



1-1-2015

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### BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Anderson, Adam (2015) "Signifier, Signified, and the Nature of Madness in *The Winter's Tale*," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 1 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol8/iss1/12>

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# Signifier, Signified, and the Nature of Madness in *The Winter's Tale*

Adam Anderson

Leontes's abject insanity is readily apparent from the first moments of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, and its prominence in both the characterization of Leontes and its subsequent importance to the play's plot demand that the nature of his insanity be closely examined. The nature of madness is perhaps the most intriguing question of the recent literary age and, though recent scientific advancements have offered numerous and effective treatments, the great cause of insanity, madness, and delusion remains elusive.

From its Freudian inception in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, psychoanalytic criticism has diagnosed the majority of our tragic heroes with one form of mental illness, syndrome, or complex. However, the critical power of psychology rests primarily in diagnosis—psychoanalysis is a pragmatic and necessary discipline, but it is a scientific one. It, like most other scientific fields, is primarily external, and concerns itself with describing rather than explaining. It is the “what” rather than the “why,” and it is not enough.

No critic can read Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* without tackling the question of Leontes's madness, but a strictly psychoanalytic approach can only offer strictly scientific answers—it is better at describing than explaining Leontes's condition, and, in the text, Leontes's madness is given no definite

cause. Leontes himself meanders from reason to reason to justify his increasingly erratic and paranoid behavior, but the very nature of Leontes's character prohibits the reader from trusting these interpretations of himself. Shakespeare clearly presents Leontes as a man disconnected from the reality of the other characters, but his outright refusal to propose any sort of reliable reason for Leontes's insanity means that we must turn elsewhere to understand it. We must work backwards from its effects—examining the linguistic clues readily apparent in the text—through the marriage of psychoanalytic and linguistic literary theories.

One of the most readily apparent effects of Leontes's lost mind is acute paranoia leading to a form of interpretive hallucination. He does not descend into this madness in the play but is infected with it from the play's inception; in Scene 2, Leontes immediately follows his dear Hermione's successful plea for Polixenes to linger longer with a paranoid aside, raving at their supposed and imagined courtship. Leontes's psychosis is compatible with modern definitions of schizophrenia; however, his actions and speeches lead to a deeper understanding of the inner-workings of the deluded mind. Leontes's schizophrenia is both an effect and a cause of his paranoia, which in turn is both caused by and causing a mis-interpretation, a mis-reading, of the world around him.

Leontes's world, and therefore, his madness, is built by the language used by and presented to him, and language itself is a slippery slope of sign, signifier, and signified (Tyson 251). According to linguistic theory in general, a linguistic *sign*, or a word, consists of both *signifier* and *signified*. A *signifier*, essentially, consists of the medium by which the sign is transmitted. It can be a series of runes or letters, a sound, a gesture, or even, as in the case of Leontes, the actions of a beloved wife and a dear friend. The *signified* on the other hand, is just that—the meaning of the signifier. It is the concept to which the signifier refers, but, unlike the signifier, it is intangible, individual, and unique. “Different people,” according to Lois Tyson, “will probably picture different” signifieds when presented with the same signifier.

Leontes's madness, therefore, lies not in the observation of signifiers, but in his schizophrenic misinterpretation of the same. He is an extremely observant individual, taking the most literal sense of the word. When Camillo challenges these observations, calling them nothing, Leontes responds with a litany of signs he has noted since Polixenes's arrival. “Is whispering nothing?” he rejoins,

Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?  
Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career

Of laughing with a sigh?—a note infallible  
 Of breaking honesty—horsing foot on foot?  
 Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?  
 Hours, minutes? Noon, midnight? And all eyes  
 Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,  
 That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing? (I.II.283–291)

Leontes has no difficulty observing signifiers; it is in the creation of a sign, in the amalgamation of signifier and signified into one linguistic unit, that his madness becomes apparent and, eventually, dangerous.

Diagnosing Leontes, both because of his fictional nature and my lack of medical degree, must be done broadly to be done responsibly. Leontes, it must be remembered, is a fictional representation of a mind and not a mind in fact. Though we can describe his actions using psychoanalytic terms, the question of his insanity becomes a primarily linguistic question, and we must therefore primarily examine the language he employs in order to responsibly analyze both him and his madness. In the text, he exhibits several symptoms consistent with paranoid schizophrenia, most notably, Leontes experiences acute states of “psychosis, apathy, and social withdrawal” leading to, as this paper argues, “cognitive impairment” and “impaired functioning . . . in interpersonal relationships” (Mueser 2063). Leontes's psychosis and paranoia is apparent in Shakespeare's play from his very first aside. “Too hot, too hot!” Leontes declares, upon witnessing Hermione's successful bid in staying his friend Polixenes,

To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.  
 I have tremor cordis on me: my heart dances;  
 But not for joy; not joy. This entertainment  
 May a free face put on, derive a liberty  
 From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom,  
 And well become the agent; 't may, I grant;  
 But to be paddling palm and pinching fingers,  
 As now they are, and making practiced smiles,  
 As in a looking-glass, and then to sigh, as 'twere  
 The mort o' the deer; O, that is entertainment,  
 My bosom likes not, nor my brows! (I.II.109–119)

Here, we first glimpse Leontes's impaired mentality both in the content of his words as well as Shakespeare's masterful construction of his language.

Before continuing, “psychosis” must be defined. It is not, as it is commonly used, merely an impaired mental state, but an impairment resulting

in a complete disassociation from reality. It is a debilitating, crippling state of mind that removes the self from external reality and results in both delusions and hallucinations. Leontes's psychosis becomes apparent in this passage not because what he is seeing is not there, but because his interpretations of events have been removed from the standard causal chain and have been replaced with his own deluded substitutes.

Returning to the quoted passage, it may perhaps be most beneficial to glean Leontes's psychosis from the formal elements which Shakespeare includes before examining what, precisely, Leontes is saying. Language is inherently slippery, and as much meaning can be derived from the aesthetics of its form as from its strict, defined meaning.

The first and most apparent quality of Leontes's aside, and his speech in general throughout the play, is his use of quick, staccato phrases, often culminating in his repeating himself throughout his longer asides. Shakespeare uses these linguistic elements to establish the fact of Leontes's madness that we, too, must establish before we can examine it. The quoted passage even begins with both a repetition and a short phrase—"Too hot! Too hot!" he says. This interruptible, repetitious rhythm creates a frantic, pitiable diction more consistent with mental ward patients than Sicilian royalty. The effect of Leontes's chaotic speech patterns are only heightened when compared to Hermione's and Polixenes's relatively elegant turns of phrase. Contrast, for example, "One good deed dying tongueless / Slaughters a thousand waiting upon that" (1.2.92-93) and "We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' the sun, / And bleat the one at the other" (1.2.67-68) with "As now they are, and making practiced smiles, / As in a looking-glass, and then to sigh, as 'twere / The mort o' the deer" (1.2.114-116). The first two examples, taken from Hermione and Polixenes, respectively, have an elegant turn about them, a beautiful, quotable simplicity the modern reader has come to expect from Shakespeare. The last example, said by Leontes, can only be said to struggle. The clauses are short, almost frantic in their delivery, as if Leontes is only thinking rationally long enough to speak every few seconds. His words spill over themselves in tormented fervor, evoking images of a lunatic in a madhouse, and his diction in general starkly contrasts with those around him, only heightening the effect of Shakespeare's affects.

The content of Leontes's asides, as much as the quality of their delivery, shape his character in the eyes of the play's viewer. It is in this aside, quoted in part above, that we first view the effects of Leontes's jealous frenzy. In it, he claims to see the "paddling palm and pinching fingers" indicative of his wife's

unfaithfulness and his friend's betrayal. Then he goes on to brag about his powers of perception as if he has solved some great riddle, or uncovered a great secret hidden in their "practiced smiles," and, either from sarcasm or denial, claims that these gaping emotional wounds "Too hot, too hot!" to bear, which give him "tremor cordis," are but "entertainment" to him. But then, as if revealing too much about his own insecurity, goes on to ask, "Mamilius, / Art thou my boy?" in order to reassert not only his social status, but to deny his already apparent inability to participate in social schema. Leontes, even from the very beginning of the play, is revealing his willingness to descend into "apathy and social withdrawal" (Mueser 2063)—tell-tale signs of clinical madness.

However, his madness, though easily classified as schizophrenia, cannot be said to be caused by schizophrenia. Such diagnoses are not causes, but descriptions of an immediate cause—a classification of a group of symptoms, useful in the medical field but ultimately meaningless, without context, in the realm of literary criticism. To say that Leontes is simply schizophrenic and think your critical task finished is to ignore the prime directive of criticism: Understanding through exploration. Leontes, in the end, is a fictional character, and diagnosing him does little good, as he cannot be treated, and, if we were to stop here, does the critic little good, as there is not much to be understood by a simple label.

Linguistic criticism offers one possible tunnel to explore. As mentioned earlier, language is a slippery beast made, essentially, of LEGO bricks without studs. Linguistic signs consist of two parts, signifier and signified, which come together to create one linguistic unit, one packet of information whose meaning can be transmitted and derived. These separate but equal processes are essential in understanding Leontes's madness through a critical lens, and, though they cannot satisfactorily explain the absolute basis of his psychosis, they can give some insight into the immediate cause.

The first thing that must be understood in examining Leontes's signifier/signified construction of the world is that, for the purpose of this paper, we are equating all forms of communication with linguistic signs. Essentially, all forms of interpretable action are being taken as a signifier leading to a signified, which creates a sign. This is done precisely because Leontes's actions themselves seem to demand it. His rambling asides are rife with his personal interpretations of Hermione's and Polixenes's actions, and differentiating between certain interpretable acts therefore becomes more an exercise in futility than a

useful critical move, for it is in this moment, this liminal space between signifier and signified in which Leontes's madness exists and persists.

Leontes has no difficulty identifying signifiers, and most of his asides contain a litany of interpretable acts to which he assigns meaning. Furthermore, there is little to no textual evidence provided by Shakespeare that allows us to assume that the actions of Hermione and Polixenes he observes are complete fabrications of Leontes's mind—they are not hallucinations in whole, only in part. The reader can assume that, even though Leontes is himself mad, the “smiles” and “paddling palm and pinching fingers” and occasional “sigh” are, in themselves, factual acts.

What is not factual, and where Leontes's madness, or at least the immediate source of his madness, lies, is in the signified to which he assigns these signifiers. His construction of meaningful signs has shifted from the mean, from a rough approximation of the actual truth of the situation—that his friend Polixenes and his wife Hermione are friends who have friendly chats and, in the course of such chats, sigh, as one would, touch hands, as one would, and smile, naturally—to his own, misguided interpretation. “Smiles,” in Leontes's mind become “practiced smiles,” lying smiles refusing to admit infidelity, “paddling palm and pinching fingers” become signs of spousal unfaithfulness, and even “friendship” becomes “too hot, too hot!” in the face of such mis-aligned and mis-constructed signs.

In this way, the entirety of Leontes madness becomes the product of an unfortunate linguistic shift consistent with the clinical definition of psychosis. It is a detachment from reality not in observation, but in perception. Leontes suffers from a type of interpretive hallucination just as debilitating, if not more so, than an outright fabrication of sights and sounds. The standard causal chain between signifier and signified has been disrupted and corrupted, leaving those around him to argue with a madman not about the facts, but about the interpretation and logical application of those facts. It leaves those around Leontes with no recourse of action, for he still has a foundation upon which to stand; namely, that which he saw happen did indeed happen. Instead, those left must argue logic with a madman whose entire interpretive framework for the world has been shifted just enough from the truth, or, perhaps more accurately, from the general consensus of the truth, that their logic no longer applies.

It must be remembered that all human experience is inherently interpreted experience. Normalcy, then, exists when that interpretation coincides with the interpretation of the majority, and madness occurs in an interpretive shift, a

digression from the mean in assigning meaning to signifiers. Hallucinations, paranoia, and psychosis are not simply irrational outbursts of a frenzied mind, but rational fears produced by a deluded mind. In this light, those who are mad cannot be simply cast away, for they are, essentially, no different from us. They are interpreting the world the only way any one can and anyone is—through an imperfect union of signifier and signified. To cast aside the mad, the insane, to label them and classify them simply, is to simplify not only the nature of madness, but the nature of ourselves.

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