

Taking the Kissing Path: Making the Homoerotic Modern in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*

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Abstract

This paper analyzes the representation of Achilles and Patroclus as lovers in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* written by Kirk Lynn and produced by the Rude Mechs. This production is part of a heritage of theatre-makers and scholars debating the nature of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. By exploring historical understanding of these characters' sexuality and relationship, this essay reveals the fluidity of sexual discourse from antiquity to the early modern period and to now. The opacity of the original text opens the possibility of queer otherness that the "fixed" sexuality in the new adaptation does not. Ultimately, while *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* aims at representational inclusivity, the adaptation presents a fixed sexuality that precludes more queer readings of the historical "other."

Introduction

Two men emerge from a white tent in shades of military green arguing like a couple who love each other, sharp tones blunted by pet names and humor. This is the first the audience has seen of these characters, but the characters call each other by name, establishing themselves as Achilles and Patroclus. When Patroclus gets offended by Achilles' impatience, Achilles is quick to apologize, saying: "I'm sorry. You lead me into passion, but passion can't keep to a map. Sometimes it takes the kissing path and sometimes it goes the long way through an argument, but you know no one else can make it up to you like I can" (Lynn 2018, 13). This flirty, overtly sexual banter is a promise that becomes performatively fulfilled as Achilles takes Patroclus into his arms, kissing him, and seductively pulling him into the tent.

This is a key establishing scene in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*, an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* and part of the larger *Fixing Shakespeare* project, in which Kirk Lynn, playwright and co-founder of the Rude Mechs Theatre Company, adapts the least produced of Shakespeare's plays to make them "useful again" (Rude Mechs 2013). As this scene demonstrates,

in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*, the audience is not given room to doubt the romantic and sexual nature of Patroclus and Achilles' relationship.

In the scene directly before the described exchange, Agemomnem (a spelling change nods to the female casting) describes Patroclus as the "tent buddy" of Achilles (Lynn 2018, 10). The "tent buddy" comment is not meant to imply Agemomnem's ignorance in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*; later she acknowledges the depth of feeling between the two. Rather, the use of "buddy" here appears as a gesture to broader contexts. "Tent buddy" signals an awareness in the Rude Mechs' adaptation of other interpretations that position Achilles and Patroclus as platonic friends. The show sets up the "tent buddy" expectation only to distance itself in the next scene from that representation.

In establishing Patroclus and Achilles' relationship as romantic and sexual while playfully alluding to the alternative, the Rude Mechs reclaim gay identity as central to their fixing of *Troilus and Cressida*. This particular "fix" aligns with larger ambitions, ambitions shared by the Rude Mechs and other contemporary theatre companies, to diversify representation in contemporary theatre. Kirk Lynn rewrites the Shakespearean characters to make Patroclus and Achilles' relationship legible as gay for a contemporary audience. In this paper, I place *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* within its literary lineage and present it as a source for future Shakespeare scholars. While it may be an adaptation, it is also a new text reflective of modern sensibilities that reveal shifts in discursive framings.

Within this family tree, I trace how Achilles and Patroclus' relationship is (or is not) framed as queer. In previous iterations, the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus is marked by a lack of clarity which has opened room for scholarly debate and criticism across centuries. Finally, I interrogate the ways in which the rewriting of queerness into historical narratives can reify the perceived stability of gendered and sexualized performances. The audience for *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* witnesses a gay relationship but does not contend with the historical queer "other" who suggests broader possibilities for queer existence.

Improving Shakespeare

Fixing Troilus and Cressida was the most recent production of the Fixing series, premiering in 2018 after a reading in 2016. Kirk Lynn has written three plays for this series; the series also includes *Fixing King John* (2013) and *Fixing Timon of Athens* (2016). The resulting scripts have been workshopped and performed with Lynn's company, The Rude Mechs, based in Austin, Texas. *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* was directed by Alexandra Bassiakou Shaw, starring Crystal Bird

Caviel as Cressida and Noel Gaulin as Troilus, with John Christopher as Achilles and Vincent Tomasino as Patroclus.

The project title, *Fixing Shakespeare*, implies irreverence towards the source material, but none of the plays are satire. Rather, Lynn acknowledges some of the problems that make certain Shakespeare plays difficult to produce and then works to "fix" these "errors." There is an understanding that to "fix" these texts is to "improve" them, at least for a modern audience and modern producing limitations. In process, Lynn first rewrites Shakespeare's text line-by-line before cutting down the text for a standard run-time, limiting characters to around 10, and gender-bending roles for parity (Rude Mechs 2018). *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* ran for about two hours. The cast consisted of seven men and five women, with women playing Agamemnon (Agemomnen) and Pandarus (Pandarini).

Determining how often a Shakespeare play is produced is notoriously difficult (what parameters does one use?), but according to data collected on Shakespearances, *Troilus and Cressida* sits in the ten least produced Shakespeare plays.¹ On one hand, it is not difficult to understand why it is neglected. It is among the longest Shakespeare plays, with considerable stage time devoted to dry strategy meetings between Greek heroes; it has a large cast size of over thirty characters, including ensemble characters; and the two titular characters can get lost in a mix of plots with secondary characters and complicated familial dramas.

Yet despite these difficulties, *Troilus and Cressida* also presents peculiarly modern sensibilities. In 1966, Joyce Carol Oates argued in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, "*Troilus and Cressida*, that most vexing and ambiguous of Shakespeare's plays, strikes the modern reader as a contemporary document" (Oates 1966, 141). Oates points to the cynical treatment of love, survival, and nationalist disillusionment, all, according to Oates, central themes of *Troilus and Cressida*. Oates's thesis has gained traction in academic circles and is supported by production trends. Shakespeare scholar Jeanne T. Newlin expanded on Oates's original argument in "The Modernity of *Troilus and Cressida*" (Newlin 1969). Michael Jamieson has identified changing evaluations of *Troilus and Cressida* that reframe the play as particularly modern (Jamieson 1982), and Sharon Harris has discussed contemporary feminist themes in the play (Harris 1990). Additionally, though *Troilus and Cressida* was very rarely produced in the years following Shakespeare's death (and may not have been produced during Shakespeare's life) there was marked uptick in productions during and after WWII (Brown 2017, 2). While *Troilus and Cressida* remains one of the least produced of Shakespeare's plays, it is also often cited as one of Shakespeare's most thematically modern plays.

In this context, the Rude Mechs' *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* works both to capitalize on the contemporary themes of the play and to reinvigorate Shakespeare's language, reference material, and muddled plot. *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* profits from the modern aspects of the Shakespearean source material as it raises question about national loyalty in the face of civic unrest. Further, the representation of Patroclus and Achilles as gay lovers benefits from a perceived basis in the Shakespearean, even Homeric, texts. The diversity in sexual expression in these older texts is one aspect of their "modernity," as noted by Shakespeare scholar Sharon Harris (Harris 1990, 65). This basis in the original text lends legitimacy to the Rude Mechs' interpretation of the characters. However, the exact nature of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship in the source texts has been debated by scholars since antiquity. These debates are sometimes caused and always complicated by the shifting categories of sexuality across time.

The Queer Subject in History

Reading Patroclus and Achilles as gay lovers in modern productions is far from unique to the Rude Mechs' adaptation. In fact, the choice has been increasingly common since John Barton's 1968 production for the Royal Shakespeare Company. Oregon Shakespeare Festival's 2012 production (the "Iraq War *Troilus and Cressida*") similarly hinted at the romantic nature of the relationship. Even more recently, the Public Theatre's production in 2016 with Louis Calcanes as Achilles and Tom Pecinka as Patroclus is a notable example of an explicit gay reading of the character. In the RSC and Wooster Groups controversial adaptation *Cry, Trojans!*, gay culture is the unifying aesthetic of the Greek army if anything is, with Thersites played as a drag queen and Achilles and Patroclus donning heels and dresses at different moments of high-camp aesthetic.

Still, the choice is by no means universal. In productions prior to 1954, gay performance subtext was either absent or so veiled as to escape mention in the archives.² After 1954, there remained variation in readings. Alan Rickman's 1985 depiction of Achilles downplayed any homosexual subtext, and homosexuality is not mentioned in any reviews. In 1998, the RSC sidestepped the conversation almost entirely, although not without adding complicated gender dynamics, by casting Elaine Pyke as Patroclus. Outside of Shakespeare, the 1994 film *Troy*, one of the most viewed recent interpretations of the characters (though adapted from Homer, not Shakespeare), establishes Achilles and Patroclus as cousins, a fact mentioned repeatedly through stilted dialogue to safeguard against homoerotic tensions.

The opacity of Shakespeare's text (and Homer's text before it) opens a range of possibilities between homosociality and homosexuality in contemporary representations of the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. Is Shakespeare's seeming opacity in this regard inherent in the text,

or is it due to semiotic shifts that render Shakespearean language alien enough to contemporary readers to allow for wider interpretative potential based on misreadings? Both scholars and theatre-makers have engaged this question in order to ground legitimacy of specific interpretations in Shakespeare's "intention" or, at least, a textual purity.

There is much to support a queer reading in Shakespeare's original work, and both theatre-makers and theatre scholars have done so, at times taking for granted the homosexual subtext. Agamemnon makes it clear early in the play that Achilles and Patroclus share a bed, remarking, "the great Achilles Grows dainty of his worth, and in his tent / Lies mocking our designs: with him Patroclus / Upon a lazy bed the livelong day" (1.3 145-150). In these lines, Patroclus is implicated in the feminization of Achilles, drawing upon a complicated entanglement of gender and sexual identity that weave together Achilles, femininity, and queerness. Patroclus is also described as a "man-whore" to Achilles and a "brach," often modernized to bitch. Directors and scholars use these comments and epithets to imply the erotic nature of Patroclus' association with Achilles.

Shakespeare's primary audience, though largely illiterate, would have likely been familiar with the myths of the *Iliad*.³ As Wisam Khalid Abdul Jabbar argues, "the prologue's brief account of the Trojan War indicates the high degree of familiarity that Shakespeare's audience would have had with this mythology" (Jabbar 2012, 165). This familiarity with the Homeric version would have overlaid meaning onto Patroclus and Achilles' relationship. A relationship that was only understood through the frames of the early modern period. As Valerie Traub points out in *Thinking Sex with the Early Moderns*, it was open to ambiguity at least partly because incomprehensibility was part of sexual understandings at the time (Traub 2016, 225).

Still, the topic was never properly settled by scholars, theatre-makers, or audiences. Even if Homer presents two men "in love," contemporary scholars point out that nowhere in the *Iliad* is this relationship clearly sexual.⁴ Other ancient Greek writers such as Aeschylus, Plato, and Antechinus did frame Patroclus and Achilles as lovers, and records demonstrate vigorous debate regarding which was the *erastus* or the *eromenos* of the two (Clarke 1978). Just as passionately, Xenophon, a historian and student of Socrates, argued that Patroclus and Achilles were chaste friends and confidants. Later, Aristarchus of Samothrace would go so far as to edit Homer's text, particularly the "we-two-alone" passage, to rewrite chastity onto Achilles and Patroclus' relationship, an interpretation Aristarchus viewed as both moral and historically accurate. In medieval readings of the *Iliad*, homoeroticism was almost universally denied through omission. In the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare's own text becomes evidence for the ambiguity of the relationship and the willingness

on behalf of some interpreters to write in erotic subtext, but this interpretation was by no means universal.

Different interpretations of Achilles and Patroclus' relationship can be explained by ambiguity in the text. In Oates' analysis of *Troilus and Cressida*, she addresses a further complication, suggesting that Achilles' is a closeted figure. Since Oates implicitly ties closeting inextricably with queerness, this renders the lack of clarity from Shakespeare not grounds for varied interpretation but cinching proof of queer sexuality. For Oates, Achilles' closeting is intentionally disingenuous, a microcosm of the larger, peculiarly modern themes of cynicism and performative identity.

Considering the contradictory interpretations and the additional obscuring potential of the closet, theatre-makers and scholars cannot assume contemporary audiences will read the homoerotic in *Troilus and Cressida*. An audience member's interpretation of the relationship will be largely dictated by production choices, although one should not discount the way viewing is filtered through personal histories and life experiences. Still, the text itself allows for ambiguity and the challenge of the language and tendency to render historical subjects heteronormative can preclude queer readings.

Fixing Troilus and Cressida explodes this ambiguity. Not only are Patroclus and Achilles romantically and sexually linked; they kiss, cuddle, and coo pet names at each other. This queer desire is both textual, as written by Kirk Lynn, and affective, as performed by John Christopher (Achilles) and Vincent Tomasino (Patroclus). For example, in Act 2, Scene 1, Patroclus tells Achilles, "if [Hector] stabs you, I'll be nearby to nurse you at a time when you'll be so bandaged up as to be possibly immobilized and unable to stop my advances" (Lynn 2018, 13). To which Achilles responds, "I wish I could have fought Hector last week to have your hospital around me now" (Lynn 2018, 13). Later in the play, in the infamous "kissing scene," the two tease Cressida by implying she does not know how to kiss before Patroclus proclaims, "I'll show her on you Achilles. Like this." The two characters then give what Ulysses describes sarcastically as "a pretty good example" as they tenderly kiss (Lynn 2018, 45-6). These performative moments demystify Shakespeare's ambiguity and antiquity's contradictory interpretations. In this production, Patroclus and Achilles are lovers without question. Homosexuality becomes legible in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* through overt sexual and romantic dialogue and action.

"Fixing" Sexuality as Stable

The Rude Mechs define their own mission in the Fixing Shakespeare Series as improving Shakespeare's least produced plays to make them producible. Here, I turn to a different definition of fixing: "to fasten something securely in place" (OED). Does *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* concretize

("fix") a particular boundedness to homoeroticism that then suggests a stability of sexuality across time? By reformulating the relationship using familiar modern gay markers, the production strips the characters of some of the ambiguity that imbue the relationship with queer potential.

A primary goal of queer theory, as defined by LGBTQ historian Lisa Duggan, is "the critique of identity categories presented as stable, unitary, or 'authentic'" (Duggan 1995, 181). Other scholars have drawn distinctions between homosexuality and queerness. The former is one category in a hetero/homosexual dyad, and the latter often works to undermine the coherence of identity labels or suggest the unstable and performative nature of sexuality categories. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick addressed in *The Epistemology of the Closet*, the hetero/homosexual dyad is a modern invention unnuanced by a full consideration of the many axes of sexual desire and understanding (Sedgwick 1990, 44). These limitations have consequences given that sexuality operates outside of boundaries imposed by modern identity categories.

Serious examination of history can work to destabilize modern sexual categories by revealing the instability of these categories across time. Succinctly, sexuality is "a historical construct" and not a "natural kind of given" (Foucault 1978, 105). Sexuality in both Elizabethan England and, especially, in Greek Antiquity were markedly different than contemporary understandings of sexual categorization. Indeed, the conversation around the sexualities of Achilles and Patroclus is complicated by rigorous historicization of these figures. To grapple with the historical constructions of sexuality in these time periods is to destabilize modern categories and open a wider potential for queer futures.

Achilles and Patroclus in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* are grounded in contemporary categorizations. The show is aesthetically ahistorical in costumes, set, and language; all of these elements slip away from historicity towards the creation of a unique world outside of historical bounds. Some theatre-makers intentionally sever ties to historical specificity to reimagine utopian queer futures and destabilize modern sexual categories. It is not, in other words, the ahistoricity of the aesthetic choices that preclude queer readings, but this ahistoricity in conjunction with the presentation of a contemporary gay subject. For, while certain choices are largely ahistoric, this does not apply to the characterization of Achilles and Patroclus.

This presentation of a gay relationship is marked by contemporary signs such as stable and binary sexual preference and the presence of oppressive discourse that views gay sexuality as perverse. Like Shakespeare, Lynn leaves out Briseis and desexualizes any promise made to Helen. Unlike Shakespeare, Lynn has also left out Achilles' courting of Polyxena. This is likely for the sake of time and clarity, but it results in the simplification of Achilles' sexuality, a simplification that places Achilles into the hetero/homosexuality dyad. In this interpretation, cutting out the

complexities of both Achilles and Patroclus' romantic relationships, they are part of a monogamous pairing which fulfills contemporary liberal expectations for how "good" gay men will behave. Additionally, the play presents homophobic tension in concert with toxic masculinity that are particularly modern in orientation. This is most clear in Patroclus' monologue in Act 3, Scene 3:

You know the world's broken and people hate loud women and strong women and women who make their own choices But you know what the world hates at least as much? Dark men. Men who pause. Men who think. Men who work differently than most. Men who love men (Lynn 2018, 31-2).

This speech, taken at face value, emphasizes a world in which valid masculinity is tied to a lack of thought, a lack of sensitivity, as well as racism and homophobia. This version of masculinity is contemporary. Patroclus's rejection of this masculinity then also marks him as a contemporary gay figure.

Apparent in the mission of the Fixing Series is the implication that the rewrite will be directed toward a contemporary audience. In *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*, several elements imply such direction, if not aesthetically then representationally. This explanation strikes at the heart of the social mission of *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*. While aesthetically the play slips from specificity, the social orientation speaks to contemporary concerns, not just about homophobia but also related to sexism, and especially a version of toxic masculinity. The reorientation of the Shakespearean text toward addressing specific contemporary social ills is part of the "fixing" project in which these plays become "useful" again. Still, by rendering them contemporary, the play does not present an unfamiliar "other" (Achilles with fluid sexuality, for example) informed by history that might undermine the myth of stable sexuality or sexuality wholly defined by gender distinctions.

While Patroclus and Achilles operate as gay subjects marked by contemporary concerns, they are also figures that echo backwards. In *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*, the audience is always aware of the source, Shakespeare, and likely the earlier source of Homer. The detour through Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* might be more specialized knowledge, but *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* is overtly framed as iterative and intertextual. Reorganizing Patroclus and Achilles as gay subjects then suggests the presence of stable gay identity from Homer through Shakespeare and into contemporary U.S. culture. The play's blend of aesthetic ahistoricity and contemporary gay subjecthood can reify the notion that gay desire is a stable identity across time, rather than highly contextual and performative. This serves to "fix" (or set) a particular mode of gay behavior that is familiar to the audience, rather than presenting a historically informed queerness as an unfamiliar "other," such as the fluidity of Greek desire.

Still, nowhere in *Fixing Troilus and Cressida* do Patroclus, Achilles, or the observers of their relationship engage in the "speech act" (Sedgwick 1990, 3) that Sedgwick identifies as particularly epistemologically limiting. While their relationship hails contemporary gay culture through the aforementioned markers, it is never verbally interpellated as "gay" or "homosexual." In this respect, the play resists the temptation to label the characters, opening a space of other possibilities, even as most of these possibilities are unexplored.

Additionally, the Fixing Shakespeare project itself signifies the degree to which text is socially constructed and historically contingent. In the Rude Mechs' explanation of the Fixing Shakespeare series, printed in the program and featured on their website, they write, "In some ways, we're offering you a more authentic experience of what a new Shakespeare play might be like than an actual Shakespeare play. In other ways, not so much" (Rude Mechs 2013). Through this assertion, they address the central contradictions in the project itself. Part of "fixing" Shakespeare is rendering the original text legible, and thus enjoyable or usable, for contemporary audiences, but Kirk Lynn and the Rude Mechs are clear that this is not a project of preservation or veneration. In translation, central pieces are lost or changed. Other elements are bound to read very differently for contemporary audiences, and an awareness of the audience, whether subverting or confirming audience expectations, is key in the Fixing Shakespeare series. The rewrite of Patroclus and Achilles as overt and contemporary gay lovers promises representational inclusiveness of the kind that is highly valued among progressive theatre troupes and organizations and the audiences that support them. It also rewrites the queer historical subject into a familiarity that precludes an audience having to contend with the instability of sexual desire and behavior across historical time.

Perhaps it is also worth saying, here at the end, that I felt joy in seeing the love story between Achilles and Patroclus unfold. The lack of closeting, so often a trope of gay figures, was a welcome relief and indicative of meaningful changes in society. At a more basic level, while I may intellectualize reasons why the language of "inclusion" falls short of offering radical futures, to be a minority included in any theatre production still makes me feel valued in the wider theatre community. This enjoyment exists alongside a critique of the way sexuality was handled in the play. I do not mean to deploy the capital of critique to signal self-virtue or to jettison the good in pursuit of the perfect. Rather, discontented by aspects of *Fixing Troilus and Cressida*, my work was written in the spirit of exploration and wonder. How have these characters been imagined across time? And how can this understanding open up wider potentials for queer futures beyond hetero/homosexual dyads and the suggestions of sexual stability? The answers to these questions carry heavy meaning for those whose sexual experiences fall outside the familiar.

Notes

1. Shakespearances has data mostly on professional or semi-professional Shakespearean production in the United States, Canada, and Australia; while not comprehensive, the data set can speak to broad trends (Kopf 2016).
2. In 1954, an aggrieved reviewer of Glen Byam Shaw's production at the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre saw no need for "Achilles' unhealthy relationship with the effeminate Patroclus" to be "quite so flagrantly and emphatically stressed by the producer" (Brown 2017, 235). As Nicholas De Jongh points out in *Not in Front of the Audience: Homosexuality on Stage*, stage depictions prior to the Shaw production may have coded Patroclus and Achilles as gay in subtle ways recognizable to some audience members and theatre professionals (De Jongh 1992, 3)).
3. Literacy rates were on the rise in Elizabethan England but even generous estimates suggest that 90% of the population were illiterate (Wheale 1999, 2).
4. See Fox 2011 and Halperin 2000.

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