

## Poetry vs. Plot in *The Winter's Tale*: Modernity and Morality in M. M. Mahood's *Shakespeare's Wordplay*

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No one, either before or since the publication in 1957 of *Shakespeare's Wordplay*, has matched M. M. Mahood in her ability to tease out the multiple meanings of Shakespeare's puns and verbal innuendoes so that local and distant thematic meanings coalesce. By valorizing, even dignifying, Shakespeare's puns, she completed the revolution of the Neoclassical judgment on Shakespeare's fatal Cleopatra. Mahood's insights have greatly benefited Shakespeare studies. She showed editors of the plays how wordplay could adjudicate matters of textual emendation.<sup>1</sup> A multitude of finely turned phrases conveyed her understanding of character in memorable jewels. Leontes' "moral rigidity," she informs us, is "born of a moral uncertainty" (154). By my count, she was the first commentator on *The Winter's Tale* to notice that in Perdita's presentation of flowers, time runs not forwards but backwards, "to fetch the age of gold, from winter herbs to August's carnations and striped gillyflowers, to the June marigold that goes to bed with the sun . . . and so back to the spring flowers she would give Florizel" (159). In the final chapter of *Shakespeare's Wordplay*, Mahood made early modern English philosophies of language available to Shakespeareans and so indirectly made possible later explorations of Shakespeare's wordplay (different from her own) by critics such as James Calderwood, Sigurd Burckhardt, W. H. Matchett, and Richard Proudfoot.<sup>2</sup> Proudfoot's demonstration of the interpenetration and presence of values associated with one half of the diptych-like *Winter's Tale* in the other half extended and confirmed Mahood's tendency to do the same with things Sicilian and Bohemian. In this respect, she was a pioneer.

Her strengths in *Shakespeare's Wordplay* were indeed many. She was the first (and in my opinion the most accomplished) analyst of the manner by which the libido invading Leontes' mind fights for "release in savage wordplay" (149), mainly in puns on words such as "neat," "dear," "die," "apparent," "stews," "business," and "satisfy." Her comprehensive knowledge of the technical meanings of certain early modern English words, meanings that precipitate puns where auditors never suspected they lurk, approached the legendary knowledge of G. L. Kittredge. M. M. Mahood understood that a Shakespeare character cannot have an unconscious mind. How then, she boldly wondered, can a character's puns be said to be unconscious? Her brilliant solution of this problem deserves quotation: "The vital wordplay in Shakespeare's writings is that between the characters and their creator, between the primary meanings of words in the context of a person's speech and their secondary meanings as part of the play's underlying pattern of thought. The chief function of the pun is to connect subject and object, inner force with outer form, the poetic vision with the characters in action that are its theoretical embodiment. The play's the thing—not the elusive mind of the playwright nor the illusory minds of his characters" (41). In other words, Shakespeare's wordplay ultimately amounts to resonant talk between Shakespeare and his creation—his characters—rather than primarily conversation between characters and on- and off-stage auditors or between characters and their conscious or unconscious minds.

Mahood's portrayal of Shakespeare's language as a private conversation between himself and his creation renders it modern—in that writers such as D. H. Lawrence, Proust, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf provided for their own and previous ages the aesthetic rationale for the circulation of private dialogue between author and characters—for language sometimes cryptic but usually dependent on wordplay for its significance.<sup>3</sup> My re-review of *Shakespeare's Wordplay* initially highlights the modernity of Mahood's reading strategies and linguistic analyses, especially with regard to her understanding of the plot of *The Winter's Tale* in relation to the play's poetry. Her modern idea of the drama's plot, however, apparently proved inadequate for the purposes of wordplay exploration. Consequently she reverted to a morality scheme contemporary with

Shakespeare to complete her reconstruction of the plot of *The Winter's Tale* so that it maximizes opportunities for the analysis of language.

Mahood's modernist context for interpretation materializes early in *Shakespeare's Wordplay* when she judges that "a generation that relishes *Finnegan's Wake* is more in danger of reading non-existent quibbles into Shakespeare's work than of missing his subtlest play of meaning" (11). But this disclaimer is unnecessary, for behind Mahood stands the authority of William Empson and his masterful discovery in *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) of galaxies of wordplay. (And behind Empson stands the patriarch of twentieth-century, that is to say, modernist, linguistic philosophy, Ludwig Wittgenstein). It was Empson who paved the way for Mahood by defining the double grammar of Shakespeare's Sonnets and the two apparently unconnected meanings given simultaneously by Shakespeare's puns in plays like *Henry V*.<sup>4</sup>

But it is in her description of the plot of *The Winter's Tale* and its relation to the play's multivalent language that Mahood is most intriguingly modern. Surprisingly, much of her chapter on *The Winter's Tale*—perhaps as much as one half of it—concerns the nature and dynamics of the play's plot rather than those of its words. The following criterion of Mahood's helps to explain this emphasis: "The plays which are the theme of the following chapters are not necessarily those which are most rich in wordplay, but they are ones in which the wordplay appears to me to offer a valuable means of access to the heart of the drama" (55). "Although there are not very many puns in *The Winter's Tale*," she admits, "the few that are used generate a superb energy" (147). The energy of wordplay, as it radiates outward from its appearance to create thematic meanings from material in different parts of the play, crystallizes a kind of plot in *The Winter's Tale*. This phenomenon becomes apparent in Mahood's explication of Polixenes' "Nine Changes of the Watry-Starre hath been / The Shepherds Note, since we haue left our Throne / Without a Burthen":

The moon's nine changes imply the themes of pregnancy (helped, perhaps, by 'Burthen'), of sudden changes of fortune, and of madness, which are all to become explicit in the course of the same scene. The whole image is the first of many taken from country things and the pastoral life, which persist throughout the Sicilian scenes of the play and so help to bridge the 'great gap'

of time and place over which we pass later to the shepherd kingdom of Bohemia. And the leading theme of these scenes in Bohemia, the summer harmony of heaven and earth, is prepared here by mention of the 'watery star' that draws the tides. (147)

Expressed this way, the rich poetry of *The Winter's Tale* not simply telescopes the plot of the play but more radically appears to first condense and then release it. Concerning "the full-grown symbolism of the last plays," Derek Traversi judged in a book published three years before Mahood's that in his last plays "Shakespeare's power of uniting poetry and drama is now such that the plot has become simply an extension, an extra vehicle of the poetry."<sup>5</sup> Mahood approaches Traversi's view when her articulation of the wordplay of Polixenes' opening lines in *The Winter's Tale* simultaneously unfolds the plot of the play from its encapsulation in richly connotative words and phrases. One could call this practice modern, for it were writers such as Joyce and Proust again who structured their plots, for example, according to the exfoliated verbal equivalents of musical phrases and leitmotifs and then just as quickly condensed them into a single word or unit of discourse (sometimes a pun).<sup>6</sup> This literary practice finds an analogue, actually its justification, in descriptions by physicists in the Einsteinian tradition of great worlds of matter created by maps compressed in tiny particles that explode in a grand, virtually unimaginable manner. Certain aspects of modern thought and aesthetics prepared Mahood to reject the paltry view of the plot of *The Winter's Tale* that she inherited from the Victorians in general and from Lytton Strachey in particular—that it was a fairy tale written by a bored, cynical old man.<sup>7</sup> Confidently, she could write that "each image, each turn of phrase, each play upon a word's meaning in [*The Winter's Tale*], compels us to feel that Shakespeare's total statement adds up to much more than the fairy-tale events of the plot" (146).

Nevertheless, wordplay and the poetry of *The Winter's Tale* were not for Mahood ultimately sufficient vehicles for or equivalents of the play's plot. This fact becomes clear when we realize that her elaborate reconstruction of the romance's plot is modernist in senses different from those just suggested. When she claims that Perdita is "a nature spirit,

the symbol of the renewing seasons" (187), she reveals that she stands in a line of twentieth-century commentators on *The Winter's Tale* that begins with F. C. Tinkler and ends (for Mahood's purposes) with F. D. Hoeniger and for whom certain values of Jesse Weston, Sir James Frazer, and T. S. Eliot were important.<sup>8</sup> Reading *The Winter's Tale* as a fertility myth in which the goddess-like Perdita and the invigorating qualities of Bohemia cause the wasteland of Sicilia to bloom again for its inhabitants, Tinkler made Shakespeare's late play accommodate the anthropology of Weston and Frazer and complement poems like Eliot's "The Waste Land," which were based upon it.<sup>9</sup> I have argued elsewhere that the despair and ennui resulting from the sense of devastation wrought by World War I and the Great Depression of the early 1930s encouraged this reading of *The Winter's Tale*.<sup>10</sup> In 1950, F. D. Hoeniger strengthened the allegorical dimension of this sterile-land-redeemed-by-fertility-characters interpretation by construing the play as Shakespeare's retelling of the Persephone myth.<sup>11</sup> When Mahood writes of "the fertility legend of a child healing an old man and so bringing prosperity to the land" (148), she indicates the degree to which her notion of the plot of *The Winter's Tale* is modernist in a sense peculiar to the decades between 1930 and 1950.

Giving a Christian coloring to the essentially pagan paradigm traced in the preceding paragraph was also a trait of criticism of *The Winter's Tale* written in the 1940s and 50s. It was S. L. Bethell who translated the scheme of Tinkler into one of the salvation of a spiritually barren winter king.<sup>12</sup> Mahood's indebtedness to Bethell for this aspect of her understanding of the plot of the play surfaces in sentences like the following: "The presiding deity of the play may be Apollo, but the Christian scheme of redemption is a leading element . . . in its pattern of ideas. *Grace*, with *gracious* a keyword in the play, is frequently used in its theological sense of 'the divine influence which operates in men to regenerate and sanctify'" (150-51). But Mahood goes beyond Bethell by asserting that in *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare has created a Jacobean Morality play. In her interpretation of the plot, Leontes is "Everyman, Humanity," who is "able to recall a primeval innocence when he was 'Boy eternal'" (151). Once Leontes/Everyman exchanges "Innocence for Experience," Hermione enacts "the role of regenerative grace" for him.

But Everyman rejects Grace in the Eye of Apollo, who becomes Apollo the Destroyer. After Apollo kills his issue Mamillius, Leontes feels guilt and despair but repents. His penance becomes his "recreation," which finally, with the help of Perdita's life-giving grace, makes the king "'man new made'" (152).

This Morality plot of *The Winter's Tale* constitutes the vehicle—perhaps a better word is framework—for Mahood's analyses of Shakespeare's extensive play on words such as "grace," "eye," "issue," and "recreation." Her adaptation of the Morality plot to the play suggests that she would have found Traversi's idea that poetry on occasion becomes plot in Shakespeare's work unusable, if not mistaken. Throughout *Shakespeare's Wordplay* Mahood shows her fondness for the English Romantic poets, especially Coleridge and Blake, by citing them and their ideas frequently. The statement that Leontes exchanges Innocence for Experience obviously alludes to one of Blake's major conceptions.<sup>13</sup> This Romantic orientation most likely led Mahood to think of Florizel and Perdita as children. For Mahood, the miraculously renovative effect of the Wordsworthian child conflates with the new seed generation of the wasteland-renewed mythology of the play. She does refer to "the fertility legend of a *child* (my italics) healing an old man" (148). This Romantic archetype adds another element to Mahood's reconstruction of the plot of *The Winter's Tale*.

At this point, it begins to become apparent that her notion of the plot of the play does not always fit its details. As part of her analysis of the play's wordplay on "eye," Mahood characterizes Mamillius' "*welkin* eye—the adjective suggesting something providential and life-giving, and not merely 'clear and blue like the sky'" (154). This quality gets associated with the [Romantic] "non-moral vision of childhood, the state of the 'Boy eternal' who had not as yet the knowledge of good and evil" (154). Moreover, "if Hermione represents the grace of heaven towards Leontes, Perdita stands for his self-forgiveness, for his recapture of the child's non-moral acceptance of things as they are in Nature" (154). But while some truth may reside in these pronouncements, Perdita and even Mamillius are not the children that Mahood describes. Having had to reconstruct the plot of *The Winter's Tale* from several different components in order to provide a medium for her treatment of

Shakespeare's wordplay, she arrives at a hybrid that entails several interpretive problems, including a few misreadings. Mamillius' knowing, almost cynical, banter with Hermione's ladies about cosmetics and the facial symptoms of pregnancy exceeds the capacity of the Romantic child. If Leontes once was a boy eternal without the knowledge of evil, that "twinn'd lamb" also wore a dagger muzzled lest it should bite its master, a sign—in short—of nascent sexuality and the aggressiveness accompanying it. And far from being a child, Florizel, who most likely is twenty-one,<sup>14</sup> burns with a controlled passion for his mistress, an affection so intense however that he flees with her in order to marry her unconventionally. Finally, Perdita, rather than being a non-moral child, gives evidence of a rigid adult morality in her super-refined notion of decorum and the propriety essential to romantic courtship.

Other difficulties appear in Mahood's reconstructed plot of *The Winter's Tale*. The severity and uncommon nature of Leontes' psychosis hardly seem to make him Everyman or Humanity. It was J. I. M. Stewart who sketched the latent Freudian homosexual dynamic of Leontes' paranoid jealousy.<sup>15</sup> In the first full-fledged modern production of *The Winter's Tale*, Harley Granville-Barker's staging of it at the Savoy Theatre in 1912, Henry Ainley's unnaturally pale face, stringy hair, and abstracted gaze effectively conveyed this atypical dynamic.<sup>16</sup> This discrepancy suggests other challenges involved in reading the plot of *The Winter's Tale* as a Jacobean Morality play. For one thing, it cannot cover the vast drama. "So *The Winter's Tale* is a morality play," Mahood judges, "but its morality is wider, wiser and more humane than that of a Puritan inner drama of sin, guilt and contrition" (153). She admits that "something is omitted in the attempt made here to allegorize the play" (153). "We have had to leave out the sunburnt mirth of the scenes in Bohemia, the Clown, Mopsa, and the rogue Autolycus . . . . Worse still, Perdita is really unnecessary if we read *The Winter's Tale* as a kind of *Grace Abounding*" (153). Calling attention to this gap in her account of the play's plot allows Mahood to analyze the regenerative wordplay on "play" and related terms in the actions of Perdita and other Bohemian characters. What appeared a liability ingeniously becomes a local interpretive asset.

Worth remarking in this context is Mahood's above-noted identification of the Morality plot and Puritanism. Throughout *Shakespeare's Wordplay*

Mahood implies a less-than-ideal valuation of each term of this combination. Arguing that both *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Timon of Athens* have overt dramatic theses, she claims that this feature “brings them closer to being morality plays than true dramas” (48). In a note on Milton’s *Comus*, Mahood writes, “it has been suggested by J. E. Crofts that Sabrina’s role in the masque is very much that of a nature spirit such as Perdita. The Lady remains frozen in a Puritanical disapproval until the nymph releases her” (155). The negative weighting of “Puritanical” is subtle but distinct. The early modern cultural tension between Puritanical mores and old holiday pastimes that Leah Marcus has recently focused and explored informs Mahood’s reconstruction of the plot of *The Winter's Tale*.<sup>17</sup> If a major function of the vaudeville-like “re-creations” of Bohemia is “to remind Everyman—Leontes and the audience—of his need for folly” (161), if “the scenes in Bohemia restore the child’s or peasant’s freedom from morbid preoccupations about good and evil” (156)—then the deadly seriousness of Leontes and his gloomy thoughts of sin will be foregrounded in Sicilia. If Perdita incarnates “innocent sexuality which represents the acceptance of the ways of nature that [she] is to restore to her father” (160), then Sicilia will be a place of corrupt sexuality.

Mahood stereotypes these fallen qualities of the winter half of the play as Puritan in her Morality pattern of fall and redemption. Barbara Kiefer Lewalski has recently argued, however, that the Reformation paradigm of sin, penance, contrition, and sanctification that Mahood utilizes is actually mainstream Church of England Protestant rather than Puritan.<sup>18</sup> The stereotyping of so-called Puritan traits has generally obscured the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Protestant acceptance of the Reformation paradigm of salvation.<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare’s mainly Protestant playgoers would have had a hard time thinking of a part of nature untouched by the curse of Original Sin. Mahood may claim that “in *The Winter's Tale* . . . Nature is neither morally good nor bad” (156), but she would have had a difficult task convincing Shakespeare’s Protestant countrymen and women that anyone born within the realm of fallen nature inherently enjoys exemption from the effects of humankind’s curse. That entailment proves to be the case even in the land of Bohemia, where shepherd wives die, men drown in offshore storms, bears eat



noblemen, the tyrannical threatenings of monarchy have force, and London rogues cut purses. The glimpse of a Sidneyan Golden Nature made possible by Perdita's play-acting the role of the goddess of flowers Flora proves, after all, fleeting—finally poignant because of its evanescence.

All this is to say that Mahood's painstaking reconstruction of *The Winter's Tale* shows many seams and not a few threads alien to the play. The considerable space given in her chapter on this late play to a fabrication of plot thus appears to be the result of her need for a vehicle (or medium) for her exemplary analysis of Shakespeare's wordplay. Other possibilities for conceiving of the plots of Shakespeare's plays in relation to their poetry exist, however. Lawrence Danson has shown that the action of *Coriolanus* amounts to a kinetic combination of two rhetorical tropes—metonymy and synecdoche—while Russ McDonald has argued that the plot of *The Winter's Tale* consists of a giant expansion of the play's typical poetic utterance—a statement made variously mysterious, ominous, and suspenseful by having several dependent phrases and clauses precede its final sense-giving main clause.<sup>20</sup>

What distinguishes *The Winter's Tale* is that much of the poetic language is organized periodically: convoluted sentences or difficult speeches become coherent and meaningful only in their final clauses or movements," McDonald asserts; "a similar principle governs the arrangement of dramatic action: the shape and meaning of events become apparent only in the final moments of the tragicomedy."<sup>21</sup>

It is likely that schemes similar to Danson's and McDonald's models for relating the poetry and plot of a Shakespeare play could be devised for the distinctive wordplay of *The Winter's Tale* and the drama's broad action. Nevertheless, repeated readings of M. M. Mahood's *Shakespeare's Wordplay* will continue to edify students of the canon, even after the day that the above-described possibility becomes fact. They will do so because the penetrating insights of this exceptional critic of Shakespeare's plays survive her inevitably culture-bound assumptions.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>M. M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (1957; rpt. London: Methuen, 1968) 12-18.

<sup>2</sup>James Calderwood, "Love's Labour's Lost: A Wantoning with Words," *Studies in English Literature* 5 (1965): 317-22; and "Coriolanus: Wordless Meanings and Meaningless Words," *Studies in English Literature* 6 (1966): 211-24; Sigurd Burckhardt, *Shakespearean Meanings* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1968) esp. 22-46; William H. Matchett, "Some Dramatic Techniques in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Survey* 22 (1969): 93-107; and Richard Proudfoot, "Verbal Reminiscence and the Two-part Structure of *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Survey* 29 (1976): 67-78.

<sup>3</sup>For this phenomenon in Lawrence, see Mark Schorer, "Technique as Discovery," *The World We Imagine* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968) 3-23, esp. 13, 14-16; in Proust, Gérard Genette, "Proust and Indirect Language," *Figures of Literary Discourse*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Columbia UP, 1982) 229-95; in Woolf, Joan Lidoff, "Virginia Woolf's Feminine Sentence: The Mother-Daughter World of *To the Lighthouse*," *Literature and Psychology* 32.3 (1986): 43-59, esp. 43-49. Certainly the Joycean stream-of-consciousness technique promotes private dialogues both between author and character and within character.

<sup>4</sup>See the second- and third-type ambiguities in William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930; rpt. Cleveland: World Publ., 1955) 57-174.

<sup>5</sup>Derek Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Last Phase* (1954; rpt. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1965) 3.

<sup>6</sup>In this respect, see—for Joyce—Timothy Martin, "Joyce, Wagner, and Literary Wagnerism," *Picking Up Airs: Hearing the Music in Joyce's Text*, ed. Ruth H. Bauerle (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1993) 105-27, esp. 119-23; for Proust, J. M. Cocking, "Proust and Music," *Proust: Collected Essays on the Writer and His Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 109-29, esp. 126-29; and Richard E. Goodkin, "Proust and Wagner: The Climb to the Octave Above, or, the Scale of Love (and Death)," *Around Proust* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1991) 103-26.

<sup>7</sup>Lytton Strachey, *Books and Characters: French and English* (1906; rpt. London: Chatto & Windus, 1922) 58-59.

<sup>8</sup>F. C. Tinkler, "The Winter's Tale," *Scrutiny* 5 (1936-37): 344-64. Also see *The Winter's Tale: Critical Essays*, ed. Maurice Hunt (New York: Garland Publ., 1995) 20.

<sup>9</sup>Hunt 19-20.

<sup>10</sup>Hunt 20-21.

<sup>11</sup>F. David Hoeniger, "The Meaning of *The Winter's Tale*," *University of Toronto Quarterly* 20.1 (1950-51): 11-26.

<sup>12</sup>S. L. Bethell, *The Winter's Tale: A Study* (London: Staples P, 1947).

<sup>13</sup>"According to Blake's paradox," Mahood states, "the return of spiritual vision by which what now seemed finite and corrupt would appear infinite and holy was to be accomplished by 'an improvement of sensual enjoyment'; and such enjoyment is felt throughout the scenes in Bohemia" (157).

<sup>14</sup>For the calculation of this age, see Maurice Hunt, "The Three Seasons of Mankind: Age, Nature, and Art in *The Winter's Tale*," *Iowa State Journal of Research* 58 (1984): 299-309, esp. 300-1.

<sup>15</sup>J. I. M. Stewart, *Character and Motive in Shakespeare: Some Recent Appraisals Examined* (London: Longmans, 1949) 30-37.

<sup>16</sup>Dennis Bartholomeusz, *The Winter's Tale in Performance in England and America 1611-1976* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1982) 151.

<sup>17</sup>Leah Marcus, *The Politics of Mirth: Herrick, Milton, Marvell, and the Defense of Old Holiday Pastimes* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1986).

<sup>18</sup>Barbara Kiefer Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1979) 16-23.

<sup>19</sup>For a questioning of the accuracy and usefulness of the term "Puritan" for historical analysis, see Patrick Collinson, "A Comment: Concerning the Name Puritan," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31 (1980): 483-88.

<sup>20</sup>Lawrence Danson, *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare's Drama of Language* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1974) 143-62; Russ McDonald, "Poetry and Plot in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 36 (1985): 315-29.

<sup>21</sup>McDonald 316.