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Remembrance of Things Past

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My immediate purpose is to explain how it came about that Molly Mahood and I, at approximately the same time, published articles in defence of Shakespeare's word-play. I am conscious of the fact that one's memory of what happened forty-five years ago cannot be trusted—it is liable to distortion by vanity or anec*dotage*, a quibble may be forgiven in the circumstances. I have tried to obtain confirmation from others, but most of them are now dead. I appealed to Professor Richard Taylor, the Head of the Department of Adult Continuing Education, and he and two of his colleagues, have promised to help. So far he has been able to correct me on one or two details, and Professor Roy Niblett, who has wisely kept a diary of his engagements, assures me that he had nothing to do with the conference on "Education through Art," which I thought he had organised and which I certainly attended. What follows is an attempt to give an accurate account of a particular assignment: less fictional, I trust that Proust's use of his own past.

I start from the conviction that I had been asked to address an audience consisting of painters and sculptors, probably at Grantley Hall, near Fountains Abbey. Fifteen years before, when my first book was published, I had met many well-known artists, introduced to them by Gertrude Hermes, wood-engraver and sculptor, whom I admired and knew well. With several of these artists I had kept in touch. When I was elected to the Leeds City Council in 1945, I became Vice-Chairman of the Libraries and Arts Sub-Committee, so I was not surprised when I was invited to address an audience of artists.

It may seem peculiar that I chose to speak to such an audience on Shakespeare's puns. The reason was simple. I had been working for years on the Arden edition of *Macbeth* and had been commissioned to follow

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it up with *King Lear*. My editorial labours had become obsessive. Furthermore, although I lost my seat in 1948 I was re-elected a year later for another ward. I remained on the council until I moved to Liverpool and my duties as a councillor involved many hours work. Since I also remained a full-time lecturer at the university, and was the honorary editor of a weekly newspaper, I had no time to search for a different topic on which to speak to the artists; but I hope the following paragraph will be enough to justify my choice, as it was one my audience appreciated.

In my talk I argued that as punning was an essential characteristic of Shakespeare's style, we ought to restore the belief that such word-play was legitimate in uncomic contexts. Having referred to T. S. Eliot who had followed in the footsteps of his favourite seventeenth-century divines in the art of quibbling, I concluded by suggesting

> It is not so much the pun itself that should be defended with uncompromising vigour but the attitude to language which the use of the quibble demands. Language is called upon to perform two main functions—to convey thoughts and to express feelings or states of mind. For the former function an unemotive, precise language is required. If we want to talk about the theory of relativity or nuclear fission, we should be as unambiguous and as straightforward as possible in our use of language. But if we are expressing complicated human feelings, the more scientifically precise we are, the greater the distortion. Where the human mind is in question we must take into consideration that the language has a life of its own, that every word has a different pedigreee, and a different emotive history, and that its relationships and derivations necessarily suggest to the speaker and to the listener the kind of association which is, in its most obvious form, the pun. In Henry Moore's sculpture it is always possible to perceive how his actual medium has influenced the finished work of art. He has collaborated, as it were, with the grain and texture of the wood or the markings on the stone, so that the reclining figures look almost as if they were works of nature rather than works of man—figures that were inherent in the tree or stone. In much the same way the artist in words must collaborate with the genius of the language. If he tries to write without due regard to his medium, his work will be thin, artificial and sterile. We can only master language by submitting to it.

It will be recalled that Molly Mahood and I were both on the Editorial Board of *Essays in Criticism*, then in its first years as what someone called "the Oxford antidote to *Scrutiny*." I knew therefore that "The Fatal

Cleopatra" was about to appear, and we exchanged proofs. Her article was the basis for part of the first chapter of *Shakespeare's Wordplay*. Whereas mine was a one-off recycling of my edition of *Macbeth*, hers was clearly the beginning of a work of literary criticism, whose endurance we are now celebrating.

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To Molly Mahood, ". . . *The Winter's Tale* is a morality play; but its morality is wider, wiser and more humane that that of a Puritan inner drama of sin, guilt and contrition" (153). And as the play, so the players: Hermione plays the "symbolic role of Heavenly Grace" (150) and "reappears literally as Patience on a monument" (152) while "Perdita stands for his [Leontes'] self-forgiveness . . ." (154). I confess that I was unhappy with such an allegorising of *The Winter's Tale*, partly because it does not really depend on the evidence of word-play. It may be true that in the "great" tragedies a stoical endurance rather than a Christian hope is all that is offered to us, although I have elsewhere sought to show that all four are not incompatible with the teaching of all the main Christian denominations. Nor is there any doubt that *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* use Christian ideas of forgiveness and redemption. Yet even in these plays there are other forces at work.

One of the great moments of the play is the welcoming of Florizel and Perdita as *Primavera*. "Welcome hither," says Leontes, "As is the spring to th'earth" (5.1.150-51). Although addressed to both lovers, Leontes singles out Perdita, whom he had previously addressed as "goddess!" (5.1.130). In Sicilia she is called Flora, the goddess she is impersonating; she refers to the story of Proserpine and the breath of Cytherea; she feels like a person acting in Whitsun Pastorals. Moreover, she frankly looks forward to the consummation of her love with Florizel, "quick, and in mine arms" (4.4.132). Not one of Shakespeare's heroines—not even Imogen and Miranda—has such a chorus of admiration from everyone she meets. It resembles the universal praise of Princess Elizabeth in celebration of whose marriage *The Winter's Tale* was performed (cf. Arden ed., p. xxiv).

Of course the play is concerned with Christian redemption, but I may suggest that Molly Mahood, by concentrating on Play, plays down the Sicilian scenes, ignoring the mythological background and Perdita's following of Leontes' description of his state of innocence when he repudiated the doctrine of Original Sin: "the imposition cleared / Hereditary ours" (I.2.73).

Yet Molly Mahood, as we might expect, has some brilliant insights. She shows that Shakespeare provided a resolution of the Life-versus-Art controversy in Florizel's description of Perdita's dancing:

> when you do dance, I wish you
> A wave o'th'Sea, that you might ever do
> Nothing but that, move still, still so,
> And own no other function. (4.4.140-43)

As Mahood comments:

> Drama comes nearest to life of all forms of *mimesis* because it is continually reanimated by living actors; . . . Shakespeare entrusts the weight of the play's meaning at this climax to a boy-actor's silent mimetic art. When Perdita dances, the old antagonism of art and nature disappears, for there is no way in which we can tell the dancer from the dance. (186)

This splendid passage, with its allusion to the last line of Yeats' "Among School Children," needs one revision. The effect depends not quite so much on the boy-actor's silent art but on the words spoken by Florizel.

I would make two further comments. One is that Perdita's delight in sex, perfectly natural in a peasant girl and equally in a hidden princess, has led to some bowdlerisation, even in the present century. My other comment is that I have seen a dozen or more Perditas and all of them have been disappointing. Some of them have been famous actresses, splendid in other roles; others have been girls straight from drama school, well-spoken, charming, and desperate to make names for themselves. Shakespeare was lucky in having boy-actors, as Molly Mahood realised. But they are not silent: they have to speak. Perhaps they were analogous to boy-sopranos of our own day, able to express thoughts beyond the reaches of their souls in singing the masterpieces of Bach or Handel.

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