope” (2005, online). The objections, quite scarce, call attention to the fact that the suggested homosexual relationship is represented too prudishly. James Christopher, for instance, finds Bassanio and Antonio’s kiss unconvincing: “I have never seen two male leads milk a homosexual frisson quite so feebly. Instead, there is manly bluster, and frothy lessons about constancy” (2004, online). Gamerro writes with engaging cheekiness that

There is such flagrant evidence for the fact that Antonio is a rich bitch that needs or at least is in the habit of keeping his lovers that one wonders how the play could be read at all obviating this matter. [...] The advantage of being able to openly discuss matters like this is not just moral but also intellectual: being able to deal openly with the gay plot of *Merchant* allows us to explain quite simply what forced critics of past periods to perform feats of acrobacy. (2005)<sup>9</sup>

What truly worries Jeremy Irons, at any rate, is that Antonio is both a melancholic gentleman and an intransigent bigot. For the actor, the hardest passage to play was the one in which after Portia publicly destroys Shylock, Antonio demands that the Jew converts to Christianity. Irons sees this as an appalling imposition, though he adds wistfully that in a sense Antonio is typical of his time in his concern for Shylock’s spiritual salvation. As film