

An Answer to Maurice Hunt's "Modern and Postmodern Discourses in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*"

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I'm grateful to Maurice Hunt for his interrogation of issues linked to my piece on *The Winter's Tale*.¹ I'm also fascinated by what he takes to be its direction—different from the trail I try to mark. Starting with a review of my discussion of various discourses within the play, he acknowledges the attempt to locate those discourses in relation to similar or cognate discourses, vocabularies and styles of utterance, in other, non-theatrical texts of the period. The fascination begins when he comes to what he calls the larger strategy, namely, "one that involves postmodern and modern language practices" (83). He goes on to claim that my purpose is to locate particular discourses in an "implied grid of modern and postmodern languages in the play" (86).

The formulations are misleading. I do not identify postmodern practices in the play. My concern is with language or language practices in relation to historical origins and contexts. The approach is insistently local and historical, scaled to a particular linguistic and political environment, its terms and registers less free floating, less open-ended, than those upon which Hunt draws. If postmodernism becomes an issue, it is in connection with a line of argument put forward by recent critics who seize on disputed passages, dismiss them as meaningless, and conclude that the play is incoherent, that it resists what Stephen Orgel refers to as "a common sense interpretation."² Hunt is right to say that I seek to counter or, perhaps, qualify such claims by showing that the various discourses are key elements in the design of the play as a whole, functioning not only to locate individual characters but also to construct a network of meanings that connect the play to its time.

¹Reference: Maurice Hunt, "Modern and Postmodern Discourses in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*: A Response to David Laird," *Connotations* 5.1 (1995/96): 83-94.

Hunt and I disagree about these discourses; I argue that they are oppositional and competing; he takes them to be merely variants of each other, more similar than different, or, as he puts it, "the modern and postmodern idioms defined by Laird are, in a certain sense, problematically alike, so much so that other paradigms for defining modern and postmodern speech acts in the play recommend themselves" (84). Here I feel a decided tug in the direction of unfamiliar targets and concerns.

Hunt attributes to the essay distinctions that are not present and remains unpersuaded by those that are. He contends that the language practices of Hermione and Leontes are essentially similar. Both speakers are linguistic absolutists, alike in their insistence on oath-taking and oath-keeping and in their struggle to freeze meanings. It is no great stretch to conclude that they are also modernists. Their speech acts are "relatively intelligible and determinate in meaning," attributes which, according to Hunt, constitute the essential ingredients of modernism (83). Having decisively dealt with Leontes and Hermione, he shifts focus to the playwright: "In what sense does the 'absolute' language of the playwright Shakespeare differ from that of his mad alter ego Leontes?" (89). Hunt's answer is, of course, that there is no difference—Shakespeare becomes a modernist and, like Leontes, is determined to control the play of meanings. Where Leontes fails, Shakespeare succeeds, fixing meanings on paper, making them "essentially absolute in the form of the First Folio" (89). Here we're treated to the rather bizarre suggestion that among Shakespeare's accomplishments is the posthumous exercise of an inscription control that settles questions of meaning once and for all. At this point, we're encouraged to disregard chronology even as we venture beyond the boundaries of the original project.

The categories Hunt introduces shed an uncertain light on issues over which the play must have created intelligent concern for at least some members of its first audiences. To the extent that the play does manage to communicate, does resolve the linguistic negotiations it enters into, Hunt may have grounds for claiming it as an example of modernism. My objection is only that the label invites a certain vacuity or blankness. What my paper undertakes is, perhaps, more substantive, certainly more venturesome. It seeks at least a partial recovery of originary meanings and significations. It is premised on the notion that the effort to restore

a text to its historical and linguistic setting is something other than a fool's errand. It fastens on language practices that are local, that figure in the foreground of contemporary political controversy and debate.

If I have a quarrel with postmodern critics, it is with their reluctance to reckon with what a text might communicate or represent in certain contexts. There is a tendency to turn to other things before considering even the possibility that a text might meet the requirements of social discourse and intelligibility within a particular community. At risk is the recovery of meanings which, though inconclusive and contingent, open vistas, ways of seeing and responding, unblinkered by the urgencies and preoccupations of the present.

A case in point is the language used by Paulina in her efforts to minister to Leontes' rage. Although she is often portrayed as a "scold" character, her language is susceptible to historical interpretation. It brings into play discursive practices prescribed for the treatment of delusion in the medical literature of the period. When she speaks as Leontes' "physician," she claims an occupational and institutional authority grounded in the therapeutic and the healing arts. Reckoning with that authority and what it implies is likely to change or, at least supplement, a more familiar interpretation of her role.

One further comment. Hunt implies that I ignore puns and wordplay, unquestionably prominent features of the play. He then goes on to discuss Hermione's pun *onward/word*. It is curious that what he says about its multiple meanings is an abbreviated version of the explication included in my essay. Similarly, he fails to recall or he misreads that part of the essay dealing with Leontes' paranoid fear of ambiguity—verbal as well as social and domestic.³ On this point Hunt seems rather elusive, saying of Leontes that "puns are his chief vehicle for creating absolutist meanings" (87). I would agree if the claim is that puns together with the crossing or disordering of meanings they invite are understood to signify the instabilities, private and public, by which Leontes imagines himself threatened. My paper contends that the ambiguities that rattle the surface of his discourse are symptomatic of pressures leading him to adopt an absolutism that is reductive, unequivocal, and decisive. Ambiguities put monarchy at risk, unmanage the manageable, disorder the instruments of order. They are intricately implicated in the problem

of rule. The bitter, accusatory wordplay that darkens the tenor of Leontes' discourse represents not only a disordering of language but of monarchical authority as well. It invades and corrupts the loftier reaches of discursive space.

The various and conflictual ways in which wordplay is deployed throughout the play put additional strain on Hunt's argument about similar language use. Hermione's wordplay describes an openness, a range of possibilities, a discursive space with room to maneuver. Leontes' puns betray a bitterness, a sense of outrage, an anguished bewilderment and discord. In the first instance, the fluidity of language is liberating, in the other it threatens sanity and rule.

Leontes' recourse is to an absolutist rhetoric intended to rid language of its duplicities and indeterminacies, to name and stabilize a variety of social and political relationships. This defensive strategy takes on a special meaning when viewed in relation to similar projects undertaken by players on the stage of history. We might recall, for example, that James I at the opening of Parliament, March, 1604, assured his subjects that he would make of language an instrument of accurate, clear representation, banishing from his discourse such diseases as duplicity and ambiguity:

... it becommeth a King, in my opinion, to use no other Eloquence then plainnesse and sinceritie. By plainnesse I meane, that his Speeches should be so cleare and voyd of all ambiguitie, that they may not be throwne, nor rent asunder in contrary sences like the old Oracles of the Pagan Gods. And by sinceritie, I understand that uprightnesse and honestie which ought to be in a Kings whole Speeches and actions⁴

Like the Stuart monarch, Leontes locates himself with those upon whom the integrity of political and legal discourse must depend.

Leontes' determination to control discourse and his insistence on transparency and referentiality arise not because he is unaware of the instability of language or incapable of submitting to its drifting and uncertain currents, but precisely because he is. He brands such submission "mere weakness" and proceeds to act according to his own reductive version of events (II.iii.2).⁵ Events move disastrously beyond his control, collapsing the categories and techniques by which an absolutist discourse reckons with, even tries to change reality. The

discourses upon which the play settles are less prone to failure. They acknowledge the contingency of language; their claims are provisional, unfinished, no longer rigid or enforcing.

In so far as this present exchange affords a glimpse beyond our own discursive practices, we give a form of witness to the authority and purposiveness of *The Winter's Tale*. In that aspect at least, we defer to the play, are subject to the sweep of its multiple meanings, even as we submit to *Connotations*.

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NOTES

¹David Laird, "Competing Discourses in *The Winter's Tale*," *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 25-43.

²"The Poetics of Incomprehensibility," *SQ* 42 (1991): 431-37.

³See Laird 30-31.

⁴*The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles Howard McIlwain (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965) 280.

⁵*The Winter's Tale*, ed. J. J. P. Pafford, Arden Edition (London: Methuen, 1953).