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,
*Shakespeare in Fluff* is clearly the product of someone who enjoys both Shakespeare and household pets. The images in the book are set against quotations designed to approximate the feel of a folio, and the extensive title pays homage to early modern book titles. The marketing page for the book on Pan MacMillan's website emphasizes Shakespeare's universality, reminding us that "millions of us have been moved to laughter and tears by his timeless poetry" before proudly announcing that "finally, we're able to experience these moments through the medium of small furry animals." Underpinning this delightful endeavor is an implicit affirmation of Shakespeare's value to the natural world beyond the human. The tongue-in-cheek insinuation here is that Shakespeare invented the human so effectively, that his work is seamlessly adaptable to accommodate the structures of the nonhuman world.

A surprising preponderance of human-animal Shakespeare relations suggest that *Shakespeare in Fluff*’s assumption is not entirely misplaced. The idea of animals' perspective on Shakespeare is not entirely new—Rick Chafe's award winning 1984 novel, for example, *Shakespeare's Dog*, viewed young Shakespeare's courtship of Anne Hathaway and emergence as a writer through the eyes of Hooker, his family dog, and in 1996, the children's cartoon *Animaniacs* produced a short performance of *Hamlet*. The 2005 animated movie *Romeo and Juliet: Sealed with a Kiss* is a musical adaptation of Shakespeare's play, set on a deserted arctic landscape and performed by seals and walruses. The film adapts the tragic ending for its juvenile audience to illustrate the themes of forgiveness and personal growth—a common trope in children's entertainment, and no less visible in the bigger-budget appropriation of Shakespearean tragedy, *The Lion King*. These endearing appropriations participate in a larger human desire to share the inner lives of our pets and make them like us. Anthropocentric appropriations of Shakespeare also serve to resist less savory associations of the bear-baiting pit that performing Elizabethan animals elicits and elide the ethical questions that might arise in conjunction with these performing rodents.

*Shakespeare in Fluff* differs from many of the popular representations of animal Shakespeares in that it freely acknowledges the theatricality of its endeavor. Perhaps because it is not overtly aiming at an adolescent audience, *Shakespeare in Fluff* does not promote the popular Internet fantasy of anthropomorphized creatures (fig. 4), but instead presents small, docile animals positioned solely for our entertainment. What is delightfully striking about the rodents of *Shakespeare in Fluff* is the photographer's inability to position them, or to elicit any semblance of an emotional response—in spite of the variance in backgrounds and costume, they all look exactly the same. *Shakespeare in Fluff*, then, appropriates Shakespearean cultural capital in order to strip it away and remind us that above all else, Shakespeare (and possibly hamsters) exist for our pleasure. *Shakespeare in Fluff*, then, occupies the dual position of appealing to our animal-
loving impulses, while subtly drawing our attention to the unsettling history of animal abuse that characterized Elizabethan theatre.
References

*Shakespeare in Fluff: Comedies, Histories & Tragedies Published According to the True Originall Copies and unto this Impression Are Added Furry Animalls of Various Kindes*. 2017. Boxtree/Pan Macmillan.