

"Dost Know This Water-fly?" – Effeminacy in Shakespeare

by David P. Gontar (March 2014)

1. Introduction

Unlike his predecessor, Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), many of whose works reflect affirmative interest in male sexual irregularity, the writings attributed to William Shakespeare are consistently orthosexual, treating deviations as unsalutary and symptomatic of social necrosis. In an age in which sexual “ambiguity” is celebrated and promoted by a veritable orgy of sensationalist journalists, psycho-babbling critics, and “queer theorists,” it's not surprising that many are anxious to enlist the prestigious “William Shakespeare” in the cause. Unfortunately, such efforts are vain and doomed to failure, for they must always be conducted at the expense of content. In what follows we examine several Shakespeare plays to reveal his negative assessment of effeminacy and male intimacy.¹ We will find that readings of Shakespeare which allege same-sex promotion are doctrinaire and intellectually transgressive.

2. A Sparrow Falls, Look Out Below!

A few notes snatched from the rising chorus should suffice. In a recent essay, “*A Sparrow Falls: Olivier's Feminine Hamlet*,” Prof. Sky Gilbert announces that Prince Hamlet is an “effeminate” character: “A close reading of the text of *Hamlet*, and also an examination of the text in performance, reveals [sic] that . . . issues of effeminacy and sexuality are and have always been central to our perception of one of Shakespeare's most famous plays.” (240) Critics “often discuss his effeminacy.” (241) “I would suggest that Hamlet is effeminate – by both early modern and contemporary standards – and that the transhistorical link between homosexuality and effeminacy makes any discussion of Hamlet's characteristics necessarily a discussion of his sexuality.” (241)

“O this learning, what a thing it is!” (*The Taming of the Shrew*, I, ii, 157)

Hamlet criticizes himself for being more womanly than manly, and is clearly not secure in his identity as an adult male. Indeed there are moments in the play where Hamlet points to his own effeminacy, characterizing himself as more like a boy or a woman than a man. One of the essential distinctions made between men and boys in Shakespeare's day was facial hair, and when Hamlet discourses on his own cowardice in his second soliloquy, he

imagines himself beardless: "Am I a coward? Who calls me villain? Breaks my pate across? Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?" (Gilbert, 242)

How might this show or tend to show him to be "effeminate"? Keep in mind that one advancing the novel and significant thesis bears the burdens of proof and persuasion. These are forensic obligations of the affirmative position occupied by Dr. Gilbert. Let the standard be a mere preponderance of the evidence. Are those burdens successfully discharged? Unfortunately not. We are reminded that Hamlet, a university student at Wittenberg, sports a beard, certainly not the rule for male undergrads. According to Dr. Gilbert, a beard is – none too surprisingly – a token of masculinity. Hence, the evidence adduced supports the contrary proposition. Hamlet is manly, not feminine.

What actions or features of Prince Hamlet are consistent with "effeminacy"? Does he lisp? Exhibit a mincing gait? A limp wrist? No? There must be something else, then – but what?

Yes, he is certainly beset by self-doubt. This may be the result of his inability to fulfill his pledge to the ghost in Act 1, scene 5 to avenge the King's death by slaying Claudius. But is murder a stroll in the park? How many young men among us could plunge a deadly blade into the bowels of the reigning monarch? If a scholar is reluctant to return his books to the library and rush out to publicly butcher a family member and sovereign on the asseverations of a "ghost," does that suggest he is "effeminate"? *Non sequitur*. Or, looked at subjectively, if he laments privately the fact of his inability to become a bloody regicide, and frets about his puissance in the process, do those perfectly understandable doubts entail "effeminacy"? Not at all. To think that way is to give the word a new wrinkle indeed. But the plain fact is that Hamlet's malaise commences not in the second soliloquy (II, ii, 551-607) but the first (I, ii, 129-159), at which point he has not yet been apprised of the late King's assassination. Yet here he already contemplates suicide ("self-slaughter") (II, ii, 132) That's pretty serious. What's ailing him? Many wish they knew. Though T.S. Eliot is correct to have observed that a mere hasty remarriage on the part of his mother is insufficient to account for the Prince's anguish, he is wrong to contend that there is no reasonable explanation. First of all, it is plain that Hamlet expected to inherit the throne from his father, but arrives in Elsinore to discover his amiable uncle's derriere resting on it. (Gontar, 399-401) Second, there is a not-so-subtle implication in those hasty nuptials, namely, that they may be a mere rubber-stamp placed on a pre-existing misalliance of some vintage. And that in turn raises the uncomfortable question of Hamlet's own provenance and legitimacy. These issues are never squarely faced, however, either by Hamlet himself or by our incisive pundits. As a result, he has continued to be an enigma. Psychologically speaking, it

is easier for him to seek refuge in doubts about his resolve to commit murder (colorfully repackaged by Dr. Gilbert as “effeminacy”) than it is to face the deeper and more imposing issues of lost crown and illegitimacy, which would undermine his very identity, and suggest the loathsome “uncle” is none other than his biological father.

Utterly insensible of these considerations, then, textual tourists must either throw up their hands in blank despair with Eliot, and set down the world's greatest tragedy as an artistic “failure,” or, with A.C. Bradley, seek out a psychological syndrome to account for Hamlet's self-hatred. When that is done, tragedy shrivels to melodrama. It is not difficult for a critic preoccupied as is Dr. Gilbert with same-sex relations to attribute to Prince Hamlet an uninviting quality such as “effeminacy.” It's a cinch to throw mud, especially if you think your target looks better wearing it. But such an offhand rubric constitutes nothing less than a disinclination to think, an abdication of critical responsibility. If one wanted to contend that Hamlet is “effeminate,” the most forthright way to do it would be to cite with particularity aspects of his activity, deportment and demeanor which have been acknowledged by critical consensus to be so. There is no such consensus. Above all, one would want to be quite sure one possessed the most cogent and up-to-date exegesis of the material. Do we?

Alas, at this point, Dr. Gilbert's golden words are spent. The argument begins to circle the drain.

A few lines later, Hamlet criticizes himself for his lack of action and obsession with talk by comparing himself to a female prostitute: “Must I like a whore unpack my heart with words, And fall a-cursing like a drab, a stallion?” Shakespeare could not be clearer that Hamlet is emasculated by his own lack of action.” (242)

Not at all.

To doubt one's solvency is not necessarily bankruptcy. To play the valetudinarian is not to be ill, nor is stewing about one's measure of manhood the same thing as effeminacy. More plausibly, what is at stake in this context is Hamlet's personal identity and unwillingness to face the possibility that he might be a court bastard who never had a chance to take the throne.

Near the end of the play, Hamlet again compares his misgivings about the upcoming duel with Laertes as womanish: “It is but foolery, but it is such a kind of gainsgiving as would perhaps trouble a woman.” (242)

Hamlet has an eerie premonition he may not survive a sporting match with blunted weapons. And he does not. When the shadow of death gives a man concern, shall we say his apprehensions of mortality are symptoms of "effeminacy"? To pose such a question is to have our answer: no.

Dr. Gilbert tries to argue that Laertes exceeds Hamlet in masculinity, but is brought up short by the fact that Laertes sheds tears while "effeminate" Hamlet does not. (242-243) He then falls back into the worst position of all, clinging desperately to Eliot's strained contention that there is no "objective correlative" and that Hamlet is deeply yet gratuitously neurotic in relation to his mother. (245) This ground has been trodden to death and has rarely if ever been thought to yield "effeminacy." That was certainly not Eliot's conclusion.

In short, Dr. Gilbert doesn't even come close to demonstrating an effeminate protagonist in *Hamlet*