

## CHAPTER 7

# READING AND QUEERING PLATO IN *HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH*

WENDY HSU

*Abstract:* *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, a musical film about a queer punk rocker, alludes to a part of Plato's Symposium in which Aristophanes narrates a mystical origin of love: that bifurcation of gender types yields sexuality types. After Judith Butler's idea of gender binary as a by-product of the oppressive practice of heterosexuality, I want to consider the use of Plato in the movie not as a simple reproduction of the Greek mythology, but as a disruption or a subversion of the mythology's seamless unidirectional connection between sex, gender, and sexuality. Here Hedwig serves as a symbolic queering agent in the oppressive, constructed binary gender and sexuality categories. I show this through a close reading of Hedwig's songs and their diegetic performances in which aspects of Hedwig's gender and sexuality are highlighted within the context of her personal history. I interpret the deployment of the punk rock aesthetics in performance, a style that definitively celebrates the abject, to be indicative of Hedwig's positive outlook on life as a stigmatized queer individual. The ending of the film gives a politically progressive message that gender division is neither essential nor universal and, echoing Butler, is conditioned by the oppressive norms of the heterosexual society. The film's conventional narrative structure encourages the viewer to empathize with Hedwig despite and for her queer gender and sexuality. The identification with Hedwig thus makes the film politically queer and activist.

*HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH*, A FILM OFFSHOOT from the original off-Broadway theater production, rocks the world of identities into a sensual and rational disarray. Identity categories are thrown together and taken apart.

I cannot help but be perplexed and at the same time mesmerized by the disorienting gender and sexuality signifiers of the characters. In an interview, John Cameron Mitchell, who wrote, directed, and starred in the movie, reveals his intention of portraying a world “where identification and categories are fluid, changing and confusing, as they are, really, in real life.” Gender-and-sexuality vertigo resonates with some of the familiar rhetoric about queerness in the twenty-first century Anglo-American world.

As a rock musical, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* states its queer politics via a few expressive vehicles: the characterization of Hedwig, the musical performances, and the ongoing narrative reference to Plato. The film’s narrative focuses on the gender and sexual transformations of our queer punk rocker hero/heroine Hedwig Schmidt, played by Mitchell. Hedwig’s story begins with Hansel, a boy growing up in East Germany. At the age of twenty-six, Hansel falls in love with American G.I. Luther Robinson. In order to marry Luther and go to the United States with him, Hansel has to get a sex-change operation, becoming a woman named Hedwig (Hansel’s mother’s name). Unfortunately the operation gets botched. Not a typical male-to-female transsexual, Hedwig is now a biological he/she with neither-female-nor-male genitals which s/he refers to as “an angry inch.”<sup>1</sup>

The film’s musical numbers, individually set in a franchised seafood restaurant in a suburban strip mall, remain in the format of the original theater production: a drag show backed up by a punk band.<sup>2</sup> Punk musician Stephen Trask, who scores the production, makes several punk and glam rock references. Being dumped by her husband while living in the stark trailer-trash Midwestern United States, Hedwig suddenly realizes her penchant for punk rock. With a band named The Angry Inch, Hedwig sings about her past and enacts her present sentiment toward different points of her personal history. By using punk rock conventions, marked by masculine aggression, Hedwig expresses anger while celebrating her abject position in her world. Also, Hedwig adopts the style of glam rock to highlight her gender ambiguity. Glam rock, most famously represented by David Bowie’s gender-bending Ziggy Stardust incarnation, is a flamboyant celebration of sexual freedom especially signified by Bowie’s ostensible bisexuality.<sup>3</sup>

The makers of the movie borrow from Plato’s *Symposium* to characterize Hedwig and to develop the movie’s overall message about queer genders and sexualities. In Plato’s *Symposium*, Aristophanes tells a mythical story about the origin of love and desire. In it, the original three human types—female, male, and androgynous (having both female and male qualities)—are split into two halves by the gods because of their discontent with decadent human behavior. As a result of the division, the individual halves desire to find their other half. The birth of love is thus the emergence of the human desire to recover the wholeness of the original form (Plato).

The mythology presents a neatly sketched picture of the different *sex/gender* types and *sexuality* types. The splitting of the original *sex* types results in three different *sexualities*—female homosexuality, male homosexuality, and heterosexuality. The mythology conveniently explains away any identities that fail to match the man/woman and the homosexuality/heterosexuality binaries. And there are other queer gender and *sexuality* identities, for instance, transgender, transsexuality, and bisexuality, that do not fit into these categories. Invariably tied to binarism, Aristophanes's story echoes with the heteronormative ideology and perceptions of gender and *sexuality* in the twenty-first century United States.

Queer theorist Judith Butler offers an alternative theory about the connection between *sex*, *gender*, and *sexuality* in *Gender Trouble*. Butler argues that *sex* and *gender* differences do not exist naturally, but as culturally constructed differences in our world. Both *sex* and *gender* differences have been enforced as a norm necessary for human reproduction; and the heterosexual norm oppresses the minority *sexuality* groups through the reinforcement of the binary *gender* system. So, compulsory heterosexuality is not an effect, but a cause of *gender* and *sex* binaries. Plato's Aristophanes and Butler seem to propose opposing ideas about the connection between *sex*, *gender*, and *sexuality*. While Aristophanes narrates that *sexualities* emerge from the binary pairing of two *sexes*, whether it is based on sameness or difference, Butler argues that it is heterosexuality, the dominant *sexuality*, that creates the binary *gender* and *sex* categories.<sup>4</sup> In a hermeneutic style representative of queer studies culture in academia and inspired by Butler, I consider the use of Plato's *Symposium* in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* not as a simple reproduction of the Greek mythology, but as an attempt to disorient or *queer* the mythology's seamless linear connection between *sex*, *gender*, and *sexuality*.

Most narratives about transsexuality or sexual inversions center around a character who has felt as if she or he has been trapped in the wrong *gendered* or *sexed* body. So the *sex* change operation is usually a means to liberate the individual, allowing the individual's *gender* to be coherent with her or his *sex*. Unlike conventional narratives about transsexuality, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* tells a story of an individual who does not have complete agency in her *gender* and *sexual* transformations. Hedwig's queerness not only is narrated and affirmed in her musical performances, but it also comes out of her defiance, both as a symbol for and a victim of the oppressive heteronormative forces in her world.

To engage with the movie's details, I interpret Hedwig's songs' lyrical contents and their diegetic performances in relation to the narrative progression of how Hedwig becomes a rock star.<sup>5</sup> There I explain Hedwig's *sex* and *gender* transformation and its connection to the notion of division, borrowed from Plato's *Symposium*. Then I delve into the idea of wholeness,

also from Plato, as Hedwig contemplates and deals with issues of sexuality, by examining Hedwig's sexual and gender identities in the context of each of her relationships with the men in her life. Finally, I will offer a reading of the movie's ambiguous ending, illuminating the movie's potentially progressive message.

### **DIVISION: HEDWIG'S SEXUAL AND GENDER TRANSFORMATION**

Before launching into close examinations of the film, I want to complicate the description of Hedwig's gender performances by asserting that they are *gender-y*, a term I borrow from queer scholar Eve Sedgwick that refers to the quantity rather than quality of gender signifiers. The usage of this term also permits the coexistence of multiple gender axes—such as butch-femme, masculine-feminine, effeminate-butch. Hedwig's gender-y performance makes her sometimes both effeminate and femme, for example, in “Wig in the Box”; femme and feminine, for example, in “Wicked Little Town”; and masculine and butch, for example, in “The Angry Inch” and “Tear Me Down.” Hedwig's gender is beyond the simple description of just being androgynous, or masculine, or feminine. Read through Sedgwick's multidimensional gender paradigm, Hedwig's complicated gender-y gender performances depart from and break down the conventional one-dimensional gender dichotomy between masculinity and femininity.

In the beginning of the film during the performance of “Tear Me Down,” with a high-pitched dykey voice, the biker-jacket-clad backup singer Yitzhak announces Hedwig's metonymic identity with the Berlin Wall: “Hedwig is like that wall/Standing before you in the divide/Between East and West/Slavery and freedom/Man and woman/Top and bottom.” Using the trope of the Berlin Wall, which divided Berlin into two halves with opposing political ideologies, Hedwig implies that she stands in the crack between the two different sexual and gender spheres—she is neither a woman nor a man, neither a he nor a she. Hedwig is not of the predivision androgynous type, accounted by Aristophanes. Hedwig's self-proclaimed in-between identity is not a point of orientation for people's identification, but of disorientation. Recognizing her symbolic existence as an object of abomination in the world, Hedwig pleads for her listener to “tear her down” and challenges the world to reconsider the ideological binaries.

With the lyrics of “The Angry Inch” that directly tell about Hedwig's botched sex-change, the juxtaposition of conflicting gender signifiers borrowed from different performance styles pushes the gender confusion of the scene into an overdose of gender vertigo. There are several punk references in this scene. Hedwig's girly halter-top says “punk rock.” Singing “Six inches forward

and five inches back/I got a/I got an angry inch,” Hedwig boyishly gropes her genitals and hops around on the stage while passively flinging around her stiff appendages like a ventriloquist femme dummy. Musically, “The Angry Inch” uses a punk-like straight-ahead rhythm and simple harmonic progressions consisting of power chords on the guitar.<sup>6</sup> The musical and kinesthetic minimalism is expressed with a punk masculine aggression; at the same time, it is juxtaposed by feminine signifiers such as Hedwig’s glitter makeup, an elaborate blonde wig, and lacy, black gloves like Stevie Nicks’. Moreover, Hedwig sings with vibrato, which is not characteristic of punk, but of glam or Broadway vocal style (or hair metal). When juxtaposed against punk aesthetics, vibrato seems relatively effeminate and feminine because of its decorative quality.

The depicted audience response to the performance deserves mentioning. After Hedwig’s explicit narration about her botched operation while groping her neither-penis-nor-vagina crotch and looking straight into the audience aggressively and provokingly, one large macho-looking man from the audience calls out “faggot.” Then Yitzhak jumps on the man to start a fight that then grows into a large group fight in which the members from the band and the audience throw food and punches at each other. I read the man’s defensive remark as reflecting his discomfort with Hedwig’s spectacular crossing of gender and sexual boundaries. The derogatory term he uses to refer to Hedwig should not be read literally. Faggot, a readily available derogatory term referring to queer and stigmatized identities, is used by the man to repudiate Hedwig and distance himself from Hedwig’s queer gender and sexual performance. Hedwig’s castration narrative threatens to emasculate the man’s symbolic control of his own reaction to Hedwig’s performance.

Hedwig sings, “The train is coming and I’m tied to the track/I try to get up but I can’t get no slack.” Here the train can refer to either Luther or the stipulations imposed by the heterosexual marriage institution. I prefer the latter reading because it allows one to see Luther and Hansel—both stigmatized because of their gay sexuality—as human agents, as opposed to subjects of free agency, within the context of the politically oppressive world. In the spirit of punk, Hedwig performs to lament and celebrate her abjection. Her neither-female-nor-male sexed body ruptures the sexual and gender binary boundaries by its accidental and brutal containment of opposing binaries in one.

In the performance of “Wig in a Box,” Hedwig shows her epiphany about gender transformations. Hedwig reclines on a beat up couch like a confined Victorian woman. With only minimal accompaniment in the background, she begins singing a slow lyrical passage depicting imageries of darkness symbolic of her mundane and miserable life in Midwestern United States as a result of being left by Luther. As the tempo of the music and the volume of her band pick up, she sings about her transformation from a boy into a

woman (now with makeup and a wig). Yitzhak brings Farrah Fawcett's wig on a serving tray. Hedwig turns to it and smiles into the camera singing, "This is the best way that I've found/To be the best you've ever seen."

With a transition marked by a drum fill and glissando on the keyboard, the music progresses into a fast-tempo section. At this point, Hedwig's trailer home turns into a performance stage. Now standing in the middle of the stage, she is wearing a long straight blonde wig (resembling Cher's long straight rarified blonde hair) and a white two-piece outfit with long frills and tall white pleather boots. With a vocal exclamation, she sings: "Suddenly I'm this punk rock star/Of stage and screen/And I ain't never/I'm never turning back!" Shagging and groping the microphone stand (like Tina Turner), Hedwig is now a rock star. Her body gesture and her outfit make her look like an oversized wig. I read this moment to be Hedwig's full gender transformation as it coincides with her new identity of a rock musician. The performer's identity legitimizes the fluidity of her gender identity and performance. As her name and title of this song imply, Hedwig is now an embodiment of a wig, a quintessential cross-dressing accessory.

For Hedwig, this round of gender transformation can be characterized as do-it-yourself, similar to the DIY premise of punk aesthetics (Hebdige). Feeling disenchanted by Luther's leaving her, at the same time, oppressed by the heterosexual institution that rejects her ambiguous body, Hedwig takes the existing resources—her musical talent and her ambiguous gender "Angry Inch"—to remake herself into a glamorous punk rock star. While the sonic constitution of "Wig in the Box" is devoid of the aggressive punk sonic and gestural signifiers, it is in the lyrical and performance context of this song that Hedwig openly identifies and announces her new identity as a punk rock star. The punk style is not literally employed, but the punk spirit is evoked through Hedwig's DIY, defiant, and self-empowering attitude against the world that has victimized her. With her neither-nor anatomical sex, now enhanced and legitimized by her power to perform as a punk rocker, Hedwig wields her queer body symbolically to defy the clean-cut sex and gender division in Plato's *Symposium*.

#### **WHOLENESS: HEDWIG'S RELATIONSHIPS AND SEXUALITY**

Hedwig never explicitly identifies herself using any of the three sexuality labels from Plato. I explore the dimension of Hedwig's sexuality in the context of her relationships with the three men in her life—Luther, Tommy Gnosis, and Yitzhak. As a way to position Hedwig's attitude toward love, I begin by discussing the movie's most conspicuous allusion from Plato's *Symposium* in the musical number "The Origin of Love."

Hedwig's voiceover narrates how she was "touched by many people" in her life—first as a seven-year-old boy in East Berlin by his American G.I. father. The picture then transitions into Hansel's drawing of two male bodies lying in bed. At this point, the music begins and the camera shows a very femme Hedwig onstage solemnly singing "The Origin of Love" with stick-figure animation projected on the screen behind her. The song's lyrics and the animation narrate the Aristophanic mythology starting from the original human forms to the gods' dividing them into halves. The song ends with Hedwig's voiceover stating her desire to find her other half. She then poses a series of questions about the gender attributes of that person, whether that person is a he or a she, whether that person is identical or complementary to Hedwig in appearance. She then questions whether sex is the way to put the halves back together and the possibility of that recovery.

I read the introduction of the song, about Hansel's being touched by his father, as crucial for establishing the onset for Hedwig's curiosity, if not inclination toward, male-to-male eroticism. The song's literal reference of Aristophanes' mythology should be read in the context of the narrative progression, especially since the song comes back in a different rendition in the end (which I will discuss in the next section). Occurring early in the film, the "Origin of Love" sequence can be interpreted as Hedwig's contemplation about sexuality in general—reading her ruminations as being literally enacted by the animation onscreen. And the questions she poses about her sexuality set the movie off as a quest for the answers to these questions. Before tackling these questions, I should turn toward the other people who have touched Hedwig on her quest for her love.

With Luther, a very macho black American G.I., Hansel is a bottom gay boy. The story of meeting Luther begins when Hansel remembers his leftist mother's lesson that "it's better to be powerless." Upon first meeting him, Luther first assumes that Hansel is a girl. Luther gives Hansel a bag of candy establishing his identity as a Sugar Daddy to Hansel. After having sex with Hansel, Luther says that he cannot believe Hansel is not a girl, revealing his satisfaction with being Hansel's top. Hansel then analogizes his satiating experience of being penetrated to the sweet taste of "power" in his mouth. The lyrics of "Sugar Daddy" are explicit about Hansel's position of orally receiving Luther's penis. Hedwig sings, "I've got a sweet tooth/For licorice drops and jelly roll,/Hey Sugar Daddy/Hansel needs some sugar in his bowl." The jelly roll reference echoes with its euphemistic signification for either female or male sexual organs within the traditional blues repertoire. Though the sexual ambiguity could connote a queer sexuality, what seems more primary is the reference that further accentuates Luther's Americanness and blackness, considering the history of blues as an African American aesthetic form. Read with the stereotypical cultural image of threatening

hypersexualized working-class black men in the United States, Luther's blackness along with his Midwestern trailer-trashiness can feed into the characterization of Luther as Hedwig's sexual top (Collins). Later in the song, Hedwig sings about disco, a gay-male signifier based on its historical existence as a dance subculture dominated by white and black gay men in urban centers in the United States (Dyer; Hughes). The song ends with a spoken part by Luther who pleads for Hansel to cross-dress for his satisfaction. The extent to which Luther tops Hansel is shown by Luther's eventual success in convincing Hansel to literally become a woman by getting a sex-change operation.

With Tommy Gnosis (formerly Tommy Speck), Hedwig is a bottom femme. At work as a babysitter for Tommy's baby sibling, Hedwig sees Tommy Speck, the androgynous seventeen-year-old pretty-faced white boy, frustrated with his adolescent attempt to get off in a bathtub. Hedwig, being older and more sexually experienced, gives Tommy a hand job. Hedwig subsequently falls in love with Tommy. Their sexual relationship marks Hedwig as the bottom whose role is to give Tommy sexual pleasure through blowjobs and hand jobs. Beyond sex, Hedwig is a source of knowledge for Tommy. Hedwig's drawing of the symbol of gnosis on Tommy's forehead is symbolic of her giving Tommy a new life as Tommy Gnosis the rock star.<sup>7</sup> The name Gnosis, which is the Greek word for knowledge, is important because it is the object passed down from a teacher to his young disciple in ancient Greece.<sup>8</sup> As we find out later in the plot, Tommy co-opts Hedwig's original songs and publicly claims authorship over them. Their relationship in terms of creativity and knowledge resonates with their sexual relation: Hedwig gives while Tommy receives.

Hedwig never gets what she wants from Tommy—love. The relationship is not reciprocal in a way that satisfies them emotionally. Being maternal and nurturing to the young Tommy, Hedwig has unconditional love for him. In a coffee shop, Hedwig sings and dedicates "Wicked Little Town" to Tommy. Looking femme and fragile with subdued makeup and a shoulder-length blonde flip, Hedwig sits on a stool with her legs crossed tightly. Gazing straight into the camera, which then connects her gaze with Tommy's, she expresses her desire to love and protect Tommy: "And if you've got no other choice/You know you can follow my voice/Through the dark turns and noise/Of this wicked little town." In a couple of scenes later, Tommy refuses to engage in sexual activities that involve the front of Hedwig. We find out that it is Hedwig's not-so-womanly genitals that repel Tommy. This dynamic allows Tommy to continue to top Hedwig emotionally and sexually. This is reinforced by Hedwig's femme gender, of her onstage and offstage appearance, in the context of her relationship with Tommy.

Hedwig and Yitzhak have a regular sexual relationship as well as a legal marriage, though their relationship is never at any point marked by love. Hedwig's total dominance over Yitzhak is consistent throughout the movie. Onstage, Hedwig is ambivalent and sometimes aggressive toward Yitzhak. When Yitzhak wants to perform in drag, Hedwig bars him from doing so.<sup>9</sup> When Yitzhak wants to divorce, Hedwig refuses to sign the paper. Yitzhak's Bosnian nationality and his legal status as an immigrant in the United States impinge upon his marital affiliation with Hedwig. Yitzhak's ambiguous sexual and gender identity is ostensibly brought out by the incoherence of his high-pitched, feminine singing voice and his overtly masculine physical features, that is his uneven facial hair, a bandanna, and biker's leather jacket. In an interview, John Cameron Mitchell discussed the deliberate intention to cast confusing signifiers about Yitzhak's gender—as a way to express his endorsement of gender fluidity—by having a woman play Yitzhak (Mitchell). Though Yitzhak is located in a subordinate position in terms of his legal existence and his role in Hedwig's emotional and musical life, his unstable gender identity complicates his sexual relationship with Hedwig. This in turn obscures Hedwig's position on the sexuality typology.

Hedwig's sexual object choices vastly differ from one another in terms of gender and sex—Luther, a macho black gay man; Tommy, an androgynous young white man with a more or less straight sexuality; and Yitzhak, ambiguous with his masculine appearance and feminine voice. Moreover, Hedwig changes his anatomical sex and gender for Luther and his gender again to be more femme for Tommy. Certainly more complex than the three sexuality types in Aristophanes's speech, Hedwig's sexuality is hard to pin down. My reading of the first performance of "The Origin of Love" points to the idea that Hedwig contemplates and searches for her other half as the movie's narrative progresses forward. The ending of the movie is then crucial in solving the mystery about Hedwig's gender and sexuality and the connection, or disconnection, between the two.

#### **A DIFFERENT KIND OF WHOLENESS: HEDWIG'S FINAL TRANSFORMATION**

The open-endedness of *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is a point to puzzle over. The dense musical material in this part, with five musical numbers back-to-back, picks up the narrative pace and puts the viewer on a roller-coaster ride. Here Hedwig and Tommy Gnosis, now a famous rock star (whose looks resemble Lou Reed, an American glam rocker), reunite and their reunion causes a series of media scandals. After (or because of) the high media exposure, Hedwig appears onstage at Times Square, New York, where she is welcomed by a round of applause by the audience.

With hair like Dolly Parton or Tina Turner and a short fur coat over a transparently layered “dress” covering a two-piece outfit, Hedwig sings a lyrical ballad called “Hedwig’s Lament” with a piano-only accompaniment. Looking femme and fragile, Hedwig’s compelling lyrics are about the tragic events in her life—her botched operation and broken heart from her relationship with Tommy—all connected to the theme of division as figured by East Berlin, “a town ripped into two.”<sup>10</sup> Just when the melancholy saturates the atmosphere, the guitar picks up the rhythm by striking a few dry and aggressive chords that lead into another song “Exquisite Corpse.”<sup>11</sup> At this point, Hedwig takes off her fur coat and kicks her left leg to sing about her “sewn up,” “collage[d]” body. Contrasting the previous style, the music is now played with a fast masculine aggression. Kinesthetically, Hedwig enacts the brokenness of her body by flinging her body parts jaggedly. Even more butch and aggressive than her punk gestures in “The Angry Inch,” Hedwig starts banging the guitar on the sound system. With a musical chaos created by heavy guitar distortion and rhythmic irregularity, Hedwig takes off her wig, tears open her dress, and reveals her flat-chested he-she body. The song goes, “And all the rest’s illusion/That there’s will and soul/That we can wrest control/From chaos and confusion.” Crosscutting with Hedwig’s shedding of her drag accessories is a series of flashing images of her relationships with her father, Tommy, and Yitzhak.

Without the wig, which is symbolic of her last gender transformation, Hedwig’s gender is once again transformed. I interpret this moment of yet another drastic femme-to-masculine gender transformation to be closely tied to Hedwig’s frustrated sexuality. Hedwig’s abjection is induced first by his gay sexuality (as Hansel) leading him onto the path of sexual and gender ambiguity. Her gender ambiguity eventually leads to her failed attempts to find love, that is to consummate her relationship with Tommy. Hedwig is fed up with the way she has to conform to one of the binary gender types. The peeling off of his/her drag appearance can be read as a deliberate act to regain his/her gender autonomy in spite of his/her attraction to Tommy.<sup>12</sup> Hedwig realizes that *s/he* does not have to be femme in order to complement Tommy’s boyish effeminacy anymore.

Now with a bare chest of a man, Hedwig walks into Tommy’s performance space next door. Hedwig’s newly emerged gender makes him/her more like his/her previous pre-operation self—the young Hansel—or like Tommy who is standing at the opposite end of the screen. Let me consider the first reading that leads to the conclusion that Hedwig’s gender is reversed back to that of the young Hansel before meeting Luther. Read with Aristophanes’s mythology, is this a gesture that reverses the mythical splitting? This interpretation will take Eros out of the picture, implying that love simply does not matter. I should point out that loving Tommy Gnosis and finding the other half

constitute the driving force of the plot, which is structured around Hedwig's performances. Hedwig schedules the same tour dates and locations as Tommy Gnosis's concert tour, hoping to recover her relationship with him. In other words, without love or Tommy, the story would not exist.

So, does the new Hedwig look like Tommy? I should mention an important narrative detail that this Tommy—now with the name Gnosis—is not the same as the old Tommy Speck, the Jesus-loving youth from a small town. The transformation from Tommy Speck into the rock star Tommy Gnosis is actually Hedwig's creation (or cocreation with Tommy himself). It is Tommy Gnosis (now with the body of Iggy Pop and the face of Lou Reed) who is an imitation of Hedwig, not vice versa. Furthermore, Tommy Gnosis is Hedwig's musical copycat because he claims all the songs that Hedwig wrote as his, without giving Hedwig any credit. On stage, to Hedwig, Tommy sings Hedwig's tune "Wicked Little Town" with altered lyrics expressing his apology for not reciprocating Hedwig's feelings. Tommy rejects Hedwig by singing that he does not believe in preassigned "cosmic lovers."

Hedwig's response to Tommy's rejection is crucial. I want to read the subsequent musical number "Midnight Radio" as Hedwig's emotional response to Tommy and his/her new self. Now back on his/her own stage, wearing dark makeup, Hedwig is singing triumphantly with a positive reassurance while wearing on his/her forehead the same cross symbol as Tommy's. I argue that the meaning of this symbol remains the same on either of the two. For Hedwig, the cross symbol is a sign of a new life marked by knowledge, in this case, self-knowledge: "Breathe feel love/Give free/Know your soul/Like your blood knows the way/From your heart to your brain/Knows that you're whole." Hedwig wants (his/her audience) to love and be in love, to feel and be affected by Eros, while at the same time be in touch with oneself, not get overinvested in a relationship. Wholeness resides in oneself. Wholeness is not a self-contained sex or gender type, like the predivision human forms in Aristophanes's story. It is a process of becoming aware of one's gender identification and allowing it to transform through the experience of love. Departing from the Platonic idea of finding the predestined other half, wholeness is a vision of love that sees it as a journey in itself.

In "Midnight Radio," Hedwig is not only singing to him/herself, s/he is also singing to "all the misfits and the losers." To those living on the fringe of the society, especially to Yitzhak, Hedwig encourages them to be confident in their queer identities, to wield their power and to perform their identity. Hedwig's attitude toward Yitzhak changes here. Hedwig dances with Yitzhak for the first time. The closeup shot on their hands shows a sense of reconciliation. Singing "You're shining like the brightest star," Hedwig lets go of Yitzhak's hand as Yitzhak puts on a wig. This gesture signifies that Hedwig finally allows Yitzhak to cross-dress, an act that the latter has longed to do.

Similar to Hedwig's liberation, Yitzhak is now free to be himself without succumbing to Hedwig's control.

Before the ending credits begin, an alternative version of "The Origin of Love" animation appears on the screen. Here, the two opposing halves attempt to fuse into one and nevertheless bounce off of one another until they eventually merge into a larger, horizontally stretched oblong entity that differs from the circular figure of the original pre-split human forms in the first animation. I interpret the new oblong figure to mean a relationship that allows the two halves to coexist without having to conform to the original or prescribed shape. Echoing with Tommy's rejection of the notion of predestined lovers in his reprise of "Wicked Little Town," this idea disrupts the teleological order of Aristophanes' story. With that, the film's final message can be one that queers the idea that there is one predefined, essential sexuality type, be it homosexual or heterosexual. Instead, one's sexuality is defined and redefined moment-to-moment by the particular gender of the other person involved and the dynamic between the two people. This takes us back to the queer perspective that I discussed in this chapter's first section regarding the ideological and political stance that sexuality is fluid and unconstrained by binary gender and sexuality categories as well as by the norms that they implicate in our society.

The audience in the "Midnight Radio" scene departs from previous performance scenes in the way it is completely attentive to Hedwig's performance. These are the fans who not only accept Hedwig but also appreciate and celebrate her/him for who s/he is. The celebratory ending makes the movie a success story about a queer individual in terms of his/her sex, gender, and sexuality. John Cameron Mitchell and Stephen Trask cleverly incorporate conventional narrative themes—namely, self-discovery and finding true love—in order for the viewer to identify with Hedwig *despite* and *for* both her gender and sexuality.<sup>13</sup> *Hedwig* is different from *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, a classic musical film starring Tim Curry—infamous for his transsexual performances as mere spectacles with no points of empathy. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* is a drama that represents queer identities in positive light.<sup>14</sup>

As a theater performance, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* continues to be produced by theater companies around the nation and is received with positive attention—a testimony to its popularity, the film has made its way across the country on both large screens and home video screens. At a live performance of *Hedwig* that I recently attended, I was impressed by the positive vibe in the audience and was touched by how the show brought together many individuals from the local queer community. During the ending chorus of "Midnight Radio," I too "lift[ed] up [my] hands" in celebrating queer liberation. On the Internet, there are a number of active fan sites, populated by Hed-heads that are devoted to the interpretations of the

songs and the movie. While most of the reviews and interpretations I have found on the Internet (on discussion forums on fan sites and imdb.com) revolve around the movie's message of self-acceptance, I think the fans' collective effort in discussing their interpretations makes the film's message of self-acceptance a collective acceptance of queer identities. Many Hed-heads are queer individuals themselves and their forum discussion about *Hedwig* becomes a safe space for queer expressions and affirmation. I see this active Hed-head community as a subcultural movement of queer resistance. I consider myself a participant of that same resistance movement hereby having offered a perspective on the movie's political implications in our oppressive heteronormative society today. Ultimately I want to say that self-acceptance is not enough. Moreover, through my intellectual and sensual identification with the queer *Hedwig*, I hope to solicit my readers to consider and practice the societal acceptance of queer identities.

#### NOTES

1. The movie does not indicate whether Hedwig is on hormones. Hedwig's exposure of her flat chest in the end of the movie may indicate that Hedwig has not been on hormones.
2. This is discussed by the makers of the film in the documentary on the movie's DVD.
3. This is most evident in David Bowie's album *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* released in 1972 and the concert performances associated with the album. Furthermore, during the first musical number "Tear Me Down," Hedwig gets down on her knees and bites the wammie bar of her sideman's guitar. This is a conspicuous reference of David Bowie's Ziggy Stardust performance in which Bowie kneeled down to bite Mick Ronson's guitar, which was held in front of his crotch. This interaction suggests male-to-male oral sex.
4. Butler's paradigm also stands out in its account of power, and therefore of the oppression of women and minority sexuality groups, which are absent in Plato.
5. In a similar vein, Judith Peraino's uses *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* as an example in her lengthy chapter on popular music as a means of resistance against "technologies of power" that govern and regulate gender and sexuality (195). My interpretation, however, is more attentive on tracing the specific instances in which the film references Aristophanes's mythology to substantiate ideas about queer theory and politics.
6. I should note that the soundtrack of this scene is studio-recorded, just as all the other songs in the film. The production quality of the recording is polished, thus unlike the rough or do-it-yourself criterion evident in some of the recordings definitive of the punk genre. This tension between professionalism and amateurism is an ongoing internal debate among the people in punk scenes.

7. One could argue that the cross symbol is strictly a Christian symbol. My interpretation considers the Christian-ness of the symbol to the extent of new birth, but as closely tied to the Greek idea that knowledge is passed down from an individual to another, as in the Socratic master-disciple relationship.
8. The power relationship between Tommy and Hedwig can also be considered within the context of the Socratic model of power, sexuality, and knowledge. According to the model, the homosocial relationship between a teacher and a student is a sexual one in which the teacher is the penetrator and the student the penetrated. Hedwig teaches Tommy all she knows about singing and guitar playing, as well as about love, through the lyrics of the songs she wrote.
9. One of the deleted scenes of the movie indicates that Yitzhak was a drag queen when he first met Hedwig at a drag show in Bosnia. Another detail about Yitzhak's desire to cross-dress has to do with his relationship to Hedwig's wig. In the beginning of the film, we see Yitzhak touching Hedwig's wig. Later we find out that this doesn't mean that Yitzhak longs for Hedwig, instead longs to be like Hedwig. This complicates the distinction between sexual attraction and identification. This is a key point in the reading of the film's ending into which I will delve further in the next section.
10. While the words in this song "Hedwig's Lament" resemble those in "Tear Me Down," particularly the verbatim repetition of the first two lines, the words in the former emit a sense of melancholy of which the latter is devoid.
11. The song title has a connection to the Surrealist's game of making a body image that is comprised of randomly juxtaposed body parts each blindly contributed by each of the players involved in the game. The resultant body image often has incoherent sexed and gendered traits.
12. From here on, I'm using the gender pronoun that includes both genders in one to refer to Hedwig's new ambiguous gender.
13. Mitchell and Trask talk about this in the documentary about the making of the movie contained in the DVD, see *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.
14. Arguably, there are ways in which depictions of queer individuals as artists or performers can be politically regressive. Philip Brett argues that homosexual artists and performers have historically been contained in the society for their nonreproductive productivity in the arts. The queer labeling of (male) homosexual artists in the end can be just another way to conveniently stigmatize them.

#### WORKS CITED

- Bowie, David. *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*. RCA Victor, 1972.
- Brett, Philip. "Musicology Essentialism and the Closet." *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*. Ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary Thomas. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African American Gender and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

- Dyer, Richard. "In Defense of Disco." *Only Entertainment*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 157–62.
- Hebdige, Dick. *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. New York: Routledge, 1987.
- Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. Dir. John Cameron Mitchell. New Line Home Entertainment, 2001.
- Hughes, Walter. "In the Empire of the Beat." *Microphone Fiends: Youth Culture and Youth Music*. Ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose. New York: Routledge, 1994. 147–57.
- Mitchell, John Cameron. Interview with Cynthia Fuchs. "Anyone Can Put That Wig On." *Pop Matters*. 2001. 4 Apr. 2006 <<http://www.popmatters.com/film/interviews/mitchell-johncameron.html>>.
- Peraino, Judith Ann. *Listening to the Sirens: Musical Technologies of Queer Identity from Homer to Hedwig*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2006.
- Plato. *Symposium*. Trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.
- The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Dir. Jim Sharman. Perf. Tim Curry. Twentieth Century Fox, 1975.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. "Gosh Boy George, You Must Be Awfully Secure in Your Masculinity!" *Constructing Masculinity*. Ed. Maurice Berger, Brian Wallis, and Simon Watson. New York: Routledge, 1995. 11–20.
- Trask, Stephen. Libretto. *Hedwig and the Angry Inch: Original Cast Recording*. Atlantic, 1999.