

Hamlet and the Limits of Euphuism: A Response to Frederick Kiefer

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Abstract

The response paper challenges Frederick Kiefer's argument that the euphuistic quality of Hamlet's “What a piece of work is a man”-speech can be held accountable for its ambiguity. It argues instead that Hamlet's speech is not as euphuistic as Kiefer claims and that the ambiguity of the speech is less related to its presumed euphuistic nature but rather to Hamlet's use of irony throughout the play.

In his analysis of Hamlet's famous “What a piece of work is a man”-speech, Frederick Kiefer argues that the lines express “a sharp incongruity” (30) between Hamlet's feelings and his description of the “most excellent canopy” (2.2.265). According to Kiefer, this incongruity illustrates the double objective of the passage as both a sincere expression of Hamlet's feelings and as a “pose concocted to insulate the prince from those who would ferret out the secret of his transformation” (26-27). Kiefer's main argument is that the euphuistic quality of the speech can be held accountable for this ambiguity. By way of their euphuistic style, Hamlet's lines, like Lyly's prose style, invite the dialogical exploration of themes and the “unwillingness to arrive at a summary judgment” (33).

In the following I would like to challenge Kiefer's arguments on three counts. First of all, I will question the claim that the speech displays the strong incongruity which Kiefer ascribes to it. Secondly, I will argue that Hamlet's speech is not as euphuistic as Kiefer makes it out to be. Thirdly, I wish to argue that the ambiguity of the speech is less related to its presumed euphuistic nature but rather to Hamlet's use of irony throughout the play.

1. Incongruity

On the surface, Hamlet's speech is indeed characterized by incongruities. On the one hand, the prince talks about "this goodly frame the earth," "this most excellent canopy the air," "this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire" (2.2.264-67).¹ On the other hand, he perceives the world in negative terms when he describes earth as a "sterile promontory" and the skies as "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" (2.2.268-69). This contrast, however, does not represent an incongruity. As Kiefer himself notes, Hamlet's speech is often regarded as a typical expression of early modern melancholy.² But regardless whether this speech is just a "parade of fashionable melancholy" (*Hamlet*, ed. Edwards 130n280-90) or the real thing, it nevertheless gives expression to an emotional state which by the end of the sixteenth century was seen to be an integral part of the human condition. As Robert Burton writes in his *Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621:

Melancholy in this sence is the Character of Mortalitie. [...] We are not here as those Angells, celestiall powers and Bodies, Sunne and Moone, to finish our course without all offence, with such constancy, to continue for so many ages: but subject to infirmitie, miseries, interrupt, tossed and tumbled up and downe, carried about with every small blast, often molested and disquieted upon each slender occasion, uncertaine, brittle, and so is all that we trust unto. (131)

Hamlet's melancholic state of mind, his perception of the world, is not incongruous with Ptolemaic cosmology. By comparing the imperfections of the sublunary cosmos with the heavenly order, Hamlet at the same time gives voice to the belief expressed by Pico della Mirandola in his famous *Oration on the Dignity of Man* that

man is the intermediary between creatures, that he is the familiar of the gods above him as he is lord of the beings beneath him; that [...] he is the interpreter of nature, set midway between the timeless unchanging and the flux of time.
(3-4)

In order for Hamlet as a Renaissance man to “comprehend the meaning of so vast an achievement” (Pico della Mirandola 5) like creation, recognizing its divine order and beauty on the one hand, and acknowledging the imperfections of man as mortal creature on the other, is not an incongruity but a distinguishing feature of Early Modern man. After all, it is the faculty of “apprehension,” referred to by Hamlet in the same speech, that man as intermediary being between the sublunar and the heavenly realm has in common with the angels and which sets him apart from the baser creatures.³ Hamlet's conclusion then, that “[m]an delights not me—nor women neither” (2.2.274-75), is not “strangely inconclusive and its effect unclear,” nor does the speech never reach “a destination that the listener has been led to expect” (Kiefer 34). Rather, by juxtaposing Mirandola's optimistic Neo-platonic view of humanity with Burton's Baroque discourse of melancholy, Shakespeare opens up a discursive space for Hamlet to explore the tensions between two worldviews.⁴

2. Euphuism

Kiefer identifies in Hamlet's lines a “sheer amplitude of [...] euphuistic speech” (33), and the question remains whether this is actually the case. In his understanding of euphuism, Kiefer draws on, among others, Carmine Di Biase, according to whom the euphuistic style is characterized

by “a self-conscious and excessive use of proverb lore, classical allusion, natural philosophy, rhetorical figures, and phonetic devices, especially alliteration” (Di Biase 85; see Kiefer 27). Kiefer further identifies in Lyly’s style “indeterminacy” (33), a “pervasive ambivalence” (33-34),⁵ “an extraordinary reliance upon analogy” (34), and “[s]ly humor, born of wit” (35). Even if we accept these criteria as an exhaustive definition of euphuism (which I think they are not, as I will show below), it becomes evident that Hamlet’s lines do not quite live up to this catalogue. To begin with, and as I have already shown above, the speech is less ambiguous and “indeterminate” than Kiefer claims it to be. As regards euphuism’s structural and formal features, Hamlet’s lines show only a few of them and not in the “amplitude” suggested by Kiefer. For example, if we understand a “proverb” as a “short pithy saying which embodies a general truth [...] related in form and content to the maxim and the aphorism” (Cuddon 706), Hamlet’s speech shows none. Although the prince refers to “natural philosophy” (Di Biase 85) by alluding to geocentric cosmology, humoral pathology and humanist ideas, as indicated above, calling the earth a “sterile promontory,” the sky a “majestical roof” and man “the beauty of the world” does not equal “pithy saying[s].” A similar statement can be made for the classical allusions, of which the speech also contains none. Moreover, Hamlet’s use of analogy “involving the various forms of life he catalogues—human, angelic, divine, animal” (Kiefer 34) seems to be a far cry from the “forest of analogies” (Maslen 237; see Kiefer 34) usually found in euphuistic prose.

As regards Di Biase’s “rhetorical figures, and phonetic devices, especially alliteration,” Hamlet’s lines admittedly do include a few examples of syntactic parallelism and chiasmus,⁶ oppositions,⁷ assonances and alliterations,⁸ but so do many of his and other figures’ speeches in the play (and to a greater degree).⁹ Moreover, the elaboration, complexity and abundance of tropes, figures and schemes which David Bevington identifies in the euphuistic style is not discernible in these lines:

Lyly’s famous Euphuistic style, with its elaborate rhetorical schemes and tropes of isocolon, parison, and paramoion (similarity of length, grammatical

form, and sound in successive and corresponding phrases or clauses), alliteration, word repetition, *similiter cadentes* (similarity at the end of a phrase), metaphors from fanciful natural history, and the like, is elegantly suited to a drama of antithetical debate. The style [...] revels in parallels, logical structures, and syntactic oppositions, through which a thing may be defined by its opposite, or two things may be held in equilibrium, or one thing may be seen to possess contrary properties within it. (46)

Again, Hamlet's speech undoubtedly employs parallels, oppositions, and logical structures, but what is missing here (especially compared to other instances of euphuism in the play) is the elaborateness ("[e]laborate rhetorical schemes") and exuberance ("the style revels in") of the euphuistic style.

In fact, when it comes to the play's engagement with euphuism, other figures than Hamlet suggest themselves, most prominently Polonius and Osric. These figures with their highly artificial and sententious manner of speech are widely held¹⁰ to be an expression of Shakespeare's critical view of the euphuistic style which, as Kiefer himself attests, "was becoming old-fashioned by the time Shakespeare wrote *Hamlet*" (36). As early as 1875, Edward Dowden argued that Polonius' advice to his son (1.3.54-80)

is a cento of quotations from Lyly's "Euphues." Its significance must be looked for less in the matter than in the sententious manner. [Compare also Gertrude's admonishment of the counsellor ("More matter with less art," 2.2.95) after the latter's verbose exordium.] [...] what Shakspeare [sic] wishes to signify in this speech is that wisdom of Polonius' kind consists of a set of maxims; all such wisdom might be set down for the headlines of copybooks. (141-42)

Polonius' extensive use of proverbs¹¹ and his overly verbose and stilted style¹² give testimony to Shakespeare's critical stance towards euphuism which "[b]y the turn of the century [...] had become ripe for parody" (Kiefer 36).

Apart from Polonius, there is yet another figure, the "*courtier*" (5.2.66 S.D.) Osric, who, although appearing only in the final scene,¹³ embodies Shakespeare's (critical) engagement with euphuism to a far greater degree than Hamlet's own prose.¹⁴ By submitting Osric's "affected style

of speech, full of empty and repetitive formulas" (Thompson and Taylor 441) and his "verbosity" (444) to intense mockery by Hamlet's cynical replies, Shakespeare introduces a character who serves as a parody of euphuism.¹⁵

3. Irony

Finally, I would like to contest Kiefer's argument that the euphuistic quality of Hamlet's speech is responsible for its analytical and dialogical quality. Drawing on Scragg's analysis of Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit*, Kiefer sees the euphuistic mode as inherently equivocal. He quotes Scragg, who argues that the euphuistic style

draws the reader not towards an irresistible conclusion, but into a series of branching avenues leading progressively further from an inevitable goal, frustrating the drive of the narrative towards finality and closure, and proliferating the positions from which a judgement might be reached. (5)¹⁶

Scragg identifies a "pervasive ambivalence at the heart of the euphuistic mode [...] endow[ing] Lyly's work with a far greater degree of ambiguity than its subject matter initially suggests" (Scragg 4; see Kiefer 32). Consequently, for Kiefer the euphuistic quality of Hamlet's speech is largely responsible for its analytical character and inconclusiveness. Hamlet's "euphuistic prose invites the exploration of an issue" (Kiefer 32). I would like to suggest, however, that this inconclusiveness and ambiguity is less an effect of Hamlet's euphuistic style but of his pervasive use of irony.¹⁷

Although I have argued above that the "sharp incongruity" which Kiefer (30) identifies in Hamlet's speech between what he says he feels and what he describes does not really exist, incongruities and ambiguities are in fact highly relevant for Hamlet as character. They define him, however, outside a strictly euphuistic perspective. In his commentary on Hamlet's rhetorical strategies in his first appearance in 1.2, Müller draws attention to the prince's use of "ambiguous speech—above

all by way of puns" (Greiner and Müller 427).¹⁸ This "purposeful ambiguity" (Greiner 100)¹⁹ is Hamlet's strongest weapon against the machinations of his adversaries and reveals itself most strongly in his ironical puns which Greiner interprets as Hamlet's way of responding to "the ambiguity of political and social reality" (Greiner and Müller 105).²⁰

As has been noted, Hamlet employs irony not only in his first scene.²¹ Throughout the entire play, "[p]uns, equivocations, and *double entendres* comprise his repertoire, his means of countering duplicity with doubleness" (Holstein 334).²² Klaus Reichert even ascribes to Hamlet's puns a function of protest (Reichert 45; qtd. in Greiner and Müller 428.). Therefore, the openness and inconclusiveness of Hamlet's speech cannot be reduced to his (anti-)euphuistic style alone, but are integral to his main rhetorical strategy of irony and his answer to the duplicity of the world.

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NOTES

¹Here and in the following all quotations from Hamlet are taken from Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor's Arden Edition of the play.

²He refers to Philip Edwards's assessment that the speech can be seen "as an example of the world-weariness not only of Hamlet but of a whole age" (*Hamlet*, ed. Edwards 130n280-90).

³"*Hamlet* is largely animated by Shakespeare's consciousness of man's being in action like an angel in apprehension like a god, and yet capable of all baseness." (Tillyard 84). Unlike Thompson and Taylor who use Q2 as the base text for their edition, Tillyard follows F1. Cf. also Tillyard 78-79.

⁴I would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers of this article for this observation.

⁵Kiefer quotes here from Scragg 4.

⁶"how noble in reason; how infinite in faculties, in form and moving; how express and admirable in action; how like an angel in apprehension; how like a god; the beauty of the world; the paragon of animals" (2.2.270-73).

⁷“goodly frame” (2.2.264) vs. “sterile promontory” (265); “excellent canopy” (265), “brave o’erhanging firmament” (266), “majestical roof” (267) vs. “foul and pestilent congregation of vapours” (268-69); “paragon of animals” (273) vs. “dust” (274).

⁸“roof fretted with golden fire” (267); “infinite in faculties, in form” (270-71); “express and admirable in action” (271); “an angel in apprehension” (272; all italics mine).

⁹See e.g. Claudius’ long opening speech (1.2.1-39, 87-117) which is also characterized by rhetorical figures such as oppositions, parallelism, and chiasmus. For an excellent analysis of the rhetorical features of Claudius’ speech, see Wolfgang G. Müller’s commentary on 424-35 in his and Norbert Greiner’s joint bilingual edition of the play. For the euphuistic qualities of Polonius’ and Osric’s speeches see below.

¹⁰For Polonius, Johnson writes: “One of the Shakespearean characters who uses a euphuistic style is Polonius in *Hamlet*” (166); see also Dowden 141-42; Draper 38; Rushdon 44-47. For Osric, see Draper 73; Hawkes 50; Williamson 79.

¹¹A few examples of Polonius’ proverbs and “commonplaces” (Greiner and Müller 437): “For the apparel oft proclaims the man” (1.3.71); “borrowing dulleth th’edge of husbandry” (1.3.76); “Ay, springes to catch woodcocks—I do know / When the blood burns how prodigal the soul / Lends the tongue vows” (1.3.114-16); “’Tis too much proved that with devotion’s visage / And pious action we do sugar o’er / The devil himself” (3.1.46-48).

¹²Cf. in particular 2.2.86-107 and 128-48.

¹³Osric has three appearances in the final act (5.2.67-163, 203-97, 334-87), of which the first one includes the encounter with Hamlet.

¹⁴Cf. Draper 73 who compares Osric’s style to euphuism.

¹⁵“Sein [Hamlets] Spiel mit Osric besteht in der Hauptsache in komischer und ironischer Kritik an seiner Sprache. Er lehnt die artifizielle Rhetorik ab, die Osrics Ideal von Vornehmheit entspricht” (Greiner and Müller 527-28). ‘His [Hamlet’s] playing with Osric consists mainly in comical and ironic criticism of the latter’s speech. He rejects the artificial rhetoric that constitutes Osric’s ideal of refinement’ (my trans.). For a full discussion of the exchange between Osric and Hamlet, see Greiner and Müller 526-28.

¹⁶See Kiefer 34. Kiefer misquotes “positions” as “propositions.”

¹⁷For a discussion of the relationship between ambiguity and irony, see Bauer.

¹⁸“[D]oppeldeutiger Rede—vor allem in der Form des Wortspiels” (my trans.).

¹⁹“[G]ezielter Doppelsinn” (my trans.).

²⁰“[D]ie Ambiguität der politischen und sozialen Wirklichkeit” (my trans.).

²¹Cf. Burnett; Holstein; Greiner and Müller 427-29 (in particular 427n27); Greiner.

²²Quoted in Greiner and Müller 428. Kiefer (36) himself concedes that “Hamlet displays the wit that he has exhibited *from his first moments onstage*” (my italics).

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