

"Shakespeare's Wordplay—Some Reappraisals": A Reply*

Connotations' re-reviews, forty years on, of *Shakespeare's Wordplay* gave me great pleasure—the more so in that they all focus on my favourite play—but their kindness also leaves me feeling a bit of a fraud. I have never thought of myself as a *real* Shakespearean of the kind who could never rest with an unresolved crux under all those mattresses. From time to time I have been struck, even a bit hypnotised, by one or other aspect of Shakespeare's art and have tried to share that fascination with other playgoers and readers. Virtually the only "research" I did for the book in question consisted in heaving onto a desk and consulting the massive volumes of what my mentor, C. L. Wrenn, ironically called the little dictionary and which to me, as a loyal Londoner, will always be the New, and not the Oxford, English Dictionary.

Still, Oxford was where I wrote *Shakespeare's Wordplay* while I had a post there from 1947 to 1954. This means that it not only bears the signs of a particular epoch, the emancipatory Attlee years so well conjured up by David Laird, but it was the product of a particular place. (In fact my *Winter's Tale* chapter originated in a term's lectures of which I vividly recall the first, which was largely on "Go play, boy, play . . ." A lifelong victim of spoonerism, I ended by reassuring the audience I did not intend to go through the line play by play.)

*Reference: David Laird, "The Magic of M. M. Mahood's *Shakespeare's Wordplay*," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 3-7; Maurice Hunt, "Poetry vs. Plot in *The Winter's Tale*: Modernity and Morality in M. M. Mahood's *Shakespeare's Wordplay*," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 8-18; Brian Gibbons, "Doubles and Likenesses-with-difference: *The Comedy of Errors* and *The Winter's Tale*," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 19-40; Kenneth Muir, "Remembrance of Things Past," *Connotations* 6.1 (1996/97): 41-45.

Surprisingly, in view of the elitism then prevalent at Oxford, the structure of the university and of the English School reinforced the general "emancipatory" trend of literary criticism at the time by encouraging the tyro critic to write for the general, though informed, reader. Specialisation was frowned upon; according to one's way of thinking, this reflected a genteel amateurism or (as I prefer to think) preserved the Johnsonian notion of humane learning. But simple fact was that, in teaching across the whole spectrum of English literature before 1832, there was no time to specialise. The texts were virtually all one read; and these texts—and this is a second point to be made about Oxford—were, because of the centuries covered, first and foremost poetry. I think the fine tuning required in the study of the Metaphysical poets in particular (on whom I had written my first book) came in useful when I approached Shakespeare's language, and as Maurice Hunt shows I was steeped in the Romantics as well.

A third Oxford influence needs to be noticed. As far as there was an acquiescence in any literary-critical trend of the time, it tended towards the theologisation of literature by such figures as C. S. Lewis and Charles Williams—and behind them, the later Eliot. I did not much like the Inklings' ethos or methods, but I did not escape their influence, and in the case of *The Winter's Tale* it certainly caused me, to superimpose on the play, as Kenneth Muir suggests and as Maurice Hunt skilfully demonstrates, a mythological pattern which did not satisfactorily match my response to its language. In point of fact, I found Bethell's reading too heavily theological, and hoped to counteract it by stressing the importance of the Sicilian scenes, but here I was up against another limitation of time and place: young women tutors, around 1950, did not explicate Shakespeare's bawdy, which could be left to Eric Partridge. This accounts for my choice of plays in which the puns were mostly uncomic, causing M. C. Bradbrook to complain of the "claustrophobic feeling of being shut in with Shakespeare, the *Oxford* (sic) *English Dictionary*, and a very good but incurably earnest preceptress."

Another review of the time, by R. A. Foakes, drew attention to another shortcoming of which I am now sharply aware: the book's lack of theatrical awareness and its overemphasis on complexities of language which can at best only be subliminally registered during a performance.

This was brought home to me at Stratford in 1981. I opened my *Winter's Tale* programme to find a long quotation from *Shakespeare's Wordplay* about Leontes' jealousy being a sudden libidinous invasion. Of course I smirked like anything—until Leontes' jealousy erupted; then I realised that, if such a gifted actor as Patrick Stewart could not play the role convincingly according to my idea, the idea was almost certainly wrong. Because of my awareness of this deficiency in my discussion of *The Winter's Tale*, I particularly enjoyed Brian Gibbons's exploration of the play's non-verbal double meanings. Here, I felt, was an essay that directors should read for all its positive insights as well as its warnings against heavy-handed stage symbolism and—the blight of recent productions—the doubling of the roles of Hermione and Perdita.

So thank you, Inge Leimberg, for initiating these re-reviews as well as for your own testimony to the profit the book gave one very responsive reader. I am only sorry that Kenneth Muir is no longer here to receive my thanks.

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