A Sparrow Falls: Olivier's Feminine Hamlet

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In 1921, Clemence Dane's *Will Shakespeare* opened in London. Largely forgotten now, Dane's play portrayed a Shakespeare who kills Christopher Marlowe in a fit of jealous rage because both are enamored of a young actress who enjoys dressing as a boy. The reviewer in *The Times Literary Supplement* was both appalled and unforgiving: "we do not believe, and do not wish to believe, that Shakespeare was like that." [1] Present day Stratfordians who vehemently oppose Oxford as a possible candidate for the "real" Shakespeare, rarely speak with such candor. However, Alan Nelson in his recent biography of Edward de Vere, *Monstrous Adversary*, frankly admits he intends to destroy Oxford's reputation in order to challenge the likelihood that Oxford could have written Shakespeare's plays: "Oxford has also been touted, for the last eighty years, as the author of the poems and plays of William Shakespeare. It has become a matter of urgency to measure the real Oxford against the myth." [2]

Particularly interesting is Nelson's focus on what he obviously perceives as one of Oxford's most significant character flaws: his alleged propensity for buggery. One of the chapters in *Monstrous Adversary* is titled "Sodomite," and in his introduction Nelson finds fault with one of the earliest and most prominent Oxfordians, Bernard M. Ward. Nelson suggests that in Ward's biography of Oxford "solid information is thus suppressed in the interest of good form, and also, in Ward's case, to protect Oxford's reputation." [3] What "solid information"? Nelson suggests Oxford's enemies accused him of being a sodomite but "where anyone who casts half an eye over the libel manuscripts in the PRO [Public Record Office] will encounter the words 'sodomy' and 'buggery,' Ward retreats into circumlocution."[4] The accusation of sexual non-conformity has often been laid to Oxford's charge. To A.L. Rowse in the Frontline *Shakespeare Mystery*, it is self-evident that Oxford was a "roaring homo" — Shakespeare, correspondingly, was "abnormally heterosexual." The Nelson-Rowse approach makes two questionable assumptions — first, that a great artist must necessarily be a "good" person, and second, that homosexuality is a flaw unlikely to be found in a man whom many consider to be the greatest poet of all time. Whatever Oxford's sexuality, he was clearly not a homosexual by modern terms. We do know

that he was married to two women by whom he had five children, and a mistress by whom he had another child. Moreover, none of the charges of buggery made against him by Howard and Arundel, themselves accused by Oxford of high treason, resulted in prosecution by the Queen's government. That Oxford may well have been bisexual, on the other hand, seems plausible on several counts, including internal evidence from the plays.

The issue of exactly how "flawed" the personality of a great artist may conceivably be is too complex to deal with here. But the assumption of homosexuality as a personality flaw is reflected in the 20th century critical interpretation of *Hamlet*, and in 20th century films and theatrical productions of the play. Nelson's character assassination of the Earl of Oxford is a typical manifestation of the difficulty that western culture has had, historically, with accepting male effeminacy and its perceived link with same-sex desire. This struggle is reflected in recent productions of Shakespeare's work as well as in the plays themselves. The contrast between Laurence Olivier's iconic 1948 film of *Hamlet* and Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 version starring Mel Gibson provides a penetrating lens to examine Shakespeare's work in relationship to same sex-desire.

Queer theory has rejected the notion that the homosexual character type as we know it today had much to do with same-sex desire during early modern England. Few would deny that same-sex desire existed at the time, but sodomy – the word that was most often associated with it during the Renaissance – had an enormous number of associations:

> Sodomy is, as a sexual act, anything that threatens alliance – any sexual act, that is, that does not promote the aim of married procreative sex (anal intercourse, fellatio, masturbation, bestiality – any of these may fall under the label of sodomy in various early legal codifications and learned discourses) [. . .]. These acts – or accusations of their performance – emerge into visibility only when those who are said to have done them also can be called traitors, heretics, or the like, at the very least, disturbers of the social order that alliance – marriage arrangements – maintained. [5]

In other words, the definition of sodomy in the early modern period was fluid, and though that definition was associated with what we would now call "gay" sexual acts, it was not necessarily limited to them. It is interesting that Nelson in his "Sodomite" chapter also mentions an accusation of bestiality hurled against Oxford when he glancingly mentions that "evidence for Oxford's bestiality is entirely hearsay...." [6] Of course, the fact that Nelson deems it hearsay does not stop him from prominently mentioning it. But here Nelson finds himself implicated in the early modern tradition of associating sodomy with all things base, radical and threatening to traditional marriage.

A few pages after discussing Oxford's possible sodomitical and bestial practices, Nelson (in a chapter titled "A Passing Singular Odd Man") quotes Harvey's characterization of Oxford as effeminate: "No wordes but valorous, no workes but

woomanish onely. For life Magnificoes, not a beck but glorious in shew, In deede most friuolous not a looke but Tuscanish always.'" [7] Was effeminacy associated with same-sex desire during the Renaissance? Foucault theorized that the creation of the modern notion of the homosexual occurred sometime after the trials of Oscar Wilde; that it was not until 1900 that effeminacy became firmly associated with sodomy and created an understanding of what we now perceive as the modern homosexual character. But recently David Halperin has contradicted this queer theory orthodoxy, suggesting that effeminacy (along with pederasty, male friendship and passivity) have long been considered aspects of same-sex desire. Halperin posits that though the modern concept of the homosexual character is relatively new, some characteristics and behaviors associated with it today (i.e., effeminacy) may have also been associated with same-sex desire in the past: "the definitional incoherence at the core of the modern notion of homosexuality is a sign of its historical evolution: it results from the way homosexuality has effectively incorporated without homogenizing earlier models of same sex sexual relations and sex and gender deviance, models directly in conflict with the category of homosexuality that has nonetheless absorbed them." [8]

In other words, today we comfortably accept the stereotype of effeminate "designer guys" on television as typical homosexuals, whereas in the Renaissance – although effeminate men were not necessarily a homosexual type — effeminacy (along with male passivity, pederasty and male friendship) was associated with same-sex desire. For instance, in 1513 Spanish explorer Balboa fed 40 North American aboriginal men to his dogs. He apparently suspected them of sodomitical practices because they were effeminate, i.e., "bedecked in women's apparell." [9] In his book on boy actors, Robertson Davies quotes William Prynne, a post-Jacobean anti-theatricalist, who (writing in 1632) elaborates on the Renaissance association made between boys who dressed as women to perform the female roles in Shakespeare's plays, and sodomy: "Lastly, this putting on of woman's array especially to act a lascivious, amorous, whorish, Love-sicke Play upon the Stage…but likewise instigates them to selfe-pollution, (a sinne for which Onan was destroyed): and to that unnatural Sondomitacall sinne of uncleannesse." [10] Linda Dowling traces the history of what she calls "the effeminatus," i.e., the feminine male figure in her book *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford*. She suggests that western culture has been haunted by the fear of the effeminatus, who has always been associated with the failure of heterosexuality: "the issue of sterility[…]had always been central to the issue of effeminacy and the effeminatus." [11]

Utilizing the association of effeminacy and sodomy to denigrate a man's character is thus nothing new; and Nelson's focus on these so-called flaws in Oxford is consistent with the early modern notion of male weakness. But even if an effeminate sodomite had written Shakespeare's plays, what does that have to do with the work itself? If Oxford (or the man from Stratford) were effeminate sodomites, does that mean that they might have written about these subjects? Speculations about a dead author's intentions result in nothing more than that: speculation. But a close reading of the text of *Hamlet*, and also an examination of the text in

performance, reveals that, although Nelson's accusations against Oxford may simply be an attempt at character assassination, issues of effeminacy and sexuality are and always have been central to our perception of one of Shakespeare's most famous plays. Critics rarely raise the issue of Hamlet's sexuality, but they often discuss his effeminacy, sometimes openly, and sometimes in the context of his inaction. 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 feminine characteristics necessarily a discussion of his sexuality.

Hamlet's character "flaws" are relevant to the authorship question because Oxfordians have suggested that there are striking similarities between incidents in Oxford's life and the incidents in *Hamlet*. Stratfordians, on the other hand, often seem uncomfortable drawing comparisons between the man from Stratford and Hamlet's fictional life. Many Stratfordians would argue that Shakespeare's greatness transcends the trivial notion of autobiographical fiction, or quite simply that attempts to trace any author's life through his or her works is futile. But others see *Hamlet* as a play that can be contextualized biographically, for instance one written with reference to the son of the man from Stratford (Hamnet). Harold Bloom, for instance, suggests that Shakespeare may have been writing about his son:

> Moralists don't want to acknowledge that Falstaff, more than Prospero, catches something crucial in Shakespeare's spirit, but if I had to guess at Shakespeare's self-representation, I would find it in Falstaff. Hamlet, though, is Shakespeare's ideal son, as Hal is Falstaff's. My assertion here is not my own; it belongs to James Joyce who first identified Hamlet the Dane with Shakespeare's son, Hamnet who died at the age of eleven in 1596. [12]

Significantly, Bloom offers no justification for his notion that Shakespeare was writing about his son through the character of Hamlet. Perhaps this is because the tendency to think of Hamlet as a boy has a foundation in the text itself. The gravedigger refers to Hamlet as being thirty years old, saying that he became a sexton on "that very day that young Hamlet was born" [13] and has been sexton "man and boy, thirty years." [14] This statement of Hamlet's age seems to contradict what is evident – that Hamlet is still a student at the beginning of the play, as Claudius speaks of his intention "in going back to school in Wittenberg." [15] Elizabethan university students often graduated at the precocious age of seventeen, so scholars sometimes joke that Shakespeare made a mistake in the play (intentionally or not) by aging Hamlet thirteen years over the course of a theatrical action which seems to take considerably less time than that. But it seems clear that whether or not Shakespeare made a mistake about representing Hamlet's age, the play presents us with a character who is essentially more boy than man. The fact that Hamlet has the same name as his father requires that he be sometimes referred to in the play as "young" Hamlet. But, more than that, Hamlet's primary obsession is a child's obsession, not an adult's: his relationship with his parents. The plot of the play is focused upon Hamlet's anxieties

about his mother, his father, and his stepfather, and thus, no matter what Hamlet's actual age might be, perpetually a son.

Hamlet criticizes himself for being more womanly than manly, and is clearly not secure in his identity as an adult male. Indeed there are many 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 a villain? Breaks my pate across? Plucks off my beard and blows it in my face?" [16] 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 very drab, a stallion!" [17] Shakespeare could not be clearer that Hamlet is emasculated by his own lack of action. 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." [18]

Hamlet's effeminacy is most clearly evident in contrast to Laertes, who, though he is also young and concerned with issues of being a son to a dead father, acts and speaks like an adult, masculine male. In the final scene of act four, when Laertes learns of his sister's death, he allows himself to cry, but only briefly, acknowledging that to be ruled by grief, and its subsequent inaction, is womanish:

> Too much of water hast thou, poor Ophelia,
> and therefore I forbid my tears. But yet
> It is our trick — nature her custom holds,
> Let shame say what it will. [Weeps.]
> When these are gone
> The woman will be out. [19]

Laertes must apologize for his tears, which he cannot help but shed over his sister, but after shedding them, he must quickly leave that 'womanish' part of him behind, and move ahead to action, avenging her death. Laertes is the opposite of Hamlet in this respect; the prince spends the entire play ruminating on what course of action to take, consumed with grief for his father, and anger at his father and stepmother.

The Elizabethan theory of humors is relevant here: Temperaments were thought to be fourfold (sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric, and melancholic), and were associated with various degrees of wetness and heat. For Elizabethans the danger was that the individual might not maintain an balance among all four humors, but instead be consumed by an unhealthy disequilibrium. By shedding tears and moving on, Laertes is showing a healthy masculine reaction to his sister's death, because he does not linger in the moist, cold phlegmatic zone of misery (where, like Ophelia, he might drown). Hamlet, on the other hand, does not experience the healthy purging

of emotion and its resultant call to action; instead he dwells in an unhealthy area that many critics have associated with the humor of melancholia – coldness and dryness.

Hamlet is cold and dry because he lives excessively in his mind. As Marvin Hunt points out, melancholia was an illness Elizabethans associated with students and intellectuals: "Students, Democritus notes, are especially vulnerable because their lives are characteristically sedentary and devoted to study[....]They dote also because they are excessively contemplative, which 'dries the brain and extinguisheth natural heat.'" [20] Hunt's history of *Hamlet* criticism, *Looking for Hamlet,* makes it clear that approaches to the play changed significantly during the early 20th century. At that time the focus shifted from Coleridge's 19th century vision of a man of inaction, lost in thought, to A.C. Bradley's more modern early 20th century vision of a man incapacitated by mental illness.

From the outset, critics and adaptors of *Hamlet* over the centuries have hotly debated Hamlet's preference for thinking and worrying over acting to avenge his father's death. Some are uncomfortable with this important aspect of Hamlet's character. In Restoration productions of the play, Hunt tells us, "aspects of Hamlet's character that register indecision, obsessive thought and melancholy were cut[....] Betterton's Hamlet is no 'dull and muddy-mettled rascal'; he does not accuse himself of being a coward, of being 'pigeon-livered' and lacking gall[....]but much else that indicated Hamlet's 'sensitivity and intellectuality' was removed." [21] Hamlet's inability to find a balance between action and thought (which is at the very center of his effeminacy) was thus less accentuated in 17th century productions of the play.

As Hunt observes, it took Samuel Taylor Coleridge (more than a hundred years later) to forge a penetrating analysis of *Hamlet* that foregrounded Hamlet's deeply indecisive nature, suggesting it was dramaturgically and thematically significant. Coleridge's interpretation of Hamlet's "madness" acknowledges that, although Hamlet may be putting on an "antic disposition" to fool his stepfather, he is also, through his obsession with the workings of his own mind, commenting on the relationship between language and truth. Hunt suggests that Coleridge views Hamlet's madness as a representation of a profound imbalance, not only between thought and action, but between reality and fantasy:

> By considering the relationship between thought and action, Coleridge introduces a reading of *Hamlet* that underlies virtually all modern (and postmodern) positions on the play, one that hinges upon a belief that reality is a matter of perception, of thought; nothing is either good or bad, as Hamlet says, but thinking makes it so.[22]

Hunt suggests that A.C. Bradley (writing about Hamlet a little more than a hundred years after Coleridge in 1904) brings us the first psychoanalytical analysis of Hamlet which, paradoxically, challenges Coleridge's characterization of Hamlet as a man of inaction, and suggests that instead he is the victim of an illness: "Bradley concurs with what he calls the modern 'pathologist' who 'emphasizes that Hamlet's melancholy is no mere common depression of spirits,' but rather a form of 'mental

disease.'" [23] Finally, Hunt suggests that Bradley's interpretation opened the door to the perception of Hamlet as being mentally ill in the modern sense, although Bradley himself doesn't see Hamlet as melancholic or insane, but, rather, pathologically depressed (admittedly a fine distinction).

T. S. Eliot's analysis of *Hamlet* followed Bradley's. It is significant not only because he introduces the idea of the objective correlative, or even because he famously labels the play an artistic failure. It is also significant because Eliot (though he seems on the surface to reject the notion of psychoanalyzing Hamlet) exemplifies the 20th century insecurity about Hamlet's sexuality: "*Hamlet*, like the sonnets, is full of some stuff that the writer could not drag into light, contemplate or manipulate into art." [24] Of course what has perplexed critics about the sonnets for centuries is the fact that so many are unapologetically addressed to a young man. Eliot also says that "intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known; it is doubtless a study for pathologists"[25] – suggesting that Hamlet's excessive love for his mother is an Oedipal problem requiring psychiatric intervention. Significantly, Eliot characterizes Hamlet as a not fully mature male: "It often occurs in adolescence: the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feelings to fit the business world." [26] At the end of his essay, Eliot suggests mysteriously that in *Hamlet* "Shakespeare tackled a problem that was too much for him. Why he attempted it at all is an insoluble puzzle; under compulsion of what experience he attempted to express the inexpressibly horrible we cannot ever know." [27] Eliot seems to be suggesting that Hamlet's childish attachment to his mother, and his over-emotionalism, as well as perhaps his homosexuality ("stuff that the writer could not drag into light") makes the character unsuitable as a subject of tragedy.

Eliot's essay is important because it exemplifies the dead end that is the unavoidable consequence of the 20th century obsession with psychoanalyzing Hamlet. Eliot believes that to pathologize Hamlet is to erase his profundity as a character, but that Shakespeare's play makes that kind of pathologizing inevitable. Hamlet is not man enough to be profound; he is an adolescent, swamped with feeling and concealing secrets that are more suited to a psychiatrist's couch than a tragedy. Is it possible to take such a misshapen personality – underdeveloped, womanish, and adolescent – seriously? Laurence Olivier and Franco Zeffirelli may or may not have read Eliot's essay, but their films present distinctly polarized responses to Eliot's thesis. The 20th century saw the birth of the concept of the effeminate homosexual type (and the consequent pathologization of homosexuality), so directors of *Hamlet* necessarily must decide whether or not to interpret Hamlet as feminine; for an effeminate Hamlet may be a homosexual Hamlet, or at the very least one who is neurotic but not profound. Olivier's 1948 film offers an unapologetically feminine version of the character, a person who is more boy than man, challenging Eliot's notion that a deeply tortured, adolescent Hamlet is not the proper subject for tragedy. In contrast, Zeffirelli's 1990 film, starring Mel Gibson, attempts to redeem the character by portraying Hamlet as a masculine man of action.

Significantly, Olivier's film begins with quotations summarizing Hamlet's problem that might very well have been taken from Coleridge's analysis of the play. *Hamlet* is "a tragedy of a man who would not make up his mind." [28] Olivier must have been aware of a female character who would have been well known to British and American audiences in 1948, when his film was made – Liza in *Lady in the Dark* (the famous Weill/Gershwin musical). *Lady in the Dark* opened in 1941 in New York City and starred one of Olivier's friends, Gertrude Lawrence. In the hit show, Lawrence portrayed a woman whose difficulty making up her mind was so central to the plot that at the climactic moment of the play the chorus sang to her: "Anyone with vision/ Comes to this decision:/ Don't make up your mind!"[29] Liza was a neurotic woman who, like Hamlet, could not make important decisions in her life, and the play was centered around her visit to a psychiatrist's office.

Olivier's portrayal of Hamlet is (on the surface at least) distinctly boyish and feminine. Olivier was forty-one when he played the role, far older than the fictional character. His Hamlet sports striking blonde hair styled in a Little Lord Fauntleroy cut, frilly necklines and tights. The camera first catches him sitting in a chair with his leg out and his hand resting limply on the armrest. The outward appearance of Olivier's Hamlet is strikingly unmanly, in part simply because it is odd to see a man Olivier's age dressed in such a fashion. His actions suit his attire: This Hamlet cries when his father tells him that he was murdered by Claudius, and faints after The Ghost exits. His tone with Ophelia is predominantly gentle, and he delivers the "to be or not to be" soliloquy reclining on a rock. He spends much of his time sitting and contemplating as the voiceovers of soliloquies run through his head.

Mel Gibson's Hamlet makes a very different impression. Unlike Olivier, Gibson is much closer in age to any one of Hamlet's possible ages (Gibson was thirty-four when he made the film) and he sports a full head of dark hair and manly beard. Though the Zeffirelli film contains no opening phrase to encapsulate it, accompanying the film on DVD is an interview with Gibson in which he says of Hamlet, "he may have been brooding and introspective but he was also an athlete." [30] This quote summarizes the almost crusading nature of Gibson's anti-wimp approach to the character. Unlike Olivier, Gibson never wears tights, though he does sport tight leather leggings. Early on Zeffirelli and Gibson take advantage of several opportunities to establish the character's masculinity. For instance, after the Ghost exits, as Hamlet speaks of writing it all down ("My tables! meet it is I set it down)," [31] Gibson jumps about and waves his sword in vengeful fashion, in stark contrast to the text's suggestion of Hamlet's thoughtfulness. Gibson even manages to make Hamlet's famous entrance a moment of fierce activity: he rips pages out of his book while supposedly reading, and throws them on the floor. This makes it questionable whether this Hamlet is, indeed, much of a reader at all.

But the difference between the two Hamlets is most starkly evident through their relationships with others. For instance, Olivier excises Rosencrantz and Guildenstern from the film. This is possibly because the two young men are characterized by Claudius as "being of so young days brought up with him." [32] The aging Olivier may well have looked incongruous chumming about with two post-

adolescent boys in his frilly neckwear and tights. Zeffirelli and Gibson, on the other hand, give special pride of place to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, emphasizing the manly bonding that Gibson's character has with his boyhood chums. In the second scene of Act Two (when Hamlet first meets the two in the play) they are outdoors, and Hamlet savagely devours a piece of meat. Zeffirelli frames the scene as a visit – by a bunch of young rascals – to an adventure hut they often frequented as boys.

In contrast, although the character of Osric is a very important in Olivier's *Hamlet*, his role in the Gibson/Zeffirelli version is circumscribed. Described as a "waterfly"[33] by Hamlet during his meeting with the character late in the play, Osric is an obvious flatterer in both movies (and in the text). Olivier goes one step further and turns him into a classic homosexual character type in the Oscar Wilde tradition – not merely unctuous but absurdly effeminate. This characterization serves to distance Olivier from homosexuality. Whether this was a conscious motive on Olivier's part, one cannot say. At any rate, Olivier's thoughtful, blonde, beardless Hamlet seems more substantial in contrast to the girlish Osric, substantial in a way he might not have appeared in contrast to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.

Another boyhood friend of Hamlet's, Horatio, is also downplayed in the Zeffirelli/Gibson version. His final discussion with Horatio before the duel with Laertes is significantly cut. For instance, the line, "there is special providence in the fall of a sparrow"[34] is removed, moving the emphasis in the speech from Hamlet's acceptance of fate to a more fighting-ready line, "the readiness is all"[35] (Zeffirelli also cuts the key line in this scene where Hamlet expresses his fears that would "trouble a woman.") In contrast, Olivier frames this scene on a beautiful stairwell with the two passing open windows, and the lines about fate, and Hamlet's feminine fears are included.

But for anyone wishing to compare different directorial approaches to the play is the closet scene between Hamlet and his mother. The films approach it very differently. In both movies Hamlet climbs into bed with his mother – but this often happens in productions of the play, partially because it takes place in Gertrude's bedroom and partially because there is some suggestion of an inappropriate or even incestuous love/hate relationship between mother and son. But, though both Hamlets end up in bed with Gertrude, the scenes have different implications. Gibson jumps into bed with his mother violently, in a way that, if it suggests anything sexual it all, it would be rape. Certainly the action is violent enough to justify Gertrude's urgent questions – "What wilt thou do? Thou wilt not murder me."[37] In contrast, the approach that Olivier makes to his mother is sexual – a case of arrested sexual development, or at least of extremely inappropriate intimacy. In both films, Hamlet kisses his mother on the lips; however, Olivier's Hamlet, who is usually indecisive and inactive, initiates the kiss, whereas Gibson is clearly kissed *by* his mother *against* his will. Olivier's obsession with his mother in this scene offers a practical solution to the dramaturgical problem of the dead body of Polonius lying behind the arras. Both mother and son ignore it because their relationship with each other is so overpowering that even a dead body in the same room cannot compete.

The difference between these interpretations exemplifies the fundamental difference between the movies and their approaches to the play's theme. Olivier's Hamlet kisses his mother passionately, obeying an impulse that he himself clearly doesn't understand. By the end of the scene he has his head in her lap and is clearly relishing the attention from her, almost as if he has finally wrenched her away from Claudius and gotten her all to himself. Gibson's Hamlet, by contrast, is passionately kissed by his mother; he is clearly horrified, and attempts to move away from her.

Olivier's Hamlet is not so much a stranger in a hostile world but is trapped in a universe of his own creation, one that horrifies him, and from which he can't escape. He is truly mad; the tortuous universe that he lives in is the product of his own intense and overwrought thinking. He is not only a man who cannot *make up* his mind, but one who *lives in* his mind, not necessarily *on* this earth. As Hamlet says (in a phrase which though justly famous, is only to be found in the Folio) "nothing is good or bad but that thinking makes it so."[37] Gibson, on the other hand, takes Marcellus' "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark"[38] quite literally – his Hamlet is no modern anti-hero who has created a nightmare life from his own fevered imagination. Instead he is a noble, reasonable man struggling in an evil, disordered world.

Gibson's Hamlet is certainly a thoughtful man as well as one of action. The difference is that his obviously uncompromising analytical brain is weighing evidence throughout the play, trying to figure out if in fact the Ghost has been telling him the truth. He clearly would act if he had enough evidence. He is a reasonable man (much like modern day reasonable men) who will not believe a ghost (no matter how real it seems) until he is sure that the ghost's claims are actually true. These moments of evidence gathering and thought are quite clear in Act Three, as Hamlet watches Claudius watching the play, and later decides not to kill Claudius when he is praying. Olivier, on the other hand, is a melancholic in the original Renaissance sense, a man who thinks too much about things in general. Olivier's film offers us a series of moments in which we are offered the opportunity to watch Hamlet thinking through and experiencing various epiphanies of emotional and intellectual agony. One of them is when Hamlet calls Claudius "mother" in Act Four. Claudius asks Hamlet to explain his remark and Hamlet says, "My mother. Father and mother is man and wife. Man and wife is one flesh. So – my mother." [39]

This is one of the many moments (another is when Hamlet is musing over Yorick's skull) when Olivier's Hamlet endures a painful transformation before our eyes. He is imagining his stepfather and mother having sex when he speaks to Claudius of being "one flesh" with his mother; and he is horrified, disgusted, disappointed and frightened – by their bodies, and by the human body in general. Similarly, he is deeply moved by the notion of how close we all are to death when he speaks about Yorick. Indeed Hamlet's realizations almost all concern the body, its immediacy and primacy, in contrast to the human brain that is, paradoxically, part of the body, and yet is the only organ through which we may think about the physical world. Olivier's Hamlet reaches the point where he releases himself to fate, and brings us the achingly beautiful attack on Claudius. He flings himself across the

room from the stairs, and flies, literally – like a bird or an avenging angel – finally giving himself up to his inexorable fate. In other words, even Olivier's final "act" is not so much an act, as a relinquishing of his will to live, as it is a fall from a great height (literally) and a graceful, eloquent, melancholic release. In contrast, Gibson, in typical heroic fashion, clearly relishes his battle with Laertes and his opportunity to kill Claudius. His final calm is that of a man who has "done the right thing" and has acted decisively, as a masculine man always should.

Olivier is, of course, a much better actor than Gibson, but this is a moot point. Zeffirelli has craftily created a film that Olivier would not have been comfortable in, but that Gibson is very at home with as an actor, a typical patriarchal tale in which a young man learns how to grow up and ultimately revenge his father – a saga of masculinity learned, tested and finally triumphing. Olivier also created for *Hamlet* the kind of acting opportunities that matched his talents, but these are opportunities that Shakespeare offers to any actor, male or female, who is willing to faithfully play the character he created.

Shakespeare's Hamlet is more than simply indecisive. He is a person who confronts the very tenuous, complex and ultimately incomprehensible relationship between the mind and the body. But when Fortinbras kisses Hamlet's brow at the end of Olivier's film, he leaves us with the idea that Hamlet's femininity – his sensitivity, his thoughtfulness, his susceptibleness to feeling, and his hesitation to act – represents the epitome of humanity, in fact the most human way to be. Olivier invites us, through Fortinbras' kiss, to love even this freakish, blonde, limp-wristed, melancholic, overgrown boy. He bravely suggests that this Hamlet is the best that we can be – not a strong king, but a "sweet prince" and a fallen sparrow. Why? Because Hamlet's center was his and our noblest, and most human, part – his mental and spiritual being.

If, as I am suggesting, Olivier's conception of Hamlet is closer to the playwright's original conception, does it bring us any closer to discovering the identity of the "real" Shakespeare? Perhaps not. But we can learn one thing: Shakespeare was a man who, through what is arguably his greatest character, dared to valorize the feminine, and portrayed it as the best in us all.

Endnotes

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6 Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary,* 217.
7 Nelson, *Monstrous Adversary*, 226.

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[14] *Hamlet*, 5.1.153.
[15] *Hamlet*, 1.2.113.
[16] *Hamlet*, 2.3.506-508.
[17] *Hamlet*, 2.3.520-522. It is interesting to note that "stallion" is defined in the Arden edition as a male prostitute.
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[21] Hunt, *Looking*, 98-99.
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[24] Eliot, T.S. *The Sacred Wood*. London: Methuen , 1920, 133.
[25] Eliot, S*acred,* 93.
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[27] Eliot, S*acred,* 94.
[28] *Hamlet*. Dir. Laurence Olivier. Perf. Laurence Olivier, Basil Sydney, Eileen Herlie, Stanley Holloway, Jean Simmons. Criterion, 1948. DVD.
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[30] Mel Gibson. Interview. *Hamlet*. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Perf. Glenn Close, Alan Bates, Paul Scofield. Universal, 1990. Video.
[31] *Hamlet*, 1.5.107.
[32] *Hamlet*, 2.2.11.
[33] *Hamlet*. 5.2.69.
[34] *Hamlet*, 5.2.197-198.
[35] *Hamlet*, 5.2.200.
[36] *Hamlet*, 3.4.20.
[37] *Hamlet*, Appendix, 466.
[38] *Hamlet*, 1.4.90.
[39] *Hamlet*, 4.3.49-50.