

Rebel Without a Closet: Homosexuality and Hollywood

BY CHRISTOPHER CASTIGLIA

In her study of "male homosocial desire" in English literature, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick defines an erotic triangle as a three-party relationship in which "the bond that links the two rivals is as intense and potent as the bond that links either of the two rivals to the beloved" (Sedgwick 21). Two men bond "homosocially"—through their competition for, their "traffic in," a shared female object of desire. Through the traffic in a shared woman, the male rivals establish and ensure "the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power" (Sedgwick 25). Sedgwick demonstrates, finally, that the classic ménage is in fact a power struggle—political and economic as well as sexual.

What concerns me in this discussion, however, is a paradigm applicable to texts in which the homosexual—as opposed to the homosocial—content of the rivalry is most explicit. The "closet cases" Sedgwick examines appear as the misogynists they are, unable to let go of the letter, if not the spirit, of heterosexual desire. In studying these texts, Sedgwick's model works admirably, because it's heterosexually, if homosocially, oriented (that is, it still centers on the boy-meets-girl plot, even if to deconstruct it). But what happens when the boys get together without the girls? What might *their* triangle look like?

Robert K. Martin, in his recent study of Melville, *Hero, Captain, and Stranger*, adapts Sedgwick's paradigm in order to read a homosexually-oriented erotic triangle. Martin traces a triangle in Melville's sea novels involving the Captain (Ahab, for instance), who represents "the imposition of the male on the female," and therefore sexual, political, and economic power; the Dark Stranger (Queequeg), who "offers the possibility of an alternate sexuality, one that is less dependent upon performance and conquest"; and the Hero (Ishmael), who must choose between them. "The novels may be distinguished," Martin writes, "precisely by the degree to which the Hero is able to make the choice for the Dark Stranger and to accomplish his act of rebellion against the Captain" (Martin 5).

I want to modify the triangle one more time by suggesting that the figures Martin establishes—the

Captain, the Dark Stranger, and the Hero—are translated in the films under discussion into another obvious figure of authority (the father), another threat to the father's authority (a homosexual lover), and a kind of hero, to a greater or lesser degree (the son), who must negotiate between the patriarchal privilege offered by his father (and consequently heterosexual convention) and the Otherness, the alienation from male heterosexual privilege, threatened by an acceptance of the lover, and hence of homosexuality. The power struggle between father, son, and lover is, of course, implicit in the figures Martin describes, as it will be in narratives where homosexuality emerges from the murky depths to which it is repressed in the novels studied by Sedgwick. The difference between the triangle examined by Sedgwick and those studied by Martin is that if the former is concerned with how best to transmit patriarchal power, the latter threatens to disrupt that transmission altogether. The films under discussion here, like Melville's sea novels, raise the question of how patriarchal power can be achieved by the son—how it can be deeded by the father—once homosexuality threatens to place the son outside the sphere of patriarchal prescription. What is ultimately in question in the triangle under discussion is the father's power to name, and therefore to control.

The father-son-lover triangle is nowhere more evident than in Nicholas Ray's 1955 classic, *Rebel Without a Cause*. As the film begins, Jim Stark (James Dean) is alienated from his family as a whole but particularly from his father, Frank (Jim Backus). The apparent problem with Mr. Stark is that he doesn't wear the pants in the family, letting his wife and mother walk all over him. Jim is left without a "role model," and he begins an allegorical search for his proper sexual identity.

At the moment of greatest crisis between Jim and his father—the opening sequence at the police station, where Jim has been brought for drunken disorderliness—he meets the two characters who will pull his sexual identity in opposite directions: Judy (Natalie Wood) and Plato (Sal Mineo). Jim feels an instant affinity with Plato, offering the shivering boy his jacket. The jacket becomes, in the course of the

film, the dominant trope of Jim's self-image, and for reasons that become clear in time, Plato at first refuses Jim's offer. At the same time as Jim establishes his connection with Plato, he recovers the compact Judy has left behind. Jim is, from the start, caught between two separate narratives: the fairly traditional boy-meets-girl plot offered by Judy and a somewhat less defined option offered by Plato.

In the course of the film, Plato's sexuality becomes an issue of increasing intrigue, as well as increasing gloom. When Plato opens his school locker, instead of revealing the expected cheesecake glossy, the door bears a photo of Alan Ladd. Plato becomes more and more solicitous of Jim's attention, to the point of obsession, even inviting Jim to spend the night at his place. And, as Plato's homosexuality becomes clear (the name is significant), so does his mental instability. Plato is at best neurotic, and the closer he gets to Jim, the more unhinged he becomes. The film sets up an implicit connection, then, between homoerotic bonding and insanity.

The cause of the insanity, apart from Plato's implied homosexuality, is his failure to attain his Platonic ideal: the traditional nuclear family. He is further identified as an outsider in that he is raised by the film's only black character, his nurse and guardian. He tries to make Jim and Judy his surrogate parents, implying that his homoerotic relationship with Jim is also a parental/filial one, but Plato is no more successful with one relationship than he is with the other. Homosexuality, through the character of Plato, is associated with insanity and with a complete alienation from the familial unit—a position which, one should recall, Jim himself is approaching at the beginning of the film. To give up on Daddy's love—or worse, to literalize that love in a physical male/male relationship—is just plain crazy.

As Plato becomes more interested in Jim, the nature of Jim's sexual identity changes. As the film starts, Jim is quite traditional in appearance, wearing a jacket and tie. But as the film progresses, Jim becomes increasingly androgynous. In the scene in which Jim takes off his shirt, far from the brutish, hirsute sexuality of a Brando, one finds a smooth, boyish body. And, in the course of the film, Jim exchanges his traditional jacket for the now famous red one. By the time Jim dons his new jacket, the color red has become quite significant. It is Judy's bright red lipstick that ensures her alienation from her father, who calls her a slut. Red becomes associated, through Judy, with a kind of wild femininity, and when Jim dons his flaming red jacket, he exchanges his traditional garb for one that ties him to Judy and her sexuality. That Plato is in some way responsible

for Jim's androgynization is undeniable; it is Plato, after all, who nicknames Jim "Jamie" (a nickname that, for no apparent reason, startles Judy).

In the sequence at the abandoned mansion, close to the end of the film (redolent with the ambient sexuality of 1980s Calvin Klein ads), Jim, Judy, and Plato lie together, making it occasionally unclear who is touching whom, again conflating the traditionally separated realms of the familial—the three are posing as a mock family—and the sexual. But then the moment is forced to a crisis by the appearance of the Boys. (In a slightly Freudian model of the return of the repressed, the overly macho boys appear to terrorize poor Plato at the very minute that Jim and Judy go off to be alone.) Plato escapes to the planetarium, where he is surrounded by police. Jim gets inside the planetarium and manages to get the bullets out of Plato's gun. But, because of misunderstandings all around, Plato still gets shot to death as he attempts to run from the bright lights of the police cars.

It is only with Plato's death that Jim is reconciled with his family, and is placed firmly within a heterosexual relationship with Judy (although he introduces her, in an oddly unromantic moment, as his "friend"—a euphemism usually reserved for gay lovers). The last words of the film come from Mrs. Stark, who exclaims, "He is ..." before she is silenced by her newly empowered husband. But what is shut up at the film's end is the process of (re)inscribing masculinity. It's clear to everyone, by the end of the film, what a "he" is, and the final ellipses signal the tragedy of Plato's death. The end of Plato's influence is signified when Jim zips up Plato's corpse in his old red jacket. The symbol of ambiguous sexuality need no longer be Jim's mantle; it is now killed off with its inspiration.

One might expect, based on Sedgwick's paradigm, to see in *Rebel* a triangle in which Jim and Plato bond over Judy, but such is not the case. Judy figures largely in the narrative, both as the apparent object of Jim's desire and as the mother in Plato's surrogate family. Yet Plato does not figure as a rival for Judy's affections, being more explicit in his choice of a masculine love-object than the characters studied by Sedgwick (actually, the relationship between Jim and Buzz more closely resembles Sedgwick's model); there is therefore little need for Plato to "traffic in" Judy. If, as Sedgwick argues, the male-male-female triangle is established for the transmission of patriarchal privilege, then such a triangle involving Jim, Plato, and Judy—none of whom possesses such power—would be useless indeed. Rather, if one can argue that the difficulty of resolution is equal to the centrality of significance, then

Rebel Without a Closet

the more important triangle in *Rebel* exists between Jim, Plato, and Frank Stark, the father and son bonding over the body of Plato, that is, over the son's objectified sexuality.

Many critics have suggested that Jim is a rebellious teenager because his father is somehow not a "real man." I am inclined to agree, however, with the subtler argument put forth by Marguerite Waller:

Humoring his wife's hypochondria by serving her dinner in bed, humoring Jim's confusion by arranging to move to another town whenever his troubles erupt, Frank Stark imprisons his wife in the role of a sick and silly woman, and his son in that of a hopeless misfit. . . he has a heavy investment in a state of affairs that constitutes him as its center of gravity, as its sole source of gratification and support. (61)

In a '50s version of passive aggression, by seemingly abdicating his patriarchal privilege, Frank Stark ensures his power to name and control. Alienation from his father, Jim senses on some level, also involves alienation from the patriarchal power that he, as son and heir, is entitled to. Jim, not yet ready to identify himself with the disempowered Plato, is not prepared to make such a sacrifice.

Yet such a patriarchal bonding cannot take place while the allure of Plato—who, at the same time as he yearns for a family, represents illogical, nontraditional sexuality, the fascination of life outside the realm of patriarchal privilege—exerts its power, however limited, over Jim. The central struggle of the film is between Frank Stark, representing patriarchal power, and Jim's undecided sexuality. What allows the completion of Jim's bond with the patriarchy is the trade-in—the literal sacrifice—of Jim's homosexual counterpart. The triangle involving an investment in patriarchal privilege has concerned the fate of homosexual existence from the film's start and, from the outset, the deck has been stacked. It's significant that the one father-figure who is strong and powerful and not at odds with the younger generation from the beginning is the juvenile detective, Ray. Of course, *Rebel* was written and directed by Nicholas Ray. The author here is both father and policeman, steering his characters/children towards the one satisfactory ending: a heterosexual, nuclear family.

The policed establishment of such a family is one of the many ideologies and fashions the 1980s has borrowed from the 1950s. In both decades, the family standard closely resembles the Andersons of *Father Knows Best*, with any mate other than a girl like Mom perceived as a dire threat to the Buds of

America. It is not surprising, then, that the archepic of the 1980s family-fantasy, *Dynasty*, should borrow its central triangle intact from *Rebel Without a Cause*. A son of ambiguous sexuality is reconciled with his father, who represents the patriarchal structure of power even more explicitly in the case of Blake Carrington, oil tycoon. The bonding of father and son is accomplished through the "traffic" in (i.e., the murder of) the third male: the lover—who threatens to separate father and son, to risk a man's position in the patriarchy. With *Dynasty*, however, the act of reconciliation-through-death, the basic scenario for acting out the erotic triangle, takes on a threatening aspect through its grisly repetition—two of Stephen's lovers are murdered.

Homosexual love seems to have only one conclusion: death and grief, both synonyms, finally, for alienation from the father. And the longer Stephen persists in his "lifestyle," the more successful his relationships, the greater the sacrifice, the more gruesome the death involved. Homosexuality is represented in both narratives as a metonym for insanity and death; the obvious heroes are the police/fathers—Blake or Ray.

Slight variations occur in ABC's *Consenting Adult* and NBC's *An Early Frost*. In *An Early Frost*, the first AIDS movie on television, the necessary sacrifice of the lover is avoided by going right to the source of the struggle—the son, Michael—a lawyer with AIDS. Michael is sacrificed by the plot in order to allow the patriarchy to continue smoothly. *An Early Frost* demonstrates what happens to *Rebel(s)* in the AIDS era. The son can be reconciled to the father only at the price of his own death. Hetero- and homosexuality still can't exist in the same framework, and it's still the queer who must go. AIDS provides filmmakers with an easy metaphor, an easy out. The sacrifice no longer seems malicious; now it's tragic.

Many of the film's scenes revolve around patriarchal images. When Michael goes to see his father to talk things out, he does so at his father's business office and refers to Mr. Pierson as "the Boss." Asked to listen to what Michael has to say, Mr. Pierson replies, "Go home, Michael. This is a place of business." In total despair, Michael tries to gas himself in the family garage. His father finds him and tries to bring him to his senses. When Mrs. Pierson comes running out, Mr. Pierson orders her back to the house, shouting, "It's between me and my son!" Michael finally gets angry with his father, shouting, "I'm not the man you wanted me to be. Well, I don't give a damn what you think because I'm a better man than you'll ever be, you son of a bitch." This speech

—along with the realization that Michael is going to die—does the trick, and Michael finally gets his father's affection, if not his approval. In the film's final scene, as Michael says good-bye to his parents and heads back to his lover in Chicago, Mr. Pierson tells his son, "You win that case, huh?—Partner!" referring, ostensibly, to Michael's recent promotion in his law firm.

I've cited these incidents to demonstrate that in *An Early Frost*, as in *Dynasty* and *Rebel*, the primary struggle is between father and son, and in both cases the bonding is involved with an investment in patriarchal power. The abundance of fraternal/business metaphors in *An Early Frost* belies the film's implicit theme: the reintegration of the homosexual man into the realm of patriarchal, heterosexual privilege. Michael, by promising to disappear, can become the father's "partner"—a word that highlights the erotics of the power arrangement. Ironically, the sacrifice of Michael himself, ostensibly the central subject of the plot, is never shown and is easily forgotten as the paternal/filial plot takes center stage, almost forcing one to forget that this is, after all, a movie about AIDS.

Although *A Consenting Adult* is very similar in plot to *An Early Frost*, it handles the erotic triangle in a different way. It is no longer the homosexual son or lover who is sacrificed, but the father. In a number of subtle and intelligent strategies involving both plot and mise-en-scène, Ken Lynd, the patriarchal center of the film, is slowly decentered and finally removed altogether. One way the film decenters Ken's position is through the subversion of the jokes and stories he tells to gain control over his family. Jeff Lynd, the homosexual son, is home from college on Christmas Eve, in a last attempt to make amends with his father. The following dialogue occurs between Jeff, Ken, and Ken's wife, Tess:

Jeff: Do you remember the year you decided that we should raise our own turkey?

Tess: Oh yeah! Tom the Terrible?

Ken: You chased him around the yard so much he was all muscle.

Jeff: No, he chased me! That turkey thought he was an eagle!

Ken attempts to fictionalize Jeff's childhood. In the fiction Ken creates, Jeff is a "normal" boy: active and aggressive. But Jeff refuses to allow his father to write his history. He, it would seem, has a different story to tell, and that story turns out to be the myth of Ganymede.

In the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid writes:

The king of the gods once loved a Trojan boy named Ganymede; for once, there was something found that Jove would rather have been than what he was. He made himself an eagle, the only bird able to bear his thunderbolts, went flying on his false wings, and carried off the youngster. (Ovid 239)

Jeff exchanges his father's myth of normal heterosexual adolescence for his own homosexual myth. Furthermore, whereas Zeus, the archetypal Father, successfully carries Ganymede away, Tom the Terrible is incapable of capturing Jeff. The eagle/father of Ovid becomes, in Jeff's revision, the turkey/father; Zeus's sexual mastery of Ganymede becomes ironically transformed into Ken's failure to "capture" Jeff within the narrative he attempts to impose upon Jeff's youth. The final irony lies in the fact that Zeus, the father, wishes to *be* Ganymede, implying that Ken's reaction to Jeff's sexuality might conceal a fair amount of repression, or, at best, jealousy of homosexuality.

A Consenting Adult changes the original paradigm of the homosexual triangle to privilege the homo- over the heterosexual male, representing a post-Stonewall version of *Rebel*. But there's still a problem with any plot requiring ritual violence (Ken dies of a stroke) for resolution; the presence of death in these films problematically eliminates the potential for real critique, real political change. Whether it's the father or son who's killed, the myth that the two cannot exist simultaneously, each providing a helpful critique of the other, persists. The paradigm never functions progressively.

Is it possible for representations of gays, particularly on television, to use the paradigm without requiring a ritual death (or a symbolic death—the reabsorption of the son into the patriarchy)? The closest a film has come to that ideal is *Welcome Home, Bobby*, CBS's contribution to the deluge of gay-related films. *Bobby* begins with echoes of its predecessors. Like *Rebel*, it begins with the arrest of its protagonist, Bobby Cavellaro. Upon his homecoming, his mother hugs him, but Bobby's only concern, like Jim's and Michael's, is with his father. When Bobby goes to confront his father (who is in the garage, where men go to be men), his father tells him, "The men in this family are men. You'll abide by that rule," again making masculinity something that can be enforced, policed.

It seems from the beginning, then, that *Bobby* will be yet another film about a boy's attempt to win his father's pleasure at whatever cost. But the film quickly takes a turn for the better. At the height of the film's tension, Bobby appears at the dinner table

Rebel Without a Closet

in full drag and, in no uncertain terms, tells his father to take his expectations and go to hell. But where Michael Pierson must die after making such a speech, Bobby earns his father's respect—on *Bobby's* terms. The film ends with Bobby's father coming out to the shack where Bobby has been living to tell his son he wants him to come home. Happy ending. No deaths. A minimum of selling out.

There are two basic reasons why *Bobby* can use the paradigm in ways that the other films couldn't. First, *Bobby* offers a sense of a gay community, a support network including gays and straights that gives Bobby helpful advice and no-strings-attached affection. This network also presents a new character: the Good Father. Bobby gets help and support both from a straight psychiatrist (who is also, oddly enough, a Catholic priest, a literal Father) and from a gay high school teacher. There is an older gay man, Bobby's first lover, who is shown in a less than flattering light, and God knows Bobby's father is no saint. But at least the gay character is not faced with only Bad Fathers and Good Policemen.

Second, *Bobby* finally comes out on the side of education and change. Death is the only resolution in a plot that doesn't allow for dialogue, except as a

mode of co-optation. But in *Welcome Home, Bobby*, the first gay-theme film in 1986, Bobby's father finally learns the lesson one of his other sons tried to teach him earlier in the film: "Prejudice, Pop—it's terrible."

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FILM IN DRAG

TRANSVESTITISM ON THE SCREEN

EDWARD CONNOR

Men have been playing women on the screen since the movies began. In one of the less obvious ways a stunt man in dress and wig would double for the heroine in dangerous situations, especially in serials (as late as 1942 stunt man David Sharpe could be spotted doubling star Kay Aldridge in the Republic serial, *Perils of Nyoka*). A close look at the crowds in the climactic scenes of such disaster films as the '36 *San Francisco* and '38 *In Old Chicago* would also show most of the "women" to be thinly disguised stunt men.

Of course it was hoped by the movie-makers that such doubling would pass unnoticed by the average movie-goer but in other films, especially comedies, a man posing as a woman was the very kernel of the plot. Charlie Chaplin appeared as such in the 1915 Keystone comedy *A Woman*, as did famous female impersonator Julian Eltinge (real name: William Dalton) in many silent features, notably the '17 *Clever Mrs. Carfax* and *Countess Charming*, the '18 *Widow's Might* and *Over the Rhine*, and the '20 *The Adventuress*. The plot of *The Adventuress* is typical: "Jack Perry" (Julian Eltinge) disguises himself as "Mam'selle Fedora" to obtain information from "monarchists" to aid "republicans" in the mythical kingdom of "Alpania." His friend "Lyn Brook" (Fred Covert) also poses as a woman ("Thelma") for the same reason.

The most famous transvestite comedy of the English and American stage, *Charley's Aunt*, which premiered in Lon-

don in 1892, concerns an Oxford student, "Lord Fancourt Babberly" ("Babs") whose friends "Charley" and "Jack" have a date with two girls, to be chaperoned by the former's aunt, "Donna Lucia D'Alvadorez." When Charley's aunt fails to appear, "Babs" is persuaded to impersonate her. The play has been filmed at least ten times. In English language versions the lead has been played by Syd Chaplin ('25), Charlie Ruggles ('30), Arthur Askey ('40), Jack Benny ('41) and Ray Bolger ('52), and in foreign versions by Fritz Olemar ('34, German), Pedro Quartucci ('46, Argentine), Alfredo Barbieri ('53, Argentine), Claus Riederstaeldt ('56, German), and Fernand Raynaud ('59, French). However, the impersonation of female relatives was not limited to comedies set at Oxford. In the '32 *Sherlock Holmes* Clive Brook took time out as the famous detective to play a prissy maiden aunt in one scene.

William Powell shaved off his moustache, put on heavy make-up and feminine clothing (with balls of yarn as breasts), and posed as a woman in the '41 *Love Crazy*. It took only a wig and dress to change Cary Grant from the screen's handsomest male to its ugliest female in the '49 *I Was a Male War Bride*.

Buster Keaton appeared briefly, disguised as a woman, in the '24 *Sherlock Jr.* while young Spec O'Donnell made a particularly unappetizing girl in the '27 two-reeler, *Don't Tell Everything*.

Other great comics, singers and