

## J. ALFRED PRUFROCK PLAYS THE SHAKESPEAREAN FOOL

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Vigorously promoting T. S. Eliot's poem, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which he had just placed with Harriet Monroe's *Poetry Magazine* (Chicago), Ezra Pound ("il miglior fabbro" Eliot called him) nevertheless admitted that the Hamlet passage was a weakness. "I dislike the paragraph about Hamlet," he wrote to Miss Monroe, "but it is an early and cherished bit and T. E. won't give it up, and as it is the only portion of the poem that most readers will like at first reading, I don't see that it will do much harm."<sup>1</sup>

Pound was right. Readers have always made a great deal of the Hamlet passage and its Shakespearean associations, so much so, in fact, that it now constitutes, perhaps, the best known passage in what Hugh Kenner calls "the best-known English poem since the *Rubaiyat*."<sup>2</sup>

No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be;  
Am an attendant lord, one that will do  
To swell a progress, start a scene or two,  
Advise the prince; no doubt, an easy tool,  
Deferential, glad to be of use,  
Politic, cautious, and meticulous;  
Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;  
At times, indeed, almost ridiculous —  
Almost, at times, the Fool (3).

But Pound was also wrong. Something more than merely a piece of catchy writing, this paragraph is indispensable to the poem overall.

Self-contained, the Hamlet unit suggests first of all that Prufrock would measure himself, if sardonically, against three

(1) *The Letters of Ezra Pound, 1907-1941*, ed. D. D. Paige (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1950), p. 50.

(2) *The Invisible Poet: T. S. Eliot* (New York: McDowell, Obolensky, 1959), p. 3.

(3) T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 7.

sharply etched Shakespearean characters representing distinctly different dramatic types. If he, at times, would see himself as less than Hamlet but very like an attendant lord, he would also see himself as "almost, at times, the Fool." Prufrock names Hamlet, of course, and though the attendant lord he has in mind is not named, the name Polonius rather inescapably suggests itself.<sup>4</sup> But the exact identity of Prufrock's Fool is not so readily apparent. Problematic, possibly he is meant to be neither more nor less than the generic Elizabethan Fool, as some would argue. But I am far from convinced that that is the case. Indeed I would advocate (1) putting aside the idea that one need not pin down the precise Shakespearean referent of Eliot's line, and (2) choosing among several candidates in the gallery of Shakespeare's Fools. It is possible, moreover, that the proper identification will shed valuable light on Eliot's poetic intention, as well on the title of his poem.

We can begin with Eliot's title. The name "J. Alfred Prufrock" has always intrigued readers. In 1951, however, they were given a clue as to its probable source. In Eliot's day, it was suggested, there existed at Fourth and St. Charles Streets in St. Louis, Missouri, U. S. A. (Eliot's birthplace), a firm of furniture wholesalers named Prufrock-Littau.<sup>5</sup> Ten years later Eliot would admit as much: "Prufrock" was a name he had first encountered in the "sign of a St. Louis shop."<sup>6</sup>

Yet speculation as to Eliot's precise point in employing the name *Prufrock*, apart from its admitted source in the St. Louis of his childhood, has ranged widely. Explicating the poem, readers have called attention to the "elitist" nature of the name: a fronting initial preceding middle name and surname. To explicate the poem further, readers have sometimes been tempted to break the surname into *Pru-frock*, indicating thereby that the name itself connotes, among other things, prudence, prudery, and effeminacy. But *Prufrock* can be explicated in at least one other way. Divide it *Pruf-rock* (for which read *proof-rock*) and the possibility of still another

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(4) Explanatory textual notes sometimes list Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as possibilities; see, for example, the widely employed anthology-text, *The American Tradition in Literature*, 3d ed., one vol., ed. Sculley Bradley, Richmond Croom Beatty and E. Hudson Long (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1967), p. 1529.

(5) Stephen Stepanchev, "The Origins of J. Alfred Prufrock," *Modern Language Notes* (Baltimore, Md., U.S.A.), 66 (June, 1951), 400-01.

(6) Walter J. Ong, "'Burnt Norton' in St. Louis," *American Literature* (Durham, N. C., U. S. A.), 33 (January, 1962), 526.

meaning emerges and, through a synonymic pun, the identity of Eliot's Fool is revealed. He is Touchstone from Shakespeare's *As You Like It*.<sup>7</sup> Just as within context Touchstone "serves to test or try the genuineness or value of anything" (*Oxford English Dictionary*), so too does Prufrock, at times playing the Shakespearean touchstone of hard reality, almost succeed at being the Fool. While Touchstone sings his love song to the lusty goat-girl Audrey, Prufrock "speaks" his love song to no one at all.

Early on, Pound characterized "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" as "a portrait satire on futility."<sup>8</sup> Yet if Eliot allows Prufrock to approach, at times, the dramatically privileged status of Shakespeare's Touchstone ("Thou speakest wiser than thou art ware of"<sup>9</sup>) then surely we cannot conclude that the poet's satirical sallies run *entirely* at Prufrock's expense. Indeed we might be justified in concluding that through Prufrock, Eliot's poem reserves for itself something of the magical function of the traditional Fool: the power to ward off certain potentially undesirable experiences by anticipating them. By making such threats present to the imagination, the poet's — and Prufrock's — words might well diminish their possibility.<sup>10</sup>

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(7) For the provocative suggestion that Eliot's Fool is actually Yorick, see Margaret Morton Blum, "The Fool in 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,'" *Modern Language Notes* (Baltimore, Md, U. S. A.), 72 (June, 1967), 424-26.

(8) *Letters of Ezra Pound*, p. 50.

(9) *As You Like It*, II, iv.

(10) See William Willeford, *The Fool and His Scepter: A Study in Clowns and Jesters and Their Audience* (Evanston, Ill., U. S. A.: Northwestern University Press, 1969), pp. 157-58.