

The Magic of M. M. Mahood's *Shakespeare's Wordplay*

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There is kind of magic in Professor Mahood's essay on *The Winter's Tale*.¹ She fixes her gaze on the play's images and pulls meanings from them like so many wild rabbits from unsuspecting hats. Even after almost forty years the effect continues to be a mix of wonder and surprise. If the variety turns out to be less than infinite, if the rabbits more docile, it is because the magician has a plan; she believes that parts comprise a unity, and textures and tonalities are keyed to an emerging and increasingly discernible architecture of meanings. A major claim is that Shakespeare in the late plays renews his faith in the communicative possibilities of language: "Belief in words is foremost among the lost things which are found in Shakespeare's final comedies" (188). Mahood's critical practice bespeaks a similar faith and delivers the good works that constitute its vindication. That the tenor here has a theological ring is not altogether accidental. Mahood reads *The Winter's Tale* as, among other things, a morality play in which Everyman Leontes staggers blindly through mists of error and remorse toward the high ground of enlightenment, guided on the way by his good angels, Paulina and Hermione. His progress is signaled in a series of double or triple puns on words such as *disgrace*, *grace*, *issue*, *blood*, *breeding* and, perhaps most tellingly, *play*, which juxtaposes or conjoins a multitude of meanings, among them what children do with toys, what they and adults sometimes do with fish ("I am angling now"), as well as games, sexual play, playacting and disguising. Central to Mahood's thematic reading is the use of the word to denote the unfettered, emancipatory play of the imagination. Through the exercise of that faculty, Mahood argues, characters find a foothold in a realm beyond the reach of Leontes' authority and thereby manage to bring a touch of glory to their play.

The focus is on what words do, on the duplicities and ambiguities of reference, the particular polyvalences to which auditors were once and may still be prepared to respond. Anne Barton, in a review of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, suggests that Stoppard's puns, "far from being dreadfully Derridean, are something Shakespeare would have understood."² What Shakespeare would, presumably, have understood is the excitement of unforeseen connectedness, the suddenly perceived link between incongruous elements. Such a crossing is, perhaps, what Tony Tanner has in mind when he likens a pun to "an adulterous bed in which two meanings that should be separated are coupled together."³

Mahood's appreciation of such relationships and what she manages to make of them in relation to everything else are a continuation of or supplement to the work of critics who had initiated the careful study of linguistic and figural patterns. One effect of their endeavor was to counter both a preoccupation with the "lives" of Shakespeare's heroes and also a tendency to view the canon almost exclusively in the context of what was then understood to be "literary" history. L. C. Knights challenged the primacy of character interpretation by presenting the plays as dramatic poems, by drawing attention to the qualities of the verse, the controlled associations released by words, their emotional and intellectual force. Similarly concerned with the rhetoricity of language, G. Wilson Knight sought signification below or above the level of plot and character, exploring figural or musical patterns that were understood to organize the whole work. Caroline Spurgeon and Wolfgang Clemen made the study of imagery central to their respective methodologies, and it is, perhaps, especially in William Empson's linguistic analysis, his discussion of "honest" in *Othello* or "fool" in *Lear*, that Mahood found precedent for the project she was so productively to undertake. Together these critics and others including, for example, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Heilman pursue avenues of inquiry that, as Arthur Eastman reminds us, were to dominate criticism for half a century. It is revealing, I think, that in his essay on the history of modern criticism, Eastman should single out Mahood's contribution as meriting special attention.⁴

The extent of that contribution can be measured in a number of more recent studies, ranging from Inge Leimberg's work on the semiology of proper names in *The Winter's Tale*⁵ to Gilian West's study of puns

in the play.⁶ Mahood's influence is less evident in the work of the new historicists reluctant to accept claims of thematic unity or even textual intelligibility. The currents of meaning these critics seek to disclose run at depths beneath the surface, beneath, that is, the interplay of character and event, driven by forces of history and society more likely to be charted by anthropologists and cultural historians than by literary critics. In dealing with individual plays, the strategy is to construct explanatory models in which a surplus of signification, often a mix of discordant and contradictory elements, is brought to order, contained, made to serve an ideological argument, the plays transformed into unwitting instruments of social and political control. By focusing on a fairly narrow range of issues and concerns, the approach tends to encase texts in an historically distant, ideologically remote region, to represent them as museum pieces drawn from a warehouse of antique monuments, to isolate or cocoon them and thus to suppress any possible connectedness between the historical past and present. Accordingly, the past comes to resemble a foreign country the study of which is properly assigned to specialists who alone are possessed of the skills required to decipher what the natives say and their motives in saying it. Mahood, on the other hand, views a text as something other than a thing of the past, as less exclusively a product of the social and political forces that may have figured in its construction. At the same time, she is at pains to acknowledge the specificities of history and thereby to constrain and discipline the meanings she is prepared to pursue even as she seeks to capture those that are, if not universal, at least transhistorical. The line of inquiry is keyed to the assumption that language is decipherable, intelligible, that it is possible to grasp meanings as ambiguous and multifaceted as they often are and that the elucidation of texts is a worthwhile activity. For Mahood, worthwhileness depends in some measure on reaching a broad constituency, less exclusively an academic or professional one, and on an approach to literature that seeks to fulfill what is, in the words of Victor Brombert, "a permanent human need to account for experience."⁷

Acknowledgment of what was happening in England at the time Mahood was writing *Shakespeare's Wordplay* may help to explain not only the direction she takes but also what she chooses to leave out.

Conditions of production, dramatic conventions, the backgrounds and expectations of the original auditors are touched upon but not lingered over or developed in any detail. The ghosts of political and ideological controversy which some critics have glimpsed among the shadows do not abide the intensity of Mahood's daytime scrutiny. That *The Winter's Tale* raises questions about monarchical absolutism and the Stuart court or creates intelligent concern over the appropriation of language as an instrument of power is not a feature in which she appears to be much interested. She resists confining the play within its historical setting, hesitant to push it back into the past and thereby to distance it from the audiences she hopes to bring within its reach. For Mahood to dwell on the past is to put her project at risk. The task of the critic in the late fifties was understood to be an emancipatory one, its expressed aim to make accessible the riches of a culture for those social groups and classes previously denied. It was, after all, a society that had survived the turmoil of war. In the academy and elsewhere there was a deliberate attempt to build on a fragile sense of cultural solidarity and community that had momentarily arisen in the wake of that war. It is indicative of the mood of the period that William Empson, then Gresham Professor of Rhetoric, was persuaded to undertake a series of lectures on Elizabethan drama to be delivered to an anonymous audience whose members were recruited from the City of London and more likely to be in search of shelter than instruction in English literature. It is, perhaps, noteworthy in this regard that shortly after its publication, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* was included as a recommended text for students preparing for A level examinations and thus served to introduce a significant number of British school children to the study of Shakespeare.

In view of the circumstances that prevailed at the time the book was written, the critical tradition on which it drew and the desire to bring Shakespeare to a wider public, it is not surprising that Mahood is quite prepared to overlook more speculative matters having to do with the theoretical or semiotic implications of language. She is not much interested in the issues with which a subsequent criticism would be increasingly concerned such as, for example, post-structuralist arguments about the unreliability of language or the difficult passage from evidence to inference, from reference to representation. Mahood's fascination with

language and the wealth of meanings she routinely extracts from texts presuppose a vocabulary shared by playwright, audience, and critic alike. She believes that the voices which animated the plays for their first audiences continue to speak to other, more recent ones and that those voices constitute a channel of communication, a communicative link, across time, between whatever there once was and what there now is.

We return to her reading of *The Winter's Tale* as we do to other essays in *Shakespeare's Wordplay* to be reminded of the vicissitudes of critical taste and practice, to be challenged to look beyond disciplinary specialization, to be warned away from single-minded or reductive explanatory patterns, and, finally, to be told that literature counts and that criticism remains to tell us why.

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NOTES

¹*Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London: Methuen, 1957).

²*New York Review of Books* 42.100 (June 8, 1995): 28.

³*Adultery and the Novel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979) 53.

⁴"Shakespeare Criticism," *William Shakespeare: His World, His Work, His Influence*, ed. John Andrews, vol. 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1985) 745.

⁵"Golden Apollo, a poor humble swain . . .': A Study of Names in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch West* (1991): 135-58.

⁶"Fuelling the Flames: Inadvertent Double Entendre in *The Winter's Tale*," *English Studies* 74 (1993): 520-23.

⁷Presidential Address 1989: "Mediating the Work: Or the Legitimate Aims of Criticism," *PMLA* 105 (1990): 391-97.