

HAMLET AND THE FRAILITY OF WOMAN

David Roberts

The interval which elapses between the death of Old Hamlet and the remarriage of his widow used to be a matter of concern for critics and editors anxious to map out the time schemes of Shakespeare's plays and to determine the reasons for Hamlet's uncertainty about the facts. The fallacies of such approaches have long been apparent¹, and annotation of references to time in the plays has either disappeared or simply remained entrenched in the old ways. Consider, for example, editorial attention to the first soliloquy in Hamlet, where the Prince says that his father is "But two months dead - nay not so much, not two", and then narrows the scope still further:

Why, she would hang on him

As if increase of appetite had grown

By what it fed on, and yet within a month -

A little month, or ere those shoes were old

With which she followed my poor father's body...²

G.R. Hibbard, the Oxford editor, ignores the discrepancy, presumably in the light of revisionist criticism, and again declines to annotate when the matter re-surfaces in Act III, with Ophelia's reminder to Hamlet that the King died "twice two months" ago (III.ii.118-91. Harold Jenkins of the Arden Shakespeare also declines to intervene but says of Ophelia's later reminder that,

Without taking it too strictly, this, along with I.ii.147-56, 176-9. implies the passage of three months between Acts I and II³

Jenkins ventures with greater caution a position favoured by Dover Wilson and Bradley before him, but this surely is having one's cake and eating it: simply to state such an implication in these terms is too strict.⁴

An alternative explanation merits the attention of future editors. N.H. Keeble's recent Reader, *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman*, documents in detail the widespread Renaissance belief that woman's sexual behaviour was governed by the cycle of her womb. "To the womb and its humoral complexion", concludes Keeble, "were attributed a whole series not only of physical ills but of mental aberrations and temperamental defects..., particularly those quintessentially female complaints, irrationality, uncontrollable passion..and hysteria or 'womb disease',.." ⁵ This argues the need for a more careful note on "frailty" than is provided in Hibbard's edition, which helpfully cites the proverb. "Women are frail" (Dent W700.1), but refrains from specifying the cause as it was understood in Renaissance anatomy. Hamlet's re-iteration of the "month" or "little month" it took Gertrude to re-marry suggests that what Jenkins interprets as a reference to linear time has more to do with biological time. and that Hamlet's distraction is evident not in amnesia but in the revulsion towards the female body which he shares with the disillusioned Posthumus and numerous other tragic heroes. Shakespearean and otherwise ⁶. The initial calculation of "But two months dead" must be discarded because it is insufficient to the facts of the case as he observes them: where woman's frailty is concerned, everything hinges on the passage of that "little month". If Robert Burton believed the "suppressed period" to be familiar among "more

ancient maids", the remedy for which is speedy marriage⁷, Hamlet is outraged that his mother's anatomy still functions like that of a younger woman:

You cannot call it love, for at your age

The heyday in the blood is tame, it's humble ...(III.iv.69-70).

There is a further dimension to this question. What has been proposed is not exactly an allusion, since I have not been able to find a specific text which mirrors Hamlet's words. All editors, nonetheless, locate problematic passages within a discursive context which appears plausible and helpful. It might prove a useful endeavour to examine what criteria of plausibility and helpfulness are used by which recent editors in annotating key passages of this kind, and to what extent the process of editorial filtration is one of literary-theoretical engagement. This is offered in a spirit of friendly inquiry by someone who has found references to theologico-political controversies more favourably treated than ones, as in this example, to discourses of the female body.

- See, for example, Emrys Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1971), pp.41-65.
- *Hamlet*, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Oxford, 1987), I.ii.138, 143-8. Subsequent quotations from the play are taken from this edition.
- *Hamlet*, ed. Harold Jenkins (London and New York, 1982), note to III.ii.126).
- A. C. Beadley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1904), p.121; John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in Hamlet* (London, 1935), pp. 73, 93, 202, *passim*.
- N.R Keeble, 00., *The Cultural Identity of Seventeenth-Century Woman. A Reader* (London, 1994), pp. 19-20.
- *Cymbeline*, ed. J.M. Nosworthy (London, 1955), II.iv.153-86.

I am not aware of any works of feminist criticism which note the significance of this "little month" to Hamlet: see, for example, Valerie Trau, *Desire and Anxiety* (London, 1992), and Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers* (London, 1992), which includes a detailed analysis of the first soliloquy.

- *Anatomy of Melancholy*, I.iii.2 (4), quoted in Keeble, *op.cit.*, pp.35-7.