

290 moult no feather.^o I have of late — but wherefore I know
not — lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercises;^o
and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition, that this
goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory;
this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave^o
295 o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted^o with
golden fire, why, it appeareth nothing to me but a foul and
pestilent congregation of vapors. What [a] piece of work^o is
a man, how noble in reason, how infinite in faculties, in
form and moving, how express^o and admirable in action,
how like an angel in apprehension, how like a god!^o the
300 beauty of the world; the paragon of animals; and yet to me
what is this quintessence^o of dust? Man delights not me —
nor women neither, though by your smiling you seem to
say so.

ROSENCRANTZ: My lord, there was no such stuff in my thoughts.
HAMLET: Why did ye laugh then, when I said, "Man delights
not me"?

ROSENCRANTZ: To think, my lord, if you delight not in man,
what lenten entertainment^o the players shall receive from
you. We coted^o them on the way, and hither are they com-
310 ing to offer you service.

HAMLET: He that plays the king shall be welcome — his Maj-
esty shall have tribute on^o me, the adventures^o knight shall
use his foil and target,^o the lover shall not sigh gratis,^o the
humorous^o man shall end his part in peace, [the clown shall
315 make those laugh whose lungs are [tickle] a' th' sere,^o] and
the lady shall say her mind freely, or the [blank] verse shall
halt^o for't. What players are they?

290. moult no feather: Not be impaired in the least. 291. custom of exercises: My usual athletic activities. 294. brave: Splendid. 295. fretted: Ornamented as with fretwork. 297. piece of work: Masterpiece. 298-300. how infinite . . . god: See the Textual Notes for the different punctuation in F1. 299. express: Exact. 302. quintessence: Finest and purest extract. 309. lenten entertainment: Meager reception. 310. coted: Outstripped. 313. on: Of, from. adventures: Adventurous, i.e. wandering in search of adventure. 314. foil and target: Light fencing sword and small shield. gratis: Without reward. 315. humorous: Dominated by some eccentric trait (like the melancholy Jaques in *As You Like It*). 316. tickle . . . sere: i.e. easily made to laugh (literally, describing a gun that goes off easily; sere = a catch in the gunlock; tickle = easily affected, highly sensitive to stimulus). 318. halt: Limp, come off lamely (the verse will not scan if she omits indecent words).

ROSENCRANTZ: Even those you were wont to take such delight
in, the tragedians of the city.

HAMLET: How chances it they travel? Their residence, both in
320 reputation and profit, was better both ways.

ROSENCRANTZ: I think their inhibition^o comes by the means of
the late innovation.^o

HAMLET: Do they hold the same estimation they did when I
325 was in the city? Are they so follow'd?

ROSENCRANTZ: No indeed are they not.

[HAMLET: How comes it? do they grow rusty?]

ROSENCRANTZ: Nay, their endeavor keeps in the wonted pace;
but there is, sir, an aery^o of children, little eyases,^o that cry
330 out on the top of question,^o and are most tyrannically^o
clapp'd for't. These are now the fashion, and so [berattle^o]
the common stages^o — so they call them — that many
wearing rapiers are afraid of goose-quills^o and dare scarce
come thither.

HAMLET: What, are they children? Who maintains 'em? How
are they escoted?^o Will they pursue the quality^o no longer
than they can sing?^o Will they not say afterwards, if they
should grow themselves to common players (as it is [most
340 like], if their means are [no] better), their writers do them
wrong, to make them exclaim against their own suc-
cession?^o

323. inhibition: Hindrance (to playing in the city). The word could be used of an official prohibition. See next note. 324. innovation: Shakespeare elsewhere uses this word of a political uprising or revolt, and lines 323-24 are often explained as meaning that the company had been forbidden to play in the city as the result of some disturbance. It is commonly conjectured that the allusion is to the Essex rebellion of 1601, but it is known that Shakespeare's company, though to some extent involved on account of the special performance of *Richard II* they were commissioned to give on the eve of the rising, were not in fact punished by inhibition. A second interpretation explains *innovation* as referring to the new theatrical vogue described in lines 330 ff., and conjectures that *inhibition* may allude to a Privy Council order of 1600 restricting the number of London playhouses to two and the number of performances to two a week. 328-52. How . . . too: This passage refers topically to the "War of the Theaters" between the child actors and their poet Jonson on the one side, and on the other the adults, with Dekker, Marston, and possibly Shakespeare as spokesmen, in 1600-01. 330. aery: Nest. eyases: Unfledged hawks. 330-31. cry . . . question: Cry shrilly above others in controversy. 331. tyrannically: Outrageously. 332. berattle: Cry down, satirize. 333. common stages: Public theaters (the children played at the Blackfriars, a private theater). 334. goose-quills: Pens (of satirical playwrights). 337. escoted: Supported. quality: Profession (of acting). 337-38. no . . . sing: i.e. only until their voices change. 341-42. succession: Future.