

BOHEMIA'S 'SEA COAST' AND THE BABE WHO WAS 'LOST FOREVER'

Irene G. Dash

In The Winter's Tale, Shakespeare's decision to strand the infant Perdita on the "sea-coast of Bohemia" may have been an intentional error--since Bohemia is an inland country--or it may have been a blunder by someone who should have known better, as Ben Jonson indicates in his contemporary reference.¹ Out of all proportion to its significance, the question has bothered critics and editors from the early eighteenth century to the present day. Summarizing these responses, J. H. P. Pafford, editor of the New Arden text, quotes Tristram Shandy: "there happening throughout the whole kingdom of Bohemia, to be no seaport . . . How the deuce should there . . . cried my Uncle Toby; for Bohemia being totally inland, it could have happened no otherwise--It might, said Trim, if it had pleased God."² That, of course, is one interpretation.

Eighteenth-century editors and critics, concerned with verisimilitude as they were, sought other rationalizations. Capell defended Shakespeare's use of the name Bohemia because of its close link with the name Sicilia in the minds of contemporary audiences who were familiar with Pandosta, Shakespeare's source for the plot.³ The most famous reaction to Shakespeare's Bohemia, however, was Sir Thomas Hanmer's. He refused to accept Bohemia at all. Observing that Shakespeare had retained the name of only one minor character, "Mopsa," from his source, Hanmer reasoned that Shakespeare probably had invented the name "Bithynia" but that "ignorance and negligence of the first transcribers or printers" had led them to "bring back" the

name Bohemia.⁴ He therefore emended every "Bohemia" to "Bithynia" in his prestigious Oxford edition of 1744. Hanmer's invention survived during the next quarter century, appearing in Morgan's adaptation called The Sheep Shearing (1754), in Garrick's manuscript copy of "Florizel and Perdita" in 1756, in Thomas Hull's version of The Winter Tale written for the 1771 production at the Theatre-Royal in Covent-Garden, and, as late as 1794, in a working prompt-book of the play.⁵ That confusion existed over which of the two place names was more appropriate is illustrated by the various changes made in the texts of Garrick's version. We find, for example, that in the 1758 edition the playwright, editor, or printer opted for a return to Shakespeare's "Bohemia," rejecting the manuscript copy. By 1762, however, an updating of the cast list in a new printing allowed for the insertion of the following footnote:

The scenes of the following Play lie in "Bohemia," which Sir Thomas Hanmer, with some Reason, has changed to "Bythynia": All the Editors of Shakespeare except Sir Thomas, have followed the original.⁶

Although prudence had dictated the retention of Shakespeare's form, the ambiguity in the wording suggests that Hanmer's emendation was not condemned. Logically it made sense. Textually it was insupportable. Although Bohemia finally triumphed, the enigma of its "sea coast" continues to baffle critics.

In his naming of the play's characters, however, Shakespeare may have provided one explanation. Having jettisoned most of the names from Greene's Pandosta, the playwright then relied on Plutarch's Lives for the majority of the characters' names.⁷ Others he derived from a variety of different contemporary sources.⁸ One name, however, he invented: "Perdita" for "the babe who / Is counted lost for ever" (111.iii.32-33). But Perdita is not "lost forever." For, just as the playwright chose to transpose the countries of his source, flouting fact by imposing the name of an inland country on a sea-coast--a sea-coast vital to his plot--so in the name he created for the young infant, he chose Perdita for a character who was, in the largest sense, never lost except to those who could not see.

The first suggestion of the paradox of her name occurs in the unusual christening speech--a speech in which fact and fiction (in the context of the story) are neatly interwoven--Antigonus' record of his dream:

I have heard, but not believ'd, the spirits o' th' dead
 May walk again; if such thing be, thy mother
 Appear'd to me last night; . . .
 . . . thrice bow'd before me,
 And, gasping to begin some speech, her eyes
 Became two spouts; the fury spent, anon
 Did this break from her: "Good Antigonus,
 Since fate, against thy better disposition
 Hath made thy person for the thrower-out
 Of my poor babe, according to thine oath,
 Places remote enough are in Bohemia,
 There weep, and leave it crying: and, for the babe
 Is counted lost for ever, Perdita,
 I prithee, call't."

(III.iii.16-34)

Because Shakespeare would have his audience convinced of the truth of this prophecy for the sake of dramatic wonder in the last act, Antigonus' vision of Hermione concludes with:

" . . . For this ungentle business,
 Put on thee by my lord, thou ne'er shalt see
 Thy wife Paulina more."

(Ibid. 34-36)

Shortly thereafter, Antigonus exits "pursued by a bear." The prophecy would seem to have been fulfilled. However the observations of Antigonus, first that Hermione is dead then that "this is indeed the issue of King Polixenes," prove to be false. What then of Shakespeare's decision to name the infant "Perdita," rather than "Fawnia," her name in Pandosta? Is it a truly apt name, or as misleading as a sea-coast of Bohemia?

Variations on "Perdita" as well as "Fawnia" appear in OED. Among them is "Perd" an obsolete and rare word used before 1100 apparently in the rime "for pert, perte," adopted from the Old French "perde, perte," the equivalent of the Italian "perdita" meaning "loss." It is also a regular descendant of the late Latin or Romantic "perdita," the substantive form from the past participle of Latin "perdere--

to lose." The definitions substantiate our own impressionistic ideas of the meaning. There is, however, another word, now obsolete, that also resembles "perdita": "perdit," or "perdite." In the definition of this word the concept of "lost" is altered and becomes more specific: "lost to virtue, abandoned, wicked." The example cited is from a seventeenth-century work: "T. Taylor, God's Judgment (1632) 'A young man of a most perdit and debauched course of life.'" Thus we have two definitions. And although Shakespeare's Perdita never suggests the second meaning, the connotation of "lost to virtue" is certainly attached to Hermione. Not only Antigonus, but also the Old Shepherd upon discovering the infant, voices these same thoughts:

Mercy on 's, a barne! A very pretty barne! A boy or a child, I wonder? A pretty one; a very pretty one. Sure, some scape: though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape. This has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door-work: they were warmer that got this than the poor thing is here. I'll take it for pity.

(III.iii.69-76)

Shakespeare had exploited both the denotative and connotative meanings of the word. For surely an audience who, in 1632, understood Taylor's condemnation of a "most perdit course of life," must, in 1611, have been familiar with the word's connotations.

The OED also provides a definition, now obsolete, for "fawn" as a verb: "to bring forth young." The first example is drawn from Caxton in 1481: "The lionesses come to fede their fawnes the iii day after they have fawned." Since Fawnia-Perdita was the daughter of Pandosta-Leontes, a king, one might speculate on the hints produced by the original name. But Shakespeare chose to discard "bring forth" in favor of "lost forever." Dramatically more effective, the name leads inevitably to the question, "How lost is Perdita?"

Having been named and deposited on the "sea-coast of Bohemia," she remains an unknown for three more scenes although Time the choral figure reports that she has "now grown in grace / Equal with wond'ring" (IV.i.24-25). A realistic scene

at the palace of Polixenes followed by a rustic caper by Autolycus prepares us for the famous sheepshearing scene of the fourth act. Opening with Florizel's discussion of clothes and costumes, of appearance and reality, it allows us to observe Perdita's first reactions to masking or pretence after Florizel's:

These your unusual weeds, to each part of you
Do give a life: no shepherdess, but Flora
Peering in April's front.

(IV.iv.1-3)

Delightfully proclaiming Perdita's resemblance to a goddess, the young Prince chooses to see her as "no shepherdess." But in this scene, in which not only costumes but also change of clothes take on special meaning (when Autolycus exchanges with the Prince and is subsequently confused for a gentleman by the Clown and Old Shepherd), Perdita is never confused.

Sir: my gracious lord,
To chide at your extremes, it not becomes me--
(Ibid.5-6)

She protests with her opening words that she knows, not only who he is--a prince disguised as a shepherd--but also who she herself is:

. . . me, poor lowly maid,
Most goddess-like prank'd up: but that our feasts
In every mess have folly, and the feeders
Digest it with a custom, I should blush
To see you so attir'd; swoon, I think,
To show myself a glass.

(Ibid. 9-14)

If this sounds like rationalization by Perdita, an effort to excuse herself, she proves later in the scene that she has no illusions as to who she is--although, in fact, her knowledge of her parentage is all illusion. Her self-understanding, however, is exemplified by her response to Polixenes' outburst "'I'll have thy beauty scratch'd with briers and made / More homely that they state" (426-27). Quietly Perdita observes "The selfsame sun that shines upon his court / Hides not his visage from our cottage, but / Look on alike" (445-47). Since these lines are spoken after Polixenes has stormed off the stage, one might conclude that she wisely withheld her words until the threat had been

removed. But Perdita also challenges Polixenes directly, to his face. In the famous art-nature debate that dominates the center of the scene, we find her, despite her cordiality and knowledge of the role of the hostess, unwilling to accept Polixenes' suggestion that she make her "garden rich in gillyvors,/And do not call them bastards" (97-98). Having rejected "streak'd gillyvors,/Which some call nature's bastards," Perdita remains adamant. She will neither change their name, nor accept them, "No more than, were I painted I would wish/This youth should say 'twere well, and only therefore/Desire to breed by me" (101-103). Although she then changes the subject, offering flowers to her unknown guests, Perdita, unlost Perdita, knows what she believes. Unwilling to concede that bastards have a place in her garden, she also knows that she does, indeed, wish "to breed by" the youth at her side. For, just as she expresses her ideas on art and nature, on legitimacy and bastardy, 'though the conversation is couched in discussion of flowers, she also knows that she has positive feelings of affection for Florizel.

And just as the flowers provide the milieu in which to discuss legitimacy and bastardy, they also provide the garlands "to strew" on her sweet friend, not like a corpse but "like a band, for love to lie and play on" (128-131). The vitality of this Perdita created by Shakespeare can best be illustrated by comparing her with some of the eighteenth-century variations created by adaptors of The Winter's Tale. David Garrick and MacNamara Morgan, for example, chose to abbreviate the play to three acts, concentrating on the sheepshearing of the fourth act. Both men, although they focused on the Florizel-Perdita romance omitted the art-nature debate between Perdita and Polixenes.⁹ Perdita in their versions is a more conventional pastoral maiden who sings songs and does not challenge the king. In fact, in the last scene of Garrick's version as well as in the last of Kemble's nineteenth-century version, Perdita, overwhelmed by all that has transpired, leans on the strong male at her side, Florizel.¹⁰ In still another version of the play,

Charles Marsh's The Winter's Tale in 1756, Perdita becomes exactly what her name implies--the lost young woman with premonitions of her true birth:

I own my Soul
In secret long has languish'd: Why I know not
Or whence the Impulse came; but in my Cottage,
My thoughts have hit the Palaces of Kings:
And now the golden Vision, like the Sun,
Has brlke upon me, in full Streams of Glory. 11

That Shakespeare created a perdita "unlost" either physically or morally suggests that perhaps if he did know the geography of Bohemia, as we may gather from Ben Jonson's slur, then our poet may have chosen to match the anachronism of the sea-coast with the anachronistic label of "Perdita" for a young woman who knew who she was, a direct, plain speaker believing that the selfsame sun shines on castle and cottage and that morality whether in the garden or among people need not be compromised.

Irene G. Dash

NOTES

¹Ben Jonson, "Conversations with Drummond," Ben Jonson, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy Simpson, I (1925; rpt. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 138. Jonson is quoted as having said: "Shakespeare in a play brought in a number of men saying they had suffered Shipwrack in Bohemia, wher yr is no Sea neer by some 100 miles."

²William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, ed. J. H. P. Pafford (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1963), III.iii. f.n. 2. Act, scene, and line divisions in this article will refer to this edition.

³William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, ed. Horace Howard Furness, New Variorum, 6th ed. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1898), III.iii. f.n.5.

⁴William Shakespeare, Works, ed. Sir Thomas Hanmer (London, 1744), II, 502.

⁵MacNamara Morgan, "Florizel and Perdita" (1754), Larpent Manuscript Collection #110, Huntington Library, San Marino, California. "Bithynia" also appears in the printed edition, The Sheep Shearing or Florizel and Perdita, Peter Wilson (Dublin, 1755; rpt. 1767) and J. Truman (London, 1762); David Garrick, "Florizel and Perdita" (1756) Larpent Manuscript Collection #122, Huntington Library, San Marino, California; William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale altered by Thomas Hull, Bell's ed. (London, 1774) and J. Wenman (London, 1779); William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, a tragedy, as performed at the theatres Royal, Regulated from the Prompt-Boords by permission of the managers. (London: Printed for J. Barker, 1794), Folger Prompt WT 16.

⁶David Garrick, Florizel and Perdita (London, 1758); (London, 1762), Folger Prompt F 24, Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, D. C.

⁷Plutarch, Vitae Parallelae, translated into English by Sir Thomas North (1579) from the French translation by Jacques Amyot of Melun (1559). Many of the names in The Winter's Tale appear in "Agis and Cleomenes," pp. 803-815 of the 1603 edition.

⁸Pafford, pp. 163-165.

⁹For a full analysis of this, see my dissertation "Changing Attitudes Towards Shakespeare as Reflected in Editions and Staged Adaptations of The Winter's Tale from 1703 to 1762," Columbia 1971, chapter VII.

¹⁰Florizel and Perdita (London, 1758), p. 63; William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale with alterations by J. P. Kemble (London, 1802), Kemble Collection no. 2240 Lilly Library, Bloomington, Indiana, p. 83 as well as on additional page after 84 written in by hand.

¹¹William Shakespeare, The Winter's Tale, altered by Charles Marsh (London, 1756), p. 78.