

‘Now let the stricken deer go weep’: what does it mean or think?

HOPKINS, Lisa

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/32561/>

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

Citation:

HOPKINS, Lisa (2023). ‘Now let the stricken deer go weep’: what does it mean or think? Notes & Queries, p. 16. [Article]

Copyright and re-use policy

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

‘Now let the stricken deer go weep’: what does it mean or think?

In Harold Jenkins’ Arden 2 edition, he remarks that ‘It is often conjectured that in the verse about *the stricken deer* Hamlet is quoting a popular ballad ... but the ballad has not been traced and the pointed relevance of these lines to the dramatic situation makes it perhaps more probable that they were modelled on a ballad than cited from one’.¹ The verse in question runs,

Why, let the stricken deer go weep,
The hart ungalled play;
For some must watch while some must sleep,
Thus runs the world away.

(III.ii.265-8)

If these lines do remember a ballad, one possible contender might be ‘Blow thy horn, hunter’² by William Cornysh (d. 1523), who composed music and created pageants and court spectacles for Henry VIII, though he seems to have fallen into disfavour at some point and to have spent time in the Fleet prison as a result of an unspecified accusation which he claimed to be false.³ The song is ostensibly about a deer which has been wounded by a hunter – ‘Sore this deer stricken is’ – but is in fact transparently about a sexually insatiable woman who ‘will not die’ (i.e. have an orgasm) despite the best attempts of the ‘hunter’, who finally gives up and goes to the pub. Just in case the hearer misses the plethora of *doubles entendres*, the ballad openly declares that one needs to look beneath the surface when it asks ‘Now, the construction of the same – / What do you mean or think?’. *Twelfth Night*’s ‘Ah, Robyn’ song comes from Cornysh, so Shakespeare knew at least some of his music,⁴ and there are, I think, four reasons for suggesting that Shakespeare might have been remembering him again here.

In the first place, the song is about an oversexed woman, which is what Hamlet perceives Gertrude to be. Moreover, it dates from the reign of Henry VIII, who had made a *cause célèbre* of the question of whether or not a man could marry his brother's widow. It explicitly invites application by asking its hearers what they 'mean or think' just as Hamlet wants to know what Horatio has made of what he has seen. Finally there is the question of metre: 'Why, let the stricken deer go weep, / The hart ungalled play' could in fact be sung to the same tune as 'Now the construction of the same – what do you mean or think?', since it has the same number of syllables, and there is a similarity of sound between 'strucken' and 'construction' (which fall in the same position in the line) to which attention would be drawn if the tune were heard and the lyrics of the song remembered. But whether the lines are sung or not, anyone who heard an echo of 'Blow thy horn, hunter' at this point in the play would understand that they were being invited to do some active decoding about a scenario conditioned by female sexuality, and if they remembered Cornysh's own career they would also be reminded of the instability and danger of life at court.

LISA HOPKINS

Sheffield Hallam University

Notes

¹ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, edited by Harold Jenkins (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 508.

² [https://www.cpdl.org/wiki/index.php/Blow_thy_horn_hunter_\(William_Cornysh\)](https://www.cpdl.org/wiki/index.php/Blow_thy_horn_hunter_(William_Cornysh))

³ Roger Bowers, 'Cornysh, William (d. 1523)', *New Dictionary of National Biography*.

[Cornysh \[Cornysshe\], William \(d. 1523\), composer and court impresario | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography \(oxforddnb.com\)](#)

⁴ Pierre Iselin, 'Musical Transmission and Transgression on the Early Modern Stage', in *Transmission and Transgression: Cultural Challenges in Early Modern England*, edited by Sophie Chiari and Hélène Palma (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires de Provence, 2014), pp. 161-73. <https://books.openedition.org/pup/8733?lang=en>