CHAPTER 10

Anatomy of a Passion: Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale as Case Study*

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This essay results from a common interest in the history of emotions shared by an academic with appointments in philosophy and psychiatry (Charland) and a literary historian (White). Where our interests converge is in the early modern concept of ‘the passions,’ as explanatory of what we now call mental illness. The task we have set ourselves is to see how this might:

(a) be exemplified in a ‘case study’ of the dramatic revelation of Leontes’s jealousy in the first half of William Shakespeare’s The Winter’s Tale, and his ‘cure’ which takes sixteen years. Both events have troubled literary critics as implausible, lacking in realistic motivation, and clumsy as narrative devices, but can be explained in terms of theories of the passions; and

(b) open up a greater, modern understanding of irrational, pathological states, their onset and termination, by using as an explanatory model the early modern understanding of passions as revived and refined in the nineteenth century by Théodule Ribot.

Janus-like, this chapter faces into the past and the future (our present) via a play written in 1610 that is still performed to receptive audiences today. We hope to show that the theory can illuminate a playtext, and that the play can revivify the theory, and to contend that historical analysis can shed light on modern clinical problems.

The particular historical distinction which lies at the heart of our approach derives from early modern terminology offered by Thomas Wright in his book, The Passions of the Minde in Generall (first published in 1601; corrected, enlarged and augmented in 1604), and presented in more modern fashion in the nineteenth century by Théodule Ribot, in his La Psychologie des sentiments

* We dedicate this essay to Philippa Maddern, whose inspiration has generated so much interdisciplinary research in the history of emotions and has brought so many like-minded scholars into fertile contact—in our cases, linking Western Ontario and Western Australia.
(1896) and *Essai sur les passions* (1907). It lies between the ‘passions,’ considered as rigid, ‘organised emotion’ (long-term affective states that involve planning and enlist reason in determining their course), and more transitory, changeable ‘affections,’ which were later named emotions (shorter, more abrupt and less reflective states than passions). This formulation seems to offer both a clue to interpreting early literature in its own medical context, and also the possibility of fresh insight into the nature of complex affective syndromes and pathologies today. The distinction is in some ways analogous to that between ‘chronic’ (a condition lasting for a long time) and ‘acute’ (a brief ‘episode’). Interestingly, Immanuel Kant seems to make this exact distinction in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, in which a chapter is titled “On Emotion in Contrast to Passion.”¹ The original German terms, however, are ‘*Affekte*’ (emotion) and ‘*Leidenschaft*’ (passion). Ribot translates these into French as ‘*émotion*’ and ‘*passion,*’ though experts contend that there is no truly adequate translation in German for the English ‘emotion.’² It should be noted that the full, modern use of the term ‘emotion’ as a predominantly psychological term of art did not develop until the mid-nineteenth century, and when it did it became a catch-all term subsuming the older term ‘passion.’ Thomas Dixon traces the first official use of the new, largely psychological, meaning of ‘emotion’ (in English) to the writings of Thomas Brown and Charles Bell.³ To make things even more complicated, some theorists these days distinguish ‘affect’ as quite close to ‘effect’ in signifying a spontaneous and unreflective bodily response (“she burst out crying”), from ‘emotion’ as more conscious and discursive states.⁴ However, our exploration is into ‘passions’ as dominant states.

We are proposing, then, that in early modern times a central ordering structure concerning what we now know as emotions, turned on the distinction between the dominant and abiding passions and the subsidiary, changeable affections. These states of the mind are generated within the more comprehensive analysis of bodily conditions that are explained in terms of the humours.

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² See for example Anna Wierzbicka, *Emotions across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3. The same, we believe, can be said for the French ‘*émotion*.’
