



## CONTRIBUTIONS OF SHAKESPEARE'S PAULINA TO THE CONTEMPORARY PRACTICE OF POETRY THERAPY

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An expression of Shakespeare's seventeenth century practice of theater art, *The Winter's Tale* resembles Japanese Noh Drama, drama inviting an audience to participate in the healing of a diseased character through the spoken poetry of a priest (Shakespeare in Arden, 1963). The diseased character in *The Winter's Tale* is Leontes, King of Sicilia, who suffers from jealousy. In the treatment of Leontes' spiritual and emotional illness, which Renaissance medical practice diagnosed a chemical imbalance caused by too much yellow bile (Gordon, 1992b), Shakespeare gives considerable focus and stage time to his priestly midwife Paulina and her emergent practice of poetry therapy. A practice born by diverging from conventional Renaissance poetry therapy inherited from the Greeks, Paulina's emergent poetics embody a principle later named *the isoprinciple* by contemporary music therapists. The isoprinciple, described by the physician-poetry therapist Jack Leedy (1985), is one of selecting an analysand, a work of music or poetry that not only matches the feeling and perception of the patient, but balances that feeling with others, always opening to a larger recognition of truth, a more wholesome balance among feelings, such as a movement from despair to hope (p. 82).

This essay identifies and describes Paulina's divergent and efficacious application of the isoprinciple to treat jealousy, altogether Shakespeare's dramatized contribution to the history and contemporary practice of poetry therapy. Accordingly, because Shakespeare's drama first reveals how Paulina's conven-

tional Renaissance poetry therapy practiced in her role of midwife and spiritual director is ineffective with respect to Leontes' particular disease, this essay first describes the role of the Renaissance midwife, conventional Renaissance poetry therapy, and pertinent scenes from *The Winter's Tale* revealing how conventional poetry therapy fails to treat jealousy. Then, Paulina's divergent poetry therapy, her efficacious application of the isoprinciple, is identified and described as this practice emerges from its embodied form in the drama's later scenes. Why this practice is effective is discussed. The study concludes that Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* embodies an effective treatment of jealousy. Insofar as Shakespeare used the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage to reveal truth (a truth of human nature, a truth about the practice of theater art, a truth about the practice of medicine or an unfolding truth from divine revelation), this study considers *The Winter's Tale* a useful educational application of the isoprinciple to treat jealousy, a recurring human disorder.

### The Role of the Renaissance Midwife

Midwives were recognized team members of Renaissance medical practice among a core of physicians drawn from priestly orders, apothecaries and barber-surgeons (Gordon, 1992a). Responsible for more than assisting a mother in childbirth, a midwife (literally "with-woman") was a child's caregiver and governess, as well as the entire family's spiritual di-

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rector. She conducted the birth baptism of children and stood present to those giving birth to new soul life (Carmichael, 1988, p. 111). Describing her as one of the holy listeners and a “midwife of the soul,” the contemporary Anglican spiritual director Margaret Guenther (1992) writes, “The midwife is a teacher in the best sense of the word in that she helps the birth-giver toward ever greater self-knowledge” (p. 87).

To “know thyself” was the identified aim of ancient Greek philosophy and spiritual direction. Self-knowledge formed one of the roots of Renaissance humanism. Self-knowledge or self-understanding is the identified aim of a contemporary practice of biblio-poetry therapy (Hynes & Hynes-Berry, 1986). By guiding another toward self-knowledge, the Renaissance midwife aimed to “lead out” the whole person. She educated according to Plato’s definition—education being not acquisition, but good use of one’s inner vision (Plato in Hamilton & Cairns, 1989, pp. 750–751). Her key role and purpose were to be present to the birthgiver’s inner vision and to give good shape to the unfolding process.

Her practice of education was founded upon certain beliefs and practices of conventional Renaissance medicine, in addition to certain practices inherited from ancient Greek oral tradition. This practice involved speaking or teaching truth, observing all characteristics and habits of the mentee and releasing the powers of innocence that engage mental balance. Said the way of Shakespeare’s midwife Paulina, “I do come with words as medicinal as true” (Shakespeare in Arden, 1963, p. 45).

With words as medicinal as true, ancient Greek oral poetry aimed to release powers of innocence and restore balance to the psyche, as attested by several sources (e.g., Plato in Hamilton & Cairns, 1989; Aristotle in Butcher, 1951). The sons of Asklepios valued the spoken word to treat mental and physical disorders, especially poetry that could subdue “the furies.” Empedocles (in Bahn & Bahn, 1970) tells of a man so possessed by the furies that he was prepared to murder his own father until he (Empedocles) “chanted soothing words to the accompaniment of his lyre until the violent passions subsided and the patient’s mental balance was restored” (p. 4). Here, the feeling and perception of the patient is not matched and then transformed. Rather, the patient is immediately given to attend feelings and perceptions opposite those that possess him.

Speaking of this same practice of poetry therapy, the contemporary Greek poet Odysseus Elytis (quoted

in Fox, 1995) tells how their island nurses, until recently, continued an ancient tradition of chasing evil spirits from cradles by saying meaningless words while holding a tiny herbal leaf, “which received God knows what strange powers exclusively from the innocence of its own nature. Poetry,” he defines, “is precisely this tiny leaf with the unknown powers of innocence and the strange words which accompany it” (p. 212). His definition of poetry may remind us of the strange word plays of Gertrude Stein (1970), many of E. E. Cummings’ (1963) poems which deconstruct outworn narratives and contexts for meaning, and the Greek practice of restoring mental and emotional stability through beautifully measured language.

### Renaissance Poetry Therapy

While Greek practice of releasing powers of innocence through beautifully measured language to restore mental and emotional balance contrasts significantly with practices of poetry therapy that apply the isoprinciple (practices that first match the imbalance and then transform it according to the tradition of Hebrew Psalms), the practice inherited from Greek oral tradition is nonetheless the conventional practice of poetry therapy during the Renaissance. The Greek practice is the one inherited by Shakespeare’s midwife Paulina and is the tradition to which she refers when she says, “I do come with words as medicinal as true.” Significantly, though, her conventional Renaissance practice of poetry therapy initially applied to treat Leontes’ jealousy is a treatment shown to fail by the action of Shakespeare’s drama.

### The Action of Shakespeare’s Drama and Paulina’s Conventional Renaissance Poetry Therapy

Leontes cannot bear to listen to his priest and physician Camillo, unlike Shakespeare’s Grail King Pericles who heeds the advice of his physician Helicanus (Shakespeare in Folger, 1968). The cause is not entirely known.

Shakespeare’s audience realizes that Leontes cannot persuade his best friend from childhood, Polixenes, to extend his visit in Sicilia. Rather, Polixenes chooses to extend his visit solely at Queen Hermione’s invitation, one offered according to her husband Leontes’ request and merely to please him. Extremely displeased, Leontes mistakes Polixenes’ and Hermione’s true courtesy as unfaithfulness to him. In torrents of iambic pentameter speech and ev-

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