

ENGL 200: Shakespeare, Comedies & Romances  
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Vision, Voice, and Women in *The Winter's Tale*  
by Oriana Tang

From *The Taming of the Shrew* to *Much Ado About Nothing*, the women of Shakespeare's plays have occupied an expansive set of roles: alternately shrewish and silent, witchlike and pure, faithful and promiscuous, they are cross-dressers, wits, mothers, daughters, servants, queens; they fall in love, go to jail, tame spirits, and save their loved ones from harm. In *The Winter's Tale*, one of Shakespeare's later plays, women, from Hermione to Paulina to Perdita, hold the key to Leontes' redemption. By first pairing a vision of Hermione's relationship with Polixenes with Leontes' crazed interpretation of that relationship, then placing increasing restrictions on the audience's, and Leontes', sight, the play encourages both king and audience to rely on information mediated through female characters like Paulina. While others have criticized the play's punishing expectations of faithfulness and submissiveness, in this paper I will argue that by only selectively permitting the audience to see what the characters see, *The Winter's Tale* teaches us—much as it teaches Leontes—to trust the word of women.

Leontes' irrational jealousy at the start of the play is a product of his attempt to control a woman's voice. Having no luck in convincing Polixenes to extend his stay in Sicilia by another week, Leontes turns to Hermione, who, though onstage throughout the conversation at the start of Act I, Scene 2, has not yet spoken a word. "Tongue-tied our queen? Speak you," Leontes commands his wife (1.2.28). Only then—once Leontes grants his permission—does Hermione say her first lines in the play. Ironically, however, her success ignites his suspicion. "Is he won

yet?" he asks her, and when she responds that Polixenes will stay, Leontes says, "At my request he would not" (1.2.86 – 87). Though not outright apprehensive, the line draws an explicit contrast between Hermione's triumph (established in Leontes' use of the word "won") and Leontes' failure (emphasized with the possessive "at *my* request"). Leontes' fixation on that failure suggests that he is uncomfortable with the idea of his wife's speech having power that exceeds his own, a discomfort that he makes explicit later in the play when he criticizes Antigonus for his seeming inability to control Paulina: "[Lose], thou art worthy to be hanged / That wilt not stay her tongue" (2.3.108 – 109). Although Paulina is the one who castigates Leontes for his callous and unjustified treatment of his wife and newborn daughter, Leontes' response indicates that he believes Antigonus is equally at fault. In so doing, Leontes displaces Paulina's agency onto her husband; to Leontes, Paulina's words are not solely her own. Applying this same psychology to Hermione, then, reveals why Leontes reacts so strongly to her persuasion of Polixenes. Although Hermione acts only in accordance with his wishes, her success suggests to Leontes that he, much like Antigonus, does not have complete control over his wife. Hermione's uncontrollable speech and rapport with Polixenes ignite Leontes' fear of cuckoldry, which stems from a similar fear of losing control. While talking to Mamillius, he observes that "revolted wives" are "a bawdy planet, that will strike / Where 'tis predominant; and 'tis powerful, think it, / From east, west, north, and south" (1.2.199, 201 – 203). Leontes' unfavorable comparison of infidelity to a "predominant" planet that is "powerful" from all directions associates cuckoldry with a cosmic influence that is beyond human jurisdiction. To be cuckolded, the king suggests, is to have one's power overruled. Leontes' sudden jealousy is thus prompted by his recognition that the power of his wife's speech may be symptomatic of other ways in which she cannot be controlled.

At the same time, however, the audience is encouraged to question Leontes' rationale. This skepticism is created through the play's juxtaposition of sight and perception: by presenting the audience with Hermione and Polixenes' interactions alongside Leontes' and others' interpretations of those interactions, the audience is able to judge the plausibility of Hermione's infidelity for themselves. At the end of Hermione's lengthy exchange with Polixenes, she declares that her speech has succeeded twice, "The one for ever earned a royal husband, / Th' other for some while a friend" (1.2.108 – 109). Both the Folger Shakespeare Library and the Pelican Shakespeare editions of *The Winter's Tale* indicate that Hermione "gives Polixenes her hand" following this line; however, the former also notes that this direction is not original to the First Folio and was rather an addition made by the edition's editor (Folger liv). It is likely that the edit was prompted by Leontes' subsequent aside: "But to be paddling palms 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' th' deer—O, that is entertainment / My bosom likes not, nor my brows" (1.2.116 – 120). These observations serve as the first in a series of implicit, in-dialogue stage directions provided by Leontes and colored through the lens of his jealousy. While shepherding Hermione and Polixenes into the garden, for instance, Leontes notes, "How she holds up the neb, the bill to him, / And arms her with the boldness of a wife / To her allowing husband!" (1.2.183 – 185). By applying a suggestive metaphor ("the boldness of a wife / To her allowing husband") to the plausibly innocent action of leaving the stage arm-in-arm, Leontes simultaneously describes the action that is observed by the audience and his own, warped perception of the action. The collocation of the visible with the described provides the audience with the opportunity to decide for themselves whether Hermione and Polixenes' exit is blameless or not.

While different directors may choose to have Hermione and Polixenes interact with different degrees of flirtatiousness that in turn vary the credibility of Leontes' doubts, the king's observations indisputably grow more and more unlikely, a fact that is supplemented by other characters' counter-observations. As a result, the reliability of his remarks as implicit stage directions decreases as his suspicions increase. In the following passage, for instance, Leontes begins with concrete, verifiable facts that become more abstract and unreasonable over the course of the speech:

Is whispering nothing?  
 Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?  
 Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career  
 Of laughter 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? (1.2.284 – 292)

Whispering, leaning cheek to cheek, meeting noses, kissing, and sighing are all visible signs of intimacy; touching feet and skulking are technically visible as well, but require discreet observation; wishing for time to pass more quickly and having eyes for only one another are subjective qualities that can only be inferred, not observed directly. The speech's movement from external to internal thus mirrors the trajectory of Leontes' own psychology: though he may have initially observed some genuine moments of intimacy between his wife and friend, the extent and meaning of their affection for one another is a projection of his own imagination.

The text cements the audience's awareness of Leontes' descriptions as misperceptions by contrasting it with the voices of other members of the court, who fail to see what Leontes sees. In their externality to the situation, these other court members, who are privy to both viewing the scene themselves and hearing Leontes describe his interpretation of the scene, mirror the

audience's position. Camillo, for instance, responds to Leontes' interrogation—"Didst perceive it?"—with simple summaries that carry no undertones of the infidelity Leontes himself perceives: "I think most understand / Bohemia stays here longer . . . / To satisfy your highness and the entreaties / Of our most gracious mistress" (1.2.216, 229 – 230, 232 – 233). Camillo's shock and confusion at Leontes' insinuations of adultery ("Be it forbid, my lord!") and attempts to dissuade the king of his false belief, which in later scenes are accompanied by similar appeals from others, temper Leontes' biased speech and weaken the validity of the actions he suggests occur (1.2.241). By staging Leontes' suspicions alongside the evidence that supposedly triggered them, the audience is given the visual context necessary to judge the nature of those suspicions for themselves. In so doing, the scene encourages the audience to reckon with the reliability of Leontes' observations, and, in turn, to question the beliefs that govern them.

If the play's depiction of Leontes' jealousy asks the audience to observe Leontes' failure to see accurately, then its depiction of Hermione's pleas asks Leontes, and the audience, to listen first and use sight as supplement. From Leontes' initial accusations to the conclusion of the trial, Hermione repeatedly begs her husband to listen to her and to see the proof of her proclamations of innocence in her body. "But I'd *say* he [Polixenes] had not [made me pregnant], / And I'll be *sworn* you would believe my *saying*, / Howe'er you lean to th' nayward," Hermione entreats in Act II, Scene 1 (emphases mine, 2.1.62). The queen's emphasis on verbal communication—what she says and swears—calls attention to the flawed foundation of the trial, which rests on pitting her word against her husband's, and locates her innocence primarily in her speech. Stating her claim out loud, Hermione suggests, should be sufficient to prove her fidelity; she has faith in her husband's trust in her ("I'll be sworn you would believe my saying"). Later in the same scene, an unnamed lord expresses his support by telling Leontes "that the Queen is spotless

/ I' th' *eyes* of heaven, and to *you*—I mean / In this which you accuse her” (emphases mine, 2.1.129 – 133). Hermione’s verbal appeal for Leontes to believe her “saying” is supported, the lord suggests, by the appearance of her innocence, which is visible to “th’ eyes of heaven”; Leontes merely needs to replicate that gaze. The onus to listen and to look thus rest on Leontes.

Leontes’ faulty sight, however, inhibits his willingness to listen to others’ opinions. Though the king does not deny the power of the senses as evidence—“Cease. No more. / You *smell* this business with *a sense as cold* / As is a dead man’s *nose*. But I do *see* ‘*t and feel* ‘*t, / As you *feel* doing thus, and *see withal* / The instruments that *feel*,” he tells Antigonus—he foregrounds the accuracy of his own senses over others’ (emphases mine, 2.1.150 – 154). By explicitly drawing attention to the difference between Antigonus’ perceptions (his metaphorical ability to “smell” Hermione’s infidelity is as undiscerning as “a dead man’s nose”) and his own, Leontes suggests that Antigonus and the other dissenters in his court fail to perceive as clearly as he does. Crucially, Leontes makes no mention of sound in this passage—his “sight” thus seems to come at the expense of his hearing, in spite of the sense’s significance in the impassioned supplications of Hermione and her supporters. After all, as Antigonus says, “It is for you [Leontes] we speak, not for ourselves” (2.1.140). Though the scene foregrounds the importance of sound, Leontes’ failure to see translates as well to a failure to listen, which culminates, ultimately, in his failure to listen to the oracle that precipitates the play’s tragic climax.*

Following Hermione’s collapse at the end of the trial, the play’s success depends on its restriction of sight and the audience’s willingness to believe the characters—primarily Paulina—who explain in speech what is missing on stage. The reversal of the dominant senses engaged by the spectacle mirrors Leontes’ reversed willingness to heed the orders of women. After Leontes denounces the oracle’s conclusion in Act III, Scene 2, a servant announces that Mamillius is

dead and Hermione collapses at Leontes' feet. At this point, it is unclear whether Hermione is dead or merely fainted; Paulina believes it is the former ("This news is mortal to the queen") while Leontes thinks it is the latter ("Her heart is but o'ercharged; she will recover") (3.2.146, 148). Either is plausible, and Hermione's unmoving body on stage could be indicative of either state. Once Hermione is removed from the stage, however, this dynamic shifts. Without visual evidence, Leontes and the audience have no choice but to take Paulina at her word when she announces that the queen is dead. "I say she's dead. I'll swear 't. If word nor oath / Prevail not, go and see," Paulina says at the end of a lengthy tirade of grief (3.2.201 – 202). Though the possibility of sight is still present, at least in theory ("If word nor oath / Prevail not, go and see"), Paulina, like Hermione, foregrounds the significance of her words first ("I say she's dead. I'll swear 't"). Once more, vision becomes secondary to speech; unlike in the previous scenes, however, where vision and speech were presented alongside one another, here speech is presented alone, supplemented not by a visual of Hermione's corpse but by Paulina's grief. The audience's, and Leontes', willingness to believe that Hermione is dead thus rests in a willingness to accept Paulina's claim and to witness her performance of grief as authentic, a grief that is coded specifically as feminine: after a lord rebukes Paulina for her harsh criticism of the king, she says, "Alas, I have showed too much / The rashness of a woman" (3.2.218 – 219). Paulina's language is thus tied explicitly to her womanhood, a language that Leontes seems finally ready to hear, telling her, "Go on, go on. / Thou canst not speak too much. I have deserved / All tongues to talk their bitt' rest." Whereas Leontes previously ignored the import of others' speech—particularly the speech of women like Hermione and the speech of those supporting a woman's words against his own—his concession to Paulina invokes none of the skepticism he displayed before. Even before Leontes sees his wife's body, he is willing to believe Paulina's report and to

accept the blame, a reversal of the previous scenes where Leontes wrongly interprets even direct visual evidence. Paulina's newfound verbal power extends over Leontes, and the audience, through the rest of the play. When Paulina demands that Leontes not remarry, for instance, Leontes responds in wholehearted agreement with emphasis on the significance of Paulina's speech: "I know, in honor, O that ever I / Had squared me to *thy counsel!*... / Thou *speak'st* truth" (5.1.51 – 52, 55). Whereas previously Leontes had disregarded the voices of women, and particularly the voices of women unruled by their husbands, he now cedes authority to one of those voices; whereas previously Leontes held the conviction that a woman's speech must be controlled by her husband, he now allows himself to be controlled by a voice that is itself uncontrolled by another man.

Unlike plays like *Measure for Measure* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the audience is aware of a conceit within the play (the Duke's disguise, the fairies' love juice) that its characters are not, *The Winter's Tale* withholds information—that Hermione will be revived at the play's end—from both other characters and from the audience. This effect is achieved by gradually limiting the audience's access to the visual world of the play, an access that is, by the play's end, ultimately controlled by Paulina. "It is required / You do awake your faith," Paulina announces before Hermione's statue begins to move in the play's last scene (5.3.94 – 95). While the line is often read as a demand that the audience have faith in spectacle, it seems to suggest as well a human faith: faith in the one who is about to present the miracle that ends the play, the one who, finally, permits the audience both onstage and off to see once more the visions that have been withheld from them. By first presenting the audience with a dual vision of Hermione and Polixenes and Leontes' interpretation of their relationship, then gradually foregrounding the significance of listening over the significance of seeing, and finally forcing Leontes and the



audience to believe the words of others, through whom their sight is mediated, the trajectory of *The Winter's Tale* is one from sight to sound, man to woman, attempts to control women to acceptance of female agency and faith in female language. While there is no doubt that Leontes' initial beliefs in submissiveness and chastity are misogynistic in nature, his punishment and redemption over the course of the play track his movement away from those beliefs and towards an acceptance of the validity of women's speech—a movement that gestures, ultimately, to a more hopeful future.