"As I Am a Man": Shakespeare’s Ferdinand as Renaissance Man in Training

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Ferdinand has received scant attention in recent considerations of The Tempest (1611). Most critics, seeing nothing promising in him, neglect Ferdinand as so much debris thrown up on the shore of Prospero’s island. When measured in the light of Renaissance ideals, however, Ferdinand takes on greater significance—a significance that Ferdinand himself alludes to when he resists Prospero’s accusations of spying with his assertion: “No, as I am a man!” (1.2.457). With this protest, Ferdinand avows himself to be a Renaissance man, an avowal he demonstrates in words, intellect, and deeds. Throughout The Tempest, Shakespeare depicts Ferdinand as undergoing a training regimen that further develops him as a man through his obedience to Prospero’s strict imperatives and Miranda’s less abrasive guidance.

While numerous critics have noted the political currents of The Tempest, they have largely ignored its exploration of the type of training in masculinity appropriate to a young prince. In Ferdinand, Shakespeare presents an alternative to traditional models of aristocratic masculinity codified in Baldassare Castiglione’s Il libro del cortegiano (1528). Shakespeare’s alternative model emphasizes the value of training in masculinity within a simultaneously courtly and natural context, i.e., the island-court of Prospero. While Ferdinand’s training resembles that of a courtier, including training in masculinity, the kind of masculinity exemplified by Ferdinand also demonstrates his physical prowess and capacity to perform even the most menial manual labor when necessary. Thus, Ferdinand represents a new model of Renaissance masculinity, one that draws upon but extends beyond Castiglione’s ideals.

Ever since the publication of Coppélia Kahn’s Man’s Estate: Masculinity in Shakespeare in 1981, scholars have begun to debate the intricacies and unsettled nature of masculinity revealed in Renaissance texts. Mark Breitenberg, for example, contends that, in the context of the Renaissance and elsewhere, “[m]asculinity is inherently anxious . . . it reveals the fissures and contradictions of patriarchal systems and, at the same time, it paradoxically enables and drives patriarchy’s reproduction and continuation of itself” (2). Similarly, Bruce Smith argues that masculinity is treated in Shakespeare’s texts as a social construction based on relations to “others” and resulting in an unsettled and continuously developing sense of gender. Smith remarks that Prospero represents “[t]he man of learning, of virtue, of caution, of moderation;” Smith also finds in Shakespeare’s plays a Renaissance appropriation of the classical ideals of masculinity in which “Virtue’ and ‘learning’ are all but made synonymous” (50). Other scholars have pushed the question of Renaissance male anxiety in a new direction by
examining the fluctuations in ideals of masculinity that mirrored the fluctuations in cultural and societal norms. Although recent critics who study Renaissance masculinity have reexamined many of the gender dynamics of Shakespeare’s text, they have largely ignored Ferdinand as a possible model for a new conception of masculinity. The fluctuating nature of gender constructs in the Renaissance—coupled with changing paradigms of the state, as informed by Renaissance texts like Niccolò Machiavelli’s *The Prince* (1532) and the changing political landscape in an officially Protestant England—suggest that Shakespeare is participating in ongoing conversations about the legitimacy and prerogatives of the monarchy, by depicting the prince as a developing model of Renaissance masculinity. Ferdinand’s training in masculinity serves to confirm his fitness for the position of monarch in a society that placed high value on the ideal of the Renaissance man: a king’s claims to natural leadership would more compellingly be made by a monarch who is also seen as a good man.

Like other recent studies, I treat Renaissance masculinity as a fluctuating concept. My reading also returns to largely unexplored yet fertile suggestions offered by Kahn’s ground-breaking text on Renaissance masculinity studies. Emphasizing Shakespeare’s participation in Renaissance questions of masculinity, Kahn observes that *The Tempest* is one of a group of his plays that bears evidence of “the Shakespearean quest for masculine selfhood” (194). This quest involves the change, Kahn suggests, from boyhood to masculinity, a kind of rebirth. Kahn’s analysis of masculinity in *The Tempest* emphasizes Prospero’s unsettled behavior by drawing attention to what she aptly characterizes as his “attempts to work through his oedipal past, to complete himself. . . . He redefines himself as a man rather than magician, and regains his dukedom” (220). While Kahn’s insights about Prospero are compelling, she overlooks Ferdinand’s significance. Nonetheless, Kahn frames the theorizing of Renaissance masculinity in ways that elucidate my investigation of Ferdinand’s character. Like Prospero, Ferdinand represents a character engaged in “the Shakespearean quest for masculine selfhood.” Ferdinand’s presumed passage from sonship to kingship—when he thinks his father has drowned—is also pertinent to Kahn’s observation that these plays frequently describe instances of “the male passage from being a son to being a father” (194). Even though his father is alive to return to Naples as king at the end, the island functions for Ferdinand as a training ground for the monarchy into which he thinks he has ascended. This process corresponds with his training for masculinity. Ferdinand’s belief that his father is dead, thus, lends urgency to his sense of development towards becoming a ruler.

Ferdinand’s role becomes, if not central, certainly much more important to the play when examined in the light of Castiglione’s famous *Il libro del cortegiano*. Scholars have described Castiglione’s text, both in its original Italian form and in the English translation of Edward Doby as *The Book of the Courtier* (1561), as “the most important book of the European Renaissance” and “the most influential and widely read courtesy book in late Tudor England” (Morini 65; Javitch 197). Moreover,