



This Rough Magic

A Peer-Reviewed, Academic, Online Journal

Dedicated to the Teaching of Medieval and Renaissance Literature



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Reviewed Work(s):

Source: *This Rough Magic*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (January, 2010), pp. 76-100.

Published by: www.thisroughmagic.org

Stable URL: <http://www.thisroughmagic.org/garret%20article.html>

"Drama and Dyscrasia in Denmark: Hamlet as Female Prince"

by Nicole Garret

I grieve and dare not show my discontent, / I love and yet am forced to seem to hate, I do, yet dare not say I ever meant, / I seem stark mute but inwardly do prate, I am and not, I freeze and yet am burned, / Since from myself another self I turned.

(Elizabeth I, "On Monsieur's Departure")

It is possible to imagine that the other "self" in this poem is not "monsieur"^[1] but another Elizabeth, and that "turned" means "became" and not "turned away." The speaker, rejecting a final chance at love or friendship, has turned – or is turning – from coherence to discord between the self and the image. Indeed, the ability to be without seeming and seem without being is crucial to the Elizabethan enigma: the body is no transparent window to the heart. Though the queen has the body of a woman, she has "the heart and stomach of a king,"^[2] though playing a king, on the inside she is a woman, and a woman in love, too. This is the paradigm "with which England lived" for forty-three years before *Hamlet* was written, and its claims are an important thematic focus of the play.^[3] This paper, in part, looks at the way that Hamlet's experience resonates with Elizabeth's self-fashioning, not only in terms of his own dissembling, but also insofar as Hamlet's experience is presented as peculiarly female. Throughout the

first half of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses the vocabulary of humourism, and of the theatre as prostitution, and the antifeminist rhetoric of the day to create a character who experiences life as a prince and as a woman. These same devices work to re-masculinize him in the second half. Thus the story of Hamlet's revenge is also about reclaiming masculinity and, I argue, the dubious power of androgyny.

In making these claims, I am more interested in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ideas of femininity and female nature than twentieth-century psychoanalysis. Scholars have long recognized Hamlet's progress as moving toward maturity and independence, and from passivity to activity, but they have been less apt to see it as a reclamation of masculinity without the help of Freud. This might come from a desire to imagine Hamlet as a young man coming of age.^[4] But Hamlet is in fact thirty years old by the time the play opens, and one would hope he has gotten over his Oedipal complex by now.^[5] We need not credit the Bard with inventing yet another cultural icon when we know he was working from very rich, extant symbolic economies. A focus on humorism and early modern beliefs about women is an important way of understanding how *Hamlet* responds to the Tudor construction of royalty as popular, enigmatic and female; it also puts Hamlet's misogyny into a new perspective. If Hamlet is a woman in constitution and in conduct, what do we make of his anti-feminist rants?

In *Elizabethan Women*, Carroll Camden enumerates the faults and vices attributed to women in antifeminist literature: women were willful, covetous, jealous of their husbands' affections, inconstant, too desirous of sex and, of course, "they talk[ed] too much" (26). Most importantly, women are naturally dissembling and dishonest (27). John Knox adds madness to this list, but he omits dissimulation, probably loath to credit women with the ability to sustain a lie.^[6] But Knox, in conformity with early modern medicine, would have seen women as phlegmatic, therefore naturally cowardly and, if not dissimulative, prone to deceit. Each of the humors had its gender, its associated properties and its corresponding element on the Great Chain of Being. Women were associated with the baser elements, water and earth; men were fire and air. Men's constitutions made them prone to action whereas women were prone to indolence and laziness (Camden, *Renaissance Women* 18-19). Women were associated with what was cold, men with what was hot, wet or dry (McDonald 254).

In Act I, Shakespeare feminizes Hamlet by juxtaposition, antithesis and analogy. Fortinbras is Hamlet's most enduring foil. Both of their names appear for the first time in line 95. We learn nothing of Hamlet yet, but Horatio describes Fortinbras, "of unproved mettle, hot and full" (1.1.96), preparing to reclaim the lands his father lost. Fortinbras' mission certainly has an equal potential for tragedy, but his would be public, and maybe glorious, not the dark, domestic catastrophe that *Hamlet* is. When Hamlet appears in scene two, he is melancholic and pale. Gertrude says, "cast thy

nighted color off" (1.2.68). This suggests wanness as well as mourning attire. He is certainly nothing like the fiery prince of Norway. An "inky cloak" and "suits of solemn black" are, as he insists, unsatisfactory symbols of his *real* depression. When he is alone, he wishes his flesh "would melt into a dew," not burn to ash. Hamlet suffers from too much black bile and phlegm. He is also associated with their corresponding elements, earth and water: he seeks his father in the dust, and "must throw to earth this unprevailing woe" (1.2.107). His wish to melt to his death is also an indication of phlegm--cowardice. When Claudius says, "'Tis and unmanly grief" (1.2.94), he articulates the doubts that this scene has already begun to raise about Hamlet's masculinity.

This parental intervention into Hamlet's melancholy is very public. He is not given the benefit of a private audience, nor is his request heard first. Hamlet is moping around while Claudius dispatches letters against Fortinbras' attack, and grants Laertes' request to return to France: "Take thy fair hour, Laertes. Time be thine,/ And thy best graces spend it at thy will" (1.3.62-3). Laertes remains on stage as the prince of Denmark is admonished and his request to return to Wittenberg is rejected. One could imagine that the visible differences between them--Hamlet pale and rejected, Laertes vigorous and successful-- might serve to reinforce the idea that Hamlet has been denied the freedom and dignity allowed to other men. He is, instead, subject to the will of his mother: "Let not thy mother lose her prayers, Hamlet" (1.2.118). Hamlet will repay these

insults later, but not until his father's ghosts provokes him to ire, both in relating the story of the murder and in further questioning his son's manhood. By that time, revenge is not enough; it must be accompanied by Hamlet's public emasculation of Claudius, and reclamation of his place in the gender-power hierarchy. This is not thoroughly accomplished until after everyone is dead.

In Act I, Hamlet is subordinated to Laertes, but his predicament is very similar to Ophelia's. Like Hamlet, she is not only told what to do, but also what to think and how to feel. She is also circumscribed by the will of a parent and, like Hamlet, she gets to be present on stage whilst Laertes' independence is encouraged. Polonius does not tell Laertes how to feel, except perhaps a sense of self-determination suggested by "to thine own self be true"(1.2.22). Hamlet and Ophelia are given no choice but to dissemble.

Polonius says,

Think yourself a baby
That you have taken these tenders for true pay
Which are not sterling. Tender yourself more dearly,
Or—not to crack the wind of the poor phrase,
Running it thus—you'll tender me a fool (1.3.105-08).

In short, Polonius commands Ophelia to think of herself as a baby, but behave like a wise woman, not like a "green girl" (1.3.97). He is also asking that she disguise her affection for Hamlet, which, of course, she must still feel without seeming to feel. This is a prelude to the theatrics she will be forced to take part in later. The woman's

subordinate position means she is forced into dissembling. When Polonius claims that Hamlet walks with “a larger tether”(1.3.125) he suggests perhaps more than he means to: that while Hamlet has a longer tether, he is still tethered, like Ophelia but unlike Laertes. Laertes makes a similar suggestion when he tells Ophelia that Hamlet’s “will is not his own”(1.3.17). He slides without much transition from describing the inconstancy of a prince to describing that of a maiden. One would be surprised if Ophelia did not feel more fellowship with Hamlet than with her family after these discussions. Hamlet, it seems, is more like the women than the men.

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark (1.5.90)

Hamlet’s subordination may have as much to do with royalty as intemperament and, as the play shows, dissimulation is a necessary attribute of both royalty and femininity. But Hamlet is far from being the only Dane with an imbalance of humours. In fact, dyscrasia may be something of a national epidemic. In the first scene, Francisco complains, “’Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart”(1.1.7). When Horatio sees the ghost, he turns pale, and fearful. When Hamlet and Horatio complain of the cold and anticipate the appearance of the ghost (1.4) the power of suggestion might make the audience feel cold and afraid as well. The cold, the recent death of the king and the appearance of the ghost have contributed to make at least some of the young men of Denmark sick, pale and cowardly. Hamlet’s monologue on his uncle’s revelry says much about the state of Denmark:

This heavy handed revel east and west
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations
[...]
So, oft it chances in particular men
That for some vicious mole of nature in them,
As in their birth—wherein they are not guilty,
Since nature cannot choose his origin—
But their o’ergrowth of some complexion,
Oft breaking down the pales and the forts of reason,
Or by some habit that too much o’erleavens
The form of plausible manners, that these men
[...] take corruption from that particular fault (1.4.26)

Hamlet suggests that the men of Denmark—and probably the women, too—are “oft” plagued by an intemperance that, resulting from either nature or habit, serves to make them seem inferior in the eyes of other nations. This particular sort of intemperance is as foreign to Hamlet as it is to Horatio. Claudius represents overabundance of air and the corresponding yellow bile: he is hot and moist, generous and lusty. To be sure, Claudius’s lust is a major source of angst. The ghost is preoccupied with incest. He spends seventeen lines talking about it, and far fewer on the fact that he was sent to his grave without confession. Later, Hamlet refers to his uncle as a Moor (3.4.67). Claudius, then, might work as another foil for Hamlet, since he has a preponderance of manly fluids.

There is reason to believe that Hamlet was not always the pale, melancholic young man he appears to be in Act I. Ophelia laments the change in him: “Oh, what a noble mind is here o’erthrown, /the courtier’s, soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue sword,/

th' expectancy and rose of the fair state"(2.1.148-9). And a similar transformation occurs later, right before our eyes, in Laertes, when he has been apprised of all that has happened to his father and sister. In a sense, Gertrude is right when she assumes that his father's death and her "o'erhasty marriage" (2.2.36-7) has had an effect on him, she is just fatally ignorant of his subsequent machinations. Perhaps, by virtue of his foreign education, Hamlet has been immune to the poison that is plaguing the nation. Horatio and Laertes, who are both foreigners for our purposes, certainly have been immune, but the longer they stay in Denmark, the more imbalanced, and the more like Hamlet, they become. Hamlet's appraisal of Osiric as exemplary of the young nobleman suggests that Denmark has entered a period of decadence. He says,

Thus

Has he—and many more of the same breed that I know the drossy age dotes on—only got the tune of the time, and, out of an habit of encounter, a kind of yeasty collection, which carries them through and through the most fanned and winnowed opinions; and do but blow them to their trial, the bubbles are out (5.2.175-81).

Osiric is happy to say it is cold when Hamlet says it is cold, and hot when Hamlet says it is hot (5.2.97). His temperament is not a matter of constitution but of suggestion. He is not ruled by nature, but by expediency.

Osiric is a minor character, but we can draw some parallels between him and Polonius. It is difficult to characterize either one of them in terms of humorism. They

are both simply hypocrites. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are also slimy flatterers, and doomed. They all demonstrate hypocritical, changeful natures and weak minds, which are the marks of renaissance femininity.^[7] Polonius is not the man he tells his son to be: he is not reserved in speech or judgment, and he goes to great lengths to “be false” to Hamlet. Polonius is the only one called “old man” in the play, and perhaps represents the source of general infection of the nobility. Hamlet shares some of the same qualities as Polonius: they are both associated with the theatre, they both talk too much about nonsense and they both thrive on misdirection and misinformation. But the difference is that Hamlet is faking it, and Polonius is not. The latter has experience of the theatre, but he cannot tell when someone is acting: “for to define true madness,/ What is it but to be nothing else but mad” (2.2.92-3). He has been a sycophant for so long that he is unable to recognize the difference between being and seeming. This is his tragic mistake and, as I will argue, the mistake that makes way for the tragedy that follows. Hamlet is not mad, and because they cannot conceive of the difference between being and seeming, they enable him to prolong the bloodshed.

As Marcellus says, “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.5.90) whether rotten from habit, an intemperate climate or dyscrasia, or a concatenation of all three.^[8] Hamlet, its “rose” has withered into an effete state that even the ghost recognizes: “I find thee apt;/And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed/ That roots itself in ease on Lethe Wharf, / Wouldst thou not stir in this” (1.5.30-2). This does not sound like a

compliment. Hamlet will do, but only because he is not quite as dull as a fat weed, because he only imperfectly demonstrates those qualities of lethargy and dullness suggested by this description.^[9] He is not too feminine to revenge his father's death, but he almost is. He cannot rush upon Claudius, as Laertes does later in the play, and take revenge. At this point we have a tragic character, but not a tragic hero. But forasmuch as his status as prince, and his melancholic disposition exclude the possibility of escape or immediate violence, they also present other ones. Hamlet will use the female power of the stage as part of a process of reclaiming masculinity. Shakespeare, by endowing Hamlet with first feminine and then masculine power, prolongs and complicates his tragic fate, taking on the supposed abuses of the theatre and exploring the enigma of the female prince.

The lady shall say her mind freely, or the blank verse will halt (2.2.314)

Hamlet, once he has become a practiced dissembler, receives two staged opportunities to repay Claudius for the humiliation in scene one. Claudius himself hosts the players in act three and the tournament in act five. Altogether, the Hamlet family puts their dirty laundry on promiscuous display three times, each time with an audience who is probably captive, aghast and very embarrassed. This might suggest anxieties about the corrupting influence of the theatre, which, beginning with Puritan attacks, finally found expression on stage.^[10] Puritans like Steven Gosson complained that the stage had a feminizing influence (Morgan 341) and that it deprived the nation

of productive labor, and that it was easily abused: "For as Poetrie and Piping are Cosen germans: so piping, and playing are of great affinity, and all three chayned in linkes of abuse."^[11] Hamlet's comment about lying being as easy as playing on a pipe is straight from the lexicon of those who see theatre as a form of abuse and prostitution.

Throughout the play, Hamlet recognizes the dubious power of the stage, but in his use of it is initially very effective in determining whether his revenge is justified. Indeed, it is innocuous compared to the other devices Hamlet uses to recover his masculinity.

Before Claudius provides Hamlet with players, stage and audience, Hamlet practices at dissembling. The effect of this is to make him seem more harmless and effeminate than he already is.^[12] Considering his later analogizing himself to a castrated rooster, he may have had this expressly in mind. He experiments with costume at the beginning of act two; when he appears, half dressed, in Ophelia's closet he is harnessing both the spectacular power of the dumb show and the erotic power of the theatre. This is a prelude to their confrontation in act three. Hamlet is fond of dumb shows and preludes. Part of his genius is that he is always giving away the secret. He tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern that he is not mad: "my uncle-father and aunt-mother are deceived [...] I am but mad north by northwest. When the wind is southerly, I know a hawk from a handsaw" (2.2.360-64). He tells his mother: "It is not madness that I have uttered" (3.4.143). Despite his assertions that he is not mad, he continues to act as though he were mad, and is therefore reported to be mad. Giving away the plot, in a

dumb show or in an open confession of sanity, does not shatter the illusion. Hamlet attests to the illusory power of the theatre when he says,

Oh, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!
Is it not monstrous that this player here could
Force his soul so to his own conceit
That from her working all his visage waned,
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting
With forms to his conceit? And all for nothing! (2.2.527-35).

At first Hamlet seems to echo some of the complaints about the theatre as “monstrous,” but it becomes clear that his objection is to it being used for no good purpose. Hamlet is not yet the actor that the first player is, and yet the player can achieve nothing without “the cue for passion” (2.2.539) that Hamlet has. This is where the prince decides to make his transition from actor to dramatist. As an actor, he has not made any great progress toward his revenge; he has, at most, inflamed Ophelia’s desire^[13] and frightened his mother. The play, on the other hand, will help him “catch the conscience of the king” (2.2.584).

Although “The Mousetrap” is an encouraging prospect, it is by no means preferable to the kind of direct, heroic revenge that Hamlet feels he is unable to take: “This is most brave,/ That I, the son of a dear father murdered,/ Prompted to my revenge by heaven and hell,/ Must like a whore unpack my heart with words/ And fall a-cursing, like a very drab” (3.1.361-65). The act of writing that “dozen or sixteen lines”

(2.2.519) is akin to whoring and witchcraft, but he *must* do it. Why must he? Ernest Jones suggests that Hamlet is attempting to suppress his darker motive: punishing Claudius for his incest (Jones 249). I would argue that his hesitation has more to do with his status as a prince. Hamlet's uncle is well loved, so precipitous action would be dangerous and might fail. As a prince, he is the obvious choice to succeed to the throne, so it is very possible that his life has been in danger since the first scene of the play. Perhaps this is what Hamlet alludes to when he berates himself for being "pigeon-livered" (2.2.555). But just because he feels like a coward does not mean his choice is not overdetermined.

By the end of the second act, Hamlet abounds with analogies to the Elizabethan stage and the Elizabethan court. Elizabeth also hesitated in punishing those who offended her.^[14] She was, like Hamlet is, a patron of the arts, particularly the theatre, which she used for political purposes.^[15] She was also a scholar, a poet and according to Gaia Servadio, she was "sexy and she knew she was barren" (201). Thus Hamlet's exploitation of the players, his affected erotomania, his androgyny and his political position might have struck notes already familiar to Elizabethan audiences. In Stephen Mullaney's reading of *Hamlet*, he compares Gertrude to Elizabeth. The latter was a highly sexualized figure whose sexuality became more alarming as she aged. Therefore, Hamlet's anger toward his mother is a matter of "obsessive disgust over what has failed to die" (150). Certainly it is rewarding to read *Hamlet* with Elizabeth I in mind; however,

if we consider that Hamlet has been subordinated and feminized throughout the play, Mullaney's reading of Hamlet's misogyny must be expanded to include Hamlet's self-loathing. In "Feminist Misogyny: Mary Wollstonecraft and the Paradox of "It Takes One to Know One," Susan Gubar asks, "If Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* embeds within it a misogynist text,^[16] do Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Rousseau's *Confessions* and Freud's "Fe-Male Sexuality" contain antithetical feminist subscripts?" (464). It would be difficult to deny that Hamlet is a misogynist text. For one thing, its hero does not succeed in his revenge through feminine dissembling. He succeeds after a series of sanguinary acts that serve to restore his manhood. On the other hand, the process of reclaiming masculinity puts Hamlet on the short path to a bloody death. Hamlet's speech to Ophelia in the third act shows ambivalence toward gender differences:

Get thee to a nunnery. Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest, but yet I could accuse me of such things as it were better my mother had not borne me: I am very proud, revengeful, ambitious, with more offenses at my beck than I have thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape, or time to act them in (3.1.119-25).

Although he culminates in the assertion that "wise men know well what monsters you [women] make of them" (3.1.136-7), Hamlet rails against men and women

throughout. Men are the sinners that women breed. We must remember that Hamlet thinks that earth as “a sterile promontory”(2.2.290), that “Denmark is a prison” (2.2.239) that “man delights not [him]”(2.2.399) and that he is “a rogue and a peasant slave”(2.2.528). If we can find one thing that Hamlet does not hate, then perhaps we can call Hamlet a misogynist. He does not seem to hate his father, but his father is dead and therefore subject to the whims of nostalgia. Neither is *Hamlet* a misogynist play. The feminized Hamlet is successful, maybe even productive, though miserable; the masculine Hamlet is a force of destruction, committing crimes that make those who would sympathize with him have to think again. What is to be feared and wondered at in this play is not the mysterious difference between sexes, but the possibility of an individual possessing the qualities of both at different times. A man can be phlegmatic, and woman can be sanguine, but what happens when both tendencies are at war within one person, and that person is a prince?

During the staging of “The Mousetrap,” Hamlet comes to the end of his feminine tether. When Claudius inquires how Hamlet fares, the latter responds by hinting at his own castration: “Excellent, I’faith, of the chameleon’s dish; I eat the/ air, promised crammed. You cannot feed capons so” (3.2.87). What this suggests is that, as far as Claudius is concerned, Hamlet is as dangerous as a castrated rooster, but cheaper to feed.^[17] Claudius dismisses this as nonsense, though it is not clear whether this is because he does not understand it, or because he does not believe it: “I have nothing

with this answer, Hamlet. These words are not mine" (3.2.88). Throughout the performance, he chatters on like a woman is supposed to do: Ophelia says, "You are as good as a chorus, my lord" (3.2.228). The dumb show, the incessant chatter, and the final thrust of the play itself are a perfect storm, and Hamlet proves himself to be more powerful than he has appeared to be. This is Hamlet's last act as female prince and it is an act of transference. It brings Claudius to his knees, but it does not, contrary to what Hamlet believes, make him repentant: "Try what repentance can. What can it not?/ Yet what can it, when one cannot repent?/ O wretched state, O bosom black as death,/ O limed soul that, struggling to be free art more engaged" (3.3.64-69). Claudius cannot repent, but he looks the part, enough so that he saves himself from Hamlet's sword for another day. Here, again, we see the advantage of dissembling. Through "The Mousetrap," Hamlet sheds his feminine role and Claudius assumes it. Hamlet pronounces the king's emasculation when he says: "My mother. Father and mother is man and wife, man and wife is one flesh, and so, my mother. Come, for England!" (4.3.50-51). Claudius is part of one flesh, and that flesh is the woman's. When Laertes later asks him why he does not just punish Hamlet publicly, the first reason is Gertrude. The second is the love that the multitude bears for their prince. Thus we see in this reversal that dissimulation is necessary for survival even at the top of the Great Chain.

Thought and affliction, passion, hell itself! She turns to favor, and to prettiness
(4.5.184-85).

After the mousetrap, Hamlet reclaims masculinity by violence. He kills Polonius onstage, orders the execution of his schoolmates, slays Laertes and, finally, takes vengeance upon his uncle.^[18] What explains this sudden choler? Of course, the aftermath of “The Mousetrap” provides Hamlet with a sort of proof, at least in his eyes and in Horatio’s. But this desire to prove the honesty of the ghost is articulated only after Hamlet is presented with the means—the players. There is something else going on in this shift from pretense to “bloody deed” (3.4.27). Hamlet’s public exposure of the king’s guilty conscience is reprisal for his humiliation in the first act of the play. When Hamlet calls Claudius “mother,” it is also in public. Hamlet’s subordination, his feminized position, has to be reversed before he can act like a man.^[19] But while he regains his manhood, he retains the feminine capacity for dissimulation. He is now such a master that he can see through the king’s deceptions: “I see a cherub that sees them”(4.3.46). He has retained the art of writing fictions: when he tells Horatio how he has had Rosencrantz and Guildenstern executed, he says, “Ere I could make a prologue to my brains, they had begun the play”(5.2.30). Hamlet is still writing tragedies, but these have real bodies attached to them. Horatio responds, “why, what a king is this!” (5.2.63), he might just as easily be referring to Hamlet’s Machiavellian strategies as Claudius’s. When Hamlet explains that he has used his father’s signet ring to condemn Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he testifies to the power of royalty. Hamlet’s androgyny

represents a real threat to the social order. As a prince, a woman and a man, he is a master dissembler, a spinner of tales, and a relentless executioner.^[20] While this does not suggest that Shakespeare saw Elizabeth's androgyny as dangerous in her particular circumstances, Hamlet's androgyny is an interesting idea of what might happen if a male prince were struggling with sexual identity.

Fortinbras example helps Hamlet to determine how he will balance action and restraint: "Rightly to be great/Is not to stir without great argument,/ But greatly to find quarrel in a straw/ When honor's at the stake [...] Oh, from this time forth/My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth!"(4.5.65). It seems he can throw restraint out the window. However, if Hamlet's thoughts have not been bloody since "The Mousetrap," his deeds certainly have been. These deeds seem not to be enough for him. There is one insult that has gone unanswered: the towering presence of Laertes in the opening scene. Their presence in the last scene as brothers and equals, in injury and in death, is a visible reconciliation of the discord in the first scene.

Hamlet can shake off his feminine tether, but Ophelia cannot. This is perhaps the most tragic part of the play. The queen can keep her wits in such an environment, but sad is the plight of the common woman. Ophelia's death is so pathetic that it quite undoes her brother:

Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
And therefore I forbid my tears. But yet
It is out trick; nature her custom holds,
Let shame say what it will. [He weeps] When these are gone
The woman will be out. Adieu, my lord.
I have a speech of fire that fain would blaze,
But that this folly douts it (5.1.186-192).

The woman's condition, when it turns tragic, can doubt the male spirit and is therefore bad for everyone. This is perhaps one place where Hamlet may contain an "antithetical feminist subscript" while simultaneously being antifeminist (Gubar 464). Laertes mourns for his sister, but he does not accept any responsibility for her death. He has been just as instrumental as Polonius in forcing her to deny her feelings and her thoughts. All three men in her life have driven her to madness and suicide. The careful reader is therefore not likely to take Laertes' misogyny as wisdom. At any rate, Laertes' claim about expelling the woman through tears is not borne out by his subsequent behavior. He makes one mad rush at Hamlet during the graveyard scene, but he is silent after, and he waits to plot behind the scenes with Claudius for his revenge. There might be something to the double-loss constituted in a father's murder and a woman's destruction that, perhaps, has the power to bring down even a Laertes or a Fortinbras.

But, sure, the bravery of his grief did put me/ Into a tow'ring passion (5.2.77).

Ernest Jones sees Hamlet's acceptance of the jousting contest as yet another distraction from taking his revenge, but as I have suggested, the scene is important to our understanding of how Shakespeare resolves the disorder at the beginning of the

play. Laertes is the favorite, and Claudius has enhanced the young man's reputation in order to entice Hamlet: "And set a double varnish on the fame/ The Frenchman gave you" (4.7. 133-34). We have to wonder at this point whether the reputation the Frenchman gave Laertes was at all influenced by the contrivance of Polonius and Reynaldo in the first act. At any rate, Claudius and Laertes set the stage for another performance that is uniquely well suited to Hamlet's needs. Battling the reigning champion at jousting is a perfect way to reclaim one's sense of masculinity, especially if that champion has contributed to its loss. Before the joust begins, Hamlet still doubts his masculinity: "But thou wouldst not think how ill all's here about my heart; but it is no matter [...]it is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gaingiving as would perhaps trouble a woman"(5.2.200). He is momentarily troubled by something that would perhaps trouble a woman. This suggests that there is still work to be done. Once he and Laertes are reduced to common circumstances, Hamlet is able to complete his work, and die. But the results of this reclamation process are pitiful, rather than heroic. Hamlet, Laertes and Gertrude are dead, and Horatio is suicidal, all in the defense of masculinity. Polonius, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead because the revenge plot has to be prolonged while Hamlet works out his inferiority complex.

The power that Hamlet is able to derive from his experience of androgyny is a dubious one. When Fortinbras arrives on the scene to have the last word, he says,

Let four captains
Bear Hamlet, like a soldier, to the stage,
For he was likely, had he been put on,
To have proved most royal; and for his passage,
The soldiers' music and the right of war
Speak loudly for him.
Take up the bodies. A sight such as this
Becomes the field but here shows much amiss
Go bid the soldiers shoot (5.2.380-67).

The dyscrasia in Denmark has brought down the royal family without a fight, but Hamlet has recovered his masculinity not only through choler, but also through the confirmed sympathy of his erstwhile foils. The result of androgyny, far from a glorious battle, is a prolix bloodbath. Fortinbras has Hamlet's "dying voice" (5.2.341), but the story Horatio relays to him could not be much like the story I have outlined here. Instead, it will be a story that shows Hamlet in a light that confirms that he would have "proved most royal." In allowing this description to be the last we hear of Hamlet, the text undermines some of its most compelling claims: that Hamlet has not been "most royal," that he has "been put on" and that has, for his deceit and hesitation, thought of himself as a cowardly woman. When Hamlet says to Horatio, "tell him th' occurents, more or less,/ Which have solicited" (5.2.333-34) he is instigating another, posthumous recovery of his manhood, a focus on events and deeds, but not the internal struggles that provoked them. These existential crises make him an interesting tragic hero, but they are difficult, as Fortinbras suggests, to square with royalty and nearly impossible to elegize.

It is almost impossible, but this is Shakespeare. *Hamlet* combines the introspective insight of Elizabeth's poem with the subtle and complex staging of action, and it tells the whole story. What cannot be said is performed; what cannot be acted upon, love, for instance, is professed. At the end of Elizabeth's reign, the Elizabethan stage imagines the drama of the female prince as a prolonged tragedy, with uncertainties of self and of sex, of what is illusive and what is sincere, attendant even on its last moments.

Endnotes

[1]_Supposedly either the Earl of Essex or the Duke of Anjou. See Bradner's note in the edition cited.

[2]_Elizabeth I, Speech to the Troops at Tilbury, August 9, 1588.

[3]_Naomi Conn Liebler points out that the image of Elizabeth in armor was "an image with which England lived for forty-five years"(21). Although she does not discuss Hamlet himself, her explanation of the female tragic hero as essentially no different than the male has been influential in suggesting this project to me.

[4]_Steven Mullaney also suggests "we all want [Hamlet] to be younger than that"(155).

[5]_Ernest Jones goes so far as to suggest that Shakespeare alighted on the Oedipal complex three hundred years before the rest of the world (249).

[6]_"Nature, I say, does pain them forth to be weak, frail, impatient, feeble, and foolish; and experience has declared them to be inconstant, variable, cruel, lacking the spirit of counsel and regiment"(Knox 15-16). Knox argues that women rulers are unnatural and sinful, but he also seems fixated on making the case that they are, in practical terms, too inept to lead. He could not be making a case against Elizabeth, however: this was published during the reign of Mary I.

[7]_As Camden points out, women had their defenders as well as their detractors, but Hamlet himself has more affinity with Elizabeth than any of the types to which men referred in their defense of women.

[8]_According to Naomi Conn Liebler, “tragedy always tells the tale of a culture in crisis” (3). In my assessment, Denmark’s crisis is foremost a matter of dyscrasia.

[9]_The footnote to my edition tells me that “fat” means torpid and lethargic and the “Lethe” is the river of forgetfulness in Hades (30). Dullness and dissipation were associated with an overabundance of phlegm.

[10]_See Joseph Lenz, “Base Trade: Theatre as Prostitution.” His article examines the way Troilus and Cressida responds to and reifies the theatre as a form of prostitution. This article is helpful in characterizing the stage as female in Hamlet, since it connects it to the kind of flagrant temptation associated with women prostitutes. I argue that in Hamlet, Shakespeare focuses on the power of the stage; it is a subversive power, but Hamlet’s initial use of it is apt.

[11]_The *Schole of Abuse*, 1579 .

[12]_In “Wonder Woman, or the Female Tragic Hero,” Liebler asserts that the Revenge Tragedy genre is a feminine form. She sees Ophelia as an “equal and opposite double” but does not extend this insight to see Hamlet as feminized. As a female prince, he is less opposed to Ophelia than he might seem.

[13]_Carroll Camden, in “Ophelia’s Madness” says that Elizabethan audiences would have recognized in Ophelia the signs of Erotomania or Passio Hysterica.

[14]_I am thinking Mary Stuart, but I know there were others.

[15]_Note the way Hamlet defends the theatre in 2.2 and wields control over the production in 3.2.

[16]_The text that it embeds within it is *Hamlet*.

[17]_Again, the footnote in my edition helped me interpret this line.

[18]_As I indicated in an earlier footnote, he is also implicated in Ophelia’s suicide in several ways. He has murdered her father, and broken her heart. She may also believe he is dead. Camden suggests in “Ophelia’s Madness” that Hamlet’s “to be or not to be” speech might have encouraged her suicide.

[19] My purpose is not an analysis of Hamlet's psyche but an analysis of the way Shakespeare uses doubles, foils and analogies both to draw characters and explain action.

[20] Part of the justification for the subordination of women was their "potential for destructive power" (Brown & McBride 126). All women, if they could, would usurp the power of men, and use it unwisely. Brown and McBride suggest that women were, despite their circumscription, numbered amongst subversives of all kinds.

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