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The Tragic Imagination: Othello and The Winter's Tale

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The Tragic Imagination: *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*

By Luke Barnhart

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

of Lehigh University

in Candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in English

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Luke Barnhart

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This is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in English.

“THE TRAGIC IMAGINATION: *OTHELLO* AND *THE WINTER’S TALE*”
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the destructive, violent potential of the imagination in Shakespeare's *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, particularly as that potential is embodied by the plays' insanely jealous husbands, Othello and Leontes. Drawing on Montaigne's essay "Of the Power of the Imagination" (1572-1574), I claim that the violence of what I call the tragic imagination is enacted most potently by a fear of impotence, an imagined emasculation, which is produced in *Othello* and *Leontes* by their fervent belief that they have been made cuckolds. The conclusion of this paper is concerned with the redemption of the tragic imagination in *The Winter's Tale* as it is made possible through the critical bond of Hermione and Paulina and their powerful counter-imaginative project.

Lo, which a greet thyng is affeccion!
Men may dyen of ymaginacion,
So depe may impressioun be take.

~Chaucer, *The Miller's Tale*

Everyone knows that *something* is mad in the skeptic's fantastic quest for certainty.

~Stanley Cavell

This essay begins with a somewhat uncomfortable but predictably skeptical task: an interrogation of the imagination in an attempt to disclose its more pernicious potential in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*. I've chosen these two texts not only for the similarities of their plots and themes, but for the stark difference in their resolutions: one is a tragedy, the other the last of the comedies in the First Folio, now categorized as one of the late, genre-bricolage romances. Both plays register the destructive potential of the imagination in harsh, broad strokes. We might say that Shakespeare's imagination has a body count. In *Othello*, the number is four, or five, if we choose to anticipate the justice that will likely be meted out to Iago, a scene of retribution that is denied us by Shakespeare in the play but eerily captured by Orson Welles in the opening of his 1952 adaptation. *The Winter's Tale* leaves two bodies in its aftermath (or should we include Hermione and make it three?), all the more troubling because they are not strewn across the stage at the conclusion of the action, but rather occluded from memory by the play's grandiloquent reconciliations.¹

¹ One recent production of *The Winter's Tale* attempts to remedy this problem with a provocative rewrite; I'll return to this in my conclusion.

Can we agree, then, that at least for Shakespeare, at least within the logic of these two plays, the unfettered imagination can be fatally dangerous not only to the one (man) who allows himself to be consumed by his imaginings, but also to anyone within his epistemological reach? But I am not interested *only* in the tragic potential of the imagination; I am also wondering at the redemption of the imagination in *The Winter's Tale*. Both are plays that testify to the tragic violence enacted by insanely jealous husbands, by husbands obsessed with imagining the rebellion of their wives. Why, then, are Othello and Desdemona dead at the end of *Othello*, while Leontes and Hermione are reconciled in the fantastic conclusion of *The Winter's Tale*? These are the questions that animate my inquiry. It would be too simple, I think, to provide easy answers by citing the conventions of genre. The membrane between tragedy and comedy is terribly thin and permeable. I am almost convinced that we are only able to distinguish at all through a kind of selective vision. For theater, the selected vision is the end of the action. Any comedy, were it allowed to continue past its putative final act, might inevitably find itself transmuted into tragedy with the passing of time. Could we say the reverse as well? Might not *The Winter's Tale*, in its abrupt transformation at Act IV, be a good reason to answer in the affirmative?

These are difficult questions. It might be prudent to begin with an easier one: what did Shakespeare and his intellectual contemporaries believe the imagination could do? Probably this is not an easy question at all. Still, *we* could do worse than turn to a scholar we know Shakespeare read², Michel de Montaigne. John Florio, the first person to translate Montaigne into English, published his *Essais* in three volumes in 1603. Florio also happened to have been a tutor to Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of

² Sections of Montaigne's essay "On Cannibals" find their way almost unaltered into *The Tempest*.

Southampton. Montaigne's essay "Of the Power of the Imagination," is a delightful "attempt" that is equal parts serious, absurd, and comic. In it, Montaigne details the potentialities of the imagination, and also reveals (unwittingly?) his rather extreme erection anxiety. What can it tell us about the tragic imagination in *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, though? I start with the observation that for Montaigne, the threat of emasculation activates the tragic imagination. I will go on to argue that we can say the same for Shakespeare as well.

I. Montaigne's Imagined Impotence

"A strong imagination creates the event, say the scholars."³ Montaigne opens "Of the Power of the Imagination" with this provocative axiom. Imagination makes reality, a kind of *creatio ex nihilo*, according to the nameless scholars. Interestingly, this formulation preserves a sort of distinction between imagination and reality, creator and creation. The scholars do not say that a strong imagination *is* the event, anyway. But does Montaigne affirm the maxim? He does admit to being "very much influenced by the imagination" (68), and claims that "its impression on [him] is piercing." He then somewhat bizarrely goes on to say that, insofar as he is subject to the influence of imagination, his "art is to escape it, not to resist it" (Ibid). I'm not sure what he means by this. Surely a program meant to escape the dominion of the imagination altogether does not entail writing essays on the power of the imagination?⁴

³ *The Complete Works of Montaigne: Essays, Travel Journal, Letters* (Stanford UP 1957), trans. Donald M. Frame.

⁴ Or maybe I underestimate the therapeutic capacity of the essay to play the exorcist.

But no matter Montaigne's belief (or skepticism) about the sway imagination holds on his own intellect, it is quite clear in "Of the Power of the Imagination" that he wholeheartedly affirms the potential of the imagination to shape reality in some capacity: "Everyone feels its impact, but some are overthrown by it" (Ibid). Perhaps a more efficacious way of paraphrasing Montaigne here, for my purposes, would be to say that some are overthrown by the imagination, and consequently others feel the impact, often quite violently. Montaigne would not be dismayed by my claim that imagination has a body count, or so it seems when he writes the following: "I catch the disease that I study, and lodge it in me. I do not find it strange that imagination brings fevers and death to those who give it a free hand and encourage it" (Ibid).

Montaigne's litany of the potentials of the imagination is fantastically variegated and unfortunately too capacious to give a full recounting here, much less explore with any amount of depth. We'll settle for a cursory listing: for Montaigne, the imagination is capable of usurping the emotions through strong feelings of empathy (68), causing insanity through obsession with knowledge (Ibid), causing instantaneous death from fear (69), satisfying desires⁵ (Ibid), turning women into men⁶ (Ibid), fostering religious ecstasies (Ibid), facilitating spiritual visions (Ibid), allowing for belief in miracles and

⁵ I assume that Montaigne means that the imagination might satisfy all types of desire, though here he writes specifically of amorous desire, citing Lucretius on wet (day?)dreams:

*So that as though it were an actual affair,
They pour out mighty streams, and stain the clothes they wear.*

⁶ There is no indication in Montaigne that the reverse process is possible, perhaps indicative of the early modern gynecological theory that the female genitalia were simply inverted male genitalia. Montaigne cites Ovid on Iphis, the man who "fulfilled vows made when he was a girl," and also the popular tale of Marie Germain, who became a man after straining herself jumping in such a way that his masculine organs "came forth." Subsequently the girls of his village sang a song warning each other not to take big strides, "for fear of becoming boys, like Marie Germain."

enchantments (70), curing diseases and sickness⁷ (73), relieving pain (74), causing death by grief⁸ (Ibid), and passing disease from body to body (75).

While each of these potentials is fascinating in its own right, and deserves more attention—even in conversation with *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*—those are ancillary projects to my own. I've chosen to focus on one avenue of Montaigne's essay; or, I should say, this avenue was chosen for me by its centrality to Montaigne's thought. Montaigne spends at least half of his essay on the power of the imagination obsessing over the problem of male impotence. How to account for this overwhelming preoccupation? Any number of the above-listed imaginative potentials might seem more useful, at least at first glance, to a discussion of the tragic imagination in my two primary texts. Upon more careful consideration, however—spurred by the need to believe that there must be *something* significant in Montaigne's persistent anxiety—the fascinating implications of his fixation materialized: for Montaigne, in “Of the Power of the Imagination,” the violence of the imagination is enacted most potently as a fear of impotency, an imagined emasculation.

⁷ Montaigne is especially insistent on the psychosomatic effects of the imagination, a phenomenon he attributes to “the narrow seam between the soul and the body, through which the experience of the one is communicated to the other” (74). He lists, among many exemplary tales, the story of a woman who, believing she had swallowed a pin with her bread, screamed in agony, as if she had a excruciating pain in her throat. Because there were no *visible* signs of her pain, an intelligent and enterprising man was able to induce her to vomit and surreptitiously slip a pin into what she threw up. The woman, believing she had vomited the pin, was abruptly relieved of her pain.

⁸ Although, it should be noted, Montaigne here invokes not humans but dogs, “who let themselves die out of grief for the loss of their masters.” I wondered why he shouldn't include human beings as creatures that might die of grief, and a friend pointed out that it is actually more interesting to consider the fact that Montaigne extends imaginative power to animals.

Montaigne launches into his discussion of male impotency the way such matters are often broached: by invoking the proverbial friend who struggles with the problem.⁹

He writes:

For I know by experience that one man, whom I can answer for as for myself on whom there could fall no suspicion whatever of impotence...heard a friend of his tell the story of an extraordinary impotence into which he had fallen at the moment when he needed it least, and finding himself in a similar situation, was all at once *so struck in his imagination by the horror* of this story that he incurred the same fate (70) [emphasis mine].

As it is hopefully clear from my italicization, I am intrigued by the exaggerated rhetoric that Montaigne uses to describe the fear of impotence. The unfortunate man upon whom this fate has befallen—let us call him Michel—is “struck in his imagination” by “the horror” of the story. I think it significant that it is a tale of impotence, and not his own impotence, that produces this horror, which in turn produces impotence. It would seem that for Montaigne a fear of emasculation leads to—what else—emasculation. And this fear of impotence, and therefore impotence itself, is produced by the very *possibility* of impotence. If I am talking in circles, it is because Montaigne’s illustration shows that storytelling, the imagination, fear of emasculation and impotence are cyclical and inseparable. Once the fear had taken hold of the imagination, the unfortunate man “was subject to relapse, for the ugly memory of his mishap checked him and tyrannized him” (Ibid).

⁹ A footnote tells us, perhaps needlessly, that Thibaudet suggests that the friend in question is in fact Montaigne himself.

So how, for Montaigne, does one break the cycle? One potential solution involves the revelation of personal anxiety to the “wronged” party, effectively converting private fantasy into public discourse. Montaigne details as follows:

He found some remedy for this fancy by another fancy: which was that by admitting this weakness and speaking about it in advance, he relieved the tension of his soul, for when the trouble had been presented as one to be expected, his sense of responsibility diminished and weighed upon him less (Ibid).

The admission of weakness and relinquishing of responsibility are then inextricably tied with a recovery made possible through the disclosure of private fantasy. The man is “completely cured,” according to Montaigne, by the efficacy of this speech act, his confession. And it is the speech act of confession, in all its (likely uncomfortable) particularity, that allows for reconciliation.¹⁰ The reconciliation, the recovery, the redemption of the imagination—call it what you will—allows for the achievement of previously impossible intimacy.

So what are the consequences of failure to achieve this intimacy, a failure to break the cycle of private fears of impotence and emasculation in the male psyche? In Montaigne, as in *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*, I will argue, the consequence is violence against women (and also men). The easy misogynist rhetoric to which Montaigne, *Othello*, and *Leontes* all succumb is just the tip of the iceberg. What is so striking about Montaigne’s treatment of impotence is that the only explicit mention of the potential of the imagination to enact *violence* is in a passage condemning women for their complicity in emasculating the men that would conquer them, at least sexually. He admonishes:

¹⁰ I take this from Sarah Beckwith’s chapter on acknowledgement and confession in *Cymbeline* in her fantastic book *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Cornell 2011), 104-126, which I’ll turn to again in the coming pages.

“women are wrong to greet us with those threatening, quarrelsome, and coy countenances, which put out our fires even as they light them” (71). The man’s already dangerously fragile confidence in his “rebellious member” is liable to be shattered entirely by the inconsiderate coquette, it seems. This is the crucial passage:

The soul of the assailant, when troubled with many various alarms, is easily discouraged; and when the imagination has once made a man suffer this shame—and it does so only at the first encounters, inasmuch as these are more boiling and *violent*, and also because in this first intimacy a man is much more afraid of failing—having begun badly, he gets from this accident a feverishness and vexation which lasts into subsequent occasions (72; emphasis mine).

Montaigne locates shame in the imagination, and it is this shame that is productive of a perpetual return to violence, “into subsequent occasions.” It is perhaps the violence of this shame that leads to more shame and violence; like the cycle of imagined impotence, feared emasculation, and actual impotence, the violent shame of the assailant will only lead to more of the same for Montaigne. The terms he uses are telling—“boiling and violent,” “feverishness and vexation”—are these not aptly paired with that other pair, Othello and Leontes? Could we not also say that it is their imagined shame—their fear of becoming the emasculated cuckold—that justifies the misogynistic violence of Othello and Leontes? The tragic imagination, then, might also be the erotic imagination.

In his turn to anti-feminine sentiment, Montaigne is helpful insofar as he reminds us that the imagination’s power extends beyond the individual. The victims of the imagination are often others. Montaigne concludes his essay by reiterating this point, in a passage that also serves as a good transition to a discussion of Shakespeare’s tragic imagination:

Sometimes, however, one's imagination acts not only against one's own body, but against someone else's. And just as a body passes on its sickness to its neighbor, as is seen in the plague, the pox, and soreness of the eyes, which are transmitted from one body to the other...likewise the imagination, when vehemently stirred, launches darts that can injure an external object (74-75).

Can we say, then, that the imagination is, or at least has the potential to be, a plague? *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, I would argue, bear this statement out. We might think of Iago when we read of a body passing its sickness (a misogynist's imagination) on to a neighbor, or rival, as the case may be. And we might also say that Leontes' imagination, as it acts against another body, is capable of turning that body to stone. Let me phrase this another way: the imagination is always in competition, with other bodies, other imaginations, other interpretations. This is what Stanley Cavell means when he writes that "doubt, like belief, is most fully, say originally, directed to claims of others, of speakers; an appropriate reaction to, for instance, rumor, Iago's medium."¹¹ What are the stakes of this competition, and what are the rules of the game? What are the consequences (or benefits) of privileging one imagination over/against another? These are the questions I take from Montaigne into *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*. What these two plays so keenly and painfully evoke are the epistemological crises that result from these fears, crises that emerge out of but are not ultimately contained within an erotic sphere. The catastrophes of epistemological chaos are personal and political, tragic and comic, and almost always violent. I'm certainly not the first to suggest an intimate connection between the Moor of Venice and the King of Sicilia. *Othello* and *Leontes*, I

¹¹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Harvard 2003) 7.

claim, share a tragic imagination. Why, then, do their stories conclude on such disparate notes?

II. Imagining the Act in *Othello*

Othello is a tragedy of *coitus imaginatio*. Iago's first provocation is to incite Brabantio to imagine his daughter deflowered by the leader of the Venetian army: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/Is tugging your white ewe" (I.I.87-88).¹² His insistence on the present tense—"now, now, very now"—suggests that he is not only interested in Brabantio contemplating his daughter as an unchaste individual; Iago also demands that Brabantio imagine Desdemona and Othello *in the act* of coupling (the repetition of his speech even replicates that act). This projected vision, we assume, is meant to provoke disgust in the father, and it is not the last time that Iago will resort to strategically coarse descriptions of sex as a means of imposing his perverse imagination on others.¹³ The imagination is Iago's weapon, and it is this first erotic image conjured by him that sets the tragic action of the play in motion.¹⁴

Stanley Cavell, in his essay "*Othello* and the Stake of the Other," argues that tragedy in *Othello* is made possible only through the replacement of Desdemona's

¹² All *Othello* quotations from *The Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Russ McDonald (New York, 2001).

¹³ Richard Kermode, in his book *Shakespeare's Language* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux 2001), draws our attention ways which sexual disgust functions prevalently in *Othello* and subsequent late romances. He writes, "For the tactician Iago has correctly guessed Othello's reaction even to the possibility of his wife's unfaithfulness, and at first with all the hesitations proper to an honest man (and an inferior) communicating such a suspicion, he infects Othello with his own disgust" (176). Kermode also, interestingly, considers *Othello*'s opening scene as an instance of "chirivari," an old custom by which a match deemed incongruous could be protested by calling the neighbors and making a disturbance outside the bride and bridegroom's dwelling (167).

¹⁴ I say erotic, but I wonder if an image meant to incite disgust in its viewer can rightly be called erotic. Sianne Ngai, in *Ugly Feelings* (Harvard, 2005), writes that "disgust is constituted by the vehement rejection or *exclusion* of its object" (22). Is it possible that Iago's imaging of sex—which essentially erases sex, or at least fundamentally alters its meaning—might have its own specific tragic force in the play?

imagination with Iago's imagination in Othello's mind.¹⁵ Stephen Orgel puts it a slightly different way in "*Othello and the End of Comedy*," when he claims that "the tragedy is not that Othello is essential to Venice, but that Iago is essential to Othello."¹⁶ But how does Iago *make* himself essential to Othello? How does he plant his own imagination so firmly in Othello's mind? Perhaps even better questions: what makes Othello so susceptible to Iago's malicious scheming, and why do Othello and Iago share an intimacy that Othello and Desdemona do not?

Before offering my own tentative answers to these questions, however, I think it best to say more about how Cavell and Orgel describe the tragic action of *Othello*. Both invoke *The Winter's Tale* (Cavell explicitly, Orgel implicitly) in their analyses, but I begin with Cavell and his provocative linking of *Othello* to *The Winter's Tale* through shared epistemological crises. I mentioned that I am far from original in my pairing of Othello and Leontes, and Cavell articulates exactly why this is the case. Both *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale* are stories of "harrowing by jealousy, and a consequent accusation of adultery, an accusation known by every outsider, everyone but the accuser, to be insanely false" (125). Additionally, the plays "involve a harrowing of the power of knowing the existence of another (as chaste, intact, as what the knower knows his other to be)" (Ibid). Most importantly, I think, Cavell argues that the consequence of Othello's and Leontes's refusals of knowledge is an "imagination of stone" (Ibid).¹⁷

¹⁵ From *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare*, 129-131. I want to return to the details of Cavell's reasoning here in the coming pages.

¹⁶ Stephen Orgel, *Spectacular Performances* (Manchester 2011), 83.

¹⁷ This is obviously literalized by Hermione's objectification in *The Winter's Tale*, and verbalized by Othello when he imagines Desdemona with skin "smooth as monumental alabaster" (V.II.5).

For Cavell, therefore, the essence of the Shakespearean tragedy is the epistemological crisis. It is this crisis that spurs (potentially) tragic action, and it is a crisis that Cavell claims to be indicative of the advent of skepticism (3).¹⁸ But what does it mean to be skeptical in *Othello*, or *The Winter's Tale* for that matter? Cavell writes of the former that it is a tragedy involving “the working out of a response to skepticism” (5), as it were, a skepticism that produces an intense desire for knowledge. Both Othello and Leontes embody this intense desire for knowledge in a destructive form: “insane jealousy” (15). Cavell is convincing when he suggests that the violence of the insanely jealous husband is activated by a desire to *know* at any cost, especially if that knowledge (for instance assurance of absolute fidelity) is actually unobtainable. They settle, then, for the fervent belief that their wives *must* be unfaithful. Cavell provocatively frames this epistemological problem as one that is closely tied to the problem of personal property:

The violence in masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession, call it private property... This linking of the desire of knowledge for possession, for, let us say, intimacy, links the epistemological problematic as a whole with that of the problematic of property, of ownership as the owning or ratifying of one's identity” (10).

It is significant to my own aims that he invokes identity and ownership, and posits possessions as the basis for a kind of fragile identity. I have already attempted to demonstrate that for Montaigne, imagined emasculation creates the possibility for violence, a claim that I find particularly relevant to the epistemological crises of Othello and Leontes. We might say that they fear that an imagined identity—an intact

¹⁸ Cavell claims that “the advent of skepticism as manifested in Descartes's *Meditations* is already in full existence in Shakespeare, from the time of the great tragedies in the first years of the seventeenth century” (3). This rather grand claim is, admittedly on Cavell's part, an “intuition.”

masculinity that is a kind of private possession—might be violated by the wayward wife, resulting in a shameful emasculation that denudes them of power. It is perhaps recognition of the fragility of their own potency which produces in Othello and Leontes an intense desire to make knowledge private property, to claim epistemological ownership over their wives' identities. Thus, when Cavell writes that while "Othello's skeptical astonishment, or nightmare, is represented as a horror of feminine sexuality, Leontes' state is represented as the torturing sense that his children are not his" (15), I would extrapolate that their violence is enacted not simply by attempts to make feminine sexuality a man's private property, but rather by anxiety over the realization that it is impossible to do so.

How, then, does Iago incite Othello to this violence, or rather, how does Iago bring about the epistemological crisis that results in Othello's violence? Cavell argues, and I would of course agree, that Iago's persuasive power is located primarily in his clever and malicious manipulation of Othello's imagination. For Cavell, as I've already mentioned, the tragedy of *Othello* is Iago's usurpation of Desdemona's place in Othello's mind. There is no doubt that Othello wins Desdemona over by the power of his own imagination, by his skills as a storyteller. Both Othello and Desdemona say as much. When Othello is forced to explain how it is possible that Desdemona could fall in love with him, his answer is both confident and unequivocal: "She'd come again, and with a greedy ear/ Devour up my discourse" (I.iii.149-150), and "She loved me for the dangers I had passed,/And I loved her that she did pity them" (I.iii.167-168). This in response to Brabantio's accusation that Othello must have used some sort of witchcraft to win Desdemona over, so *unnatural* is her attraction to Othello in his mind:

To fall in love with what she feared to look on!
It is a judgment maimed and most imperfect
That will confess perfection so could err
Against all rules of nature, and must be driven
To find out practices of cunning hell
Why this should be.

(I.iii.98-103)

Othello, it seems, is initially able to resist the notion that there is something unnatural in Desdemona's love for him, inspired in part, we must assume, by the mutual desire that Desdemona affirms even in the face of her father's interrogation. She even goes as far as to say that it is in fact Othello's "very quality," his nature, that she has seen and desired:

That I did love the Moor to live with him,
My downright violence, and storm of fortunes,
May trumpet to the world. My heart's subdued
Even to the very quality of my lord.
I saw Othello's visage in his mind

(I.iii.248-252; emphasis mine)

Desdemona does admit that she has crossed the boundaries of convention (her "downright violence") in her desire for Othello. But what does she mean when she says that she "saw Othello's visage in his mind"? Perhaps the line would be more easily deciphered if she claimed to see Othello's visage *in her own* mind, in a kind of loving contemplation. But seeing Othello in Othello's mind is another matter entirely. One simple reading of the line is to say that Desdemona falls for Othello's intellect; in other words, she is able to look past his blackness and therefore his unsuitability for her and see the brilliance of his imaginative mind. I certainly wouldn't cast aspersions on that rather familiar interpretation, and actually find it rather plausible. However, I do wonder if

there isn't something more happening in Desdemona's speech. Cavell writes that what the line in question "most naturally says is that she saw his visage as he sees it, that she understands his blackness as he understands it, as the expression (or in his word, his manifestation) of his mind—which is not overlooking it" (129). His assertion that Desdemona sees Othello as Othello sees himself is provocative and, to me, more satisfying than the first reading. But might not Cavell's emphasis on *blackness* be both unwarranted and unnecessary? Desdemona may or may not be invoking Othello's skin color here. What seems more significant is her imaginative placement of herself in Othello's mind; she sees Othello, as it were, *from within* Othello, expressing a kind of intense intellectual bond that not only transforms the way Othello envisions himself, but also serves as a powerful competing interpretation that would dispute the rhetoric of Othello and Desdemona's unsuitability for one another, the unnaturalness of their love.

But, as Cavell rightly points out, Desdemona cannot maintain this place in Othello's mind. What can account for her precipitate fall from grace? Why is Iago able to occupy the space that should be Desdemona's, and experience an intimacy with Othello that should be Desdemona's? Is it too simple to venture that one possible answer is to be found in the putative loss of her virginity? The consummation of Othello and Desdemona's marriage is denied us in the opening scene of the play, though Iago asks us to imagine it. We never have proof that they have actually consummated, and there are in fact reasons to believe that perhaps they have been unable to do so after various interruptions. Shakespeare, then, asks us to imagine the act as well, or at least to speculate about whether or not it has occurred. If Desdemona *has* lost her virginity, then Othello would certainly be the one to know it, would he not? Cavell emphasizes his

assumption that, in Othello's mind, "the theme and condition of virginity...carry their full weight within a romantic universe" (130). If we assent to Cavell's assumption, then we might also assume that the change in Desdemona's condition would provide ample reason for her fall from grace in Othello's mind. But is it not paradoxical to make that claim when Othello might in fact be responsible for that change in her condition?

Perhaps not as paradoxical as it would seem. While Othello is initially able to resist the narrative of Desdemona's unnatural attraction to him through her hold on his imagination, we see that Iago's replacement of Desdemona in Othello's mind reopens this possibility. The work that Iago does to implant himself in Othello's mind in the third scene of Act 3 is both swift and effective. It begins, we might say, with an invitation to imagine that Desdemona *might* be unfaithful with Michael Cassio. Iago, making the seemingly innocuous suggestion to Othello, sets off a chain reaction of fevered and fearful imaginings on Othello's part that he must merely facilitate with the smallest of prods and nudges. Iago becomes—and perhaps not only figuratively—the devil's advocate. He need only ask the question; Othello's imagination does the rest:

IAGO: Indeed?

OTHELLO: Indeed? Ay, indeed! Discern'st thou aught in that?
Is he not honest?

IAGO: Honest, my Lord?

OTHELLO: Honest. Ay, honest.

IAGO: My lord, for aught I know.

OTHELLO: What dost thou think?

IAGO: Think, my lord?

OTHELLO: Think, my lord?

By heaven, thou echo'st me

As if there were some monster in thy thought

Too hideous to be shown.

(III.iii.101-108)

The frustration that Iago's obnoxious parroting produces in Othello has an obvious irony: the monster in Iago's thought, "too hideous to be shown," is actually the insanely jealous Othello, the very monster that Iago hopes to animate. Iago, recognizing this, picks up on Othello's image and taunts him with it, warning him of becoming the thing he has already created through his manipulations:

O, beware, my lord, of jealousy!
It is the green-eyed monster, which doth mock
The meat it feeds on. That cuckold lives in bliss
Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger;
But O, what damnèd minutes tells he o'er
Who dotes, yet doubts—suspects, yet soundly loves!
(III.iii.165-170)

Othello becomes the monster, but Iago is the one that mocks the meat he feeds on. Can we say, then, that the two become one in Iago's image? It is too late for Othello when he proclaims the benediction over his perverse marriage to Iago: "I am bound to thee forever" (III.iii.214). Iago's imagination is fully lodged in Othello's, to the extent that he need not even suggest his thoughts verbally to Othello after this point. Othello, as it were, seems to embody Iago's voice, succumbing to the doubt and insecurity that Iago projects on him despite a fleeting desire to believe in Desdemona's fidelity¹⁹:

OTHELLO: I do not think but Desdemona's honest.
IAGO: Long live she so! and long live you to think so!
OTHELLO: And yet, *nature erring from itself*—
IAGO: Ay, there's the point!
(III.iii.227; emphasis mine)

¹⁹ Michael Neill articulates this eloquently in his chapter "Death and Discovery in *Othello*" from his book *Issues of Death: Mortality and Identity in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Clarendon Press 1997). Neill argues that "the whole dynamic of the temptation scene depends on [a] carefully engineered reversal, which turns back upon Othello the scopic longing aroused in him by Iago's self-presentation as a man with something to hide. The effect is to foster in the moor the horrifying sense that it is his own secret self that is being opened to the scandal of public view." This "inner self" of Othello's "includes the dank 'dungeon' and foul 'cistern' of his corrupted sexual imaginings (III.iii.271 and IV.ii.61)" (143).

We can see the barb in Iago's "long live you to think so!" that prompts Othello's final surrender to the rhetoric originally leveled at him by Brabantio: "nature erring from itself" is the telling phrase. It is not just the loss of Desdemona's virginity that makes her capable of losing her place in Othello's mind, then; it is actually the fact, for Othello, that she would sleep with him that renders Desdemona capable of infidelity. Desdemona errs from nature by consummating with the unworthy Othello. Therefore, if she is aberrant, she will surely make him a cuckold as well.

This is not really Othello's thought (how could it be?), and it is certainly not Desdemona's; it is Iago's formulation (and Brabantio's before him), impressed on Othello's mind. Iago's handkerchief scheme is almost unnecessary at this point. Othello will view the handkerchief as proof of course; anything will be proof after he is convinced of Desdemona's corrupted nature. In the end, then, it doesn't much matter who takes Desdemona's virginity. Sex is contaminating, even (or especially) imagined sex, and Othello must cleanse the contamination in the only way he knows how; by killing the woman who is both the source and object of this contaminating desire.²⁰ His murder of Desdemona on their wedding sheets, then, is the final proof of consummation that is occluded in the opening scene of the play in necrophiliac form, in a familiar twinning of masculine sex and death drives that seems the logical extension of Iago's (and therefore Othello's) misogynistic imagination.

²⁰ Kenneth Gross's important essay "Slander and Skepticism in *Othello*" frames this problem provocatively and in a way that resonates deeply with my own aims: "Othello feels himself wounded or stained by his own doubt, his own perception of wounds, gaps, or fissures beyond his control—whether this comes from a fear that marriage or sexual consummation must inevitably involve a scar or stain (Desdemona has a body) or that an unbridgeable gap inhibits his perfect knowledge of his bride's desires and intentions (Desdemona has a body with a mind—a mind that moreover may know him better, or at least differently, than he knows himself, that sees and desires a desire which is more than he can bear to imagine)." From *ELH*, Vol. 56 No. 4 (Winter 1989), pg. 833.

Critics have debated the source of Iago's influence over Othello. It is somewhat inexplicable in the play itself. Othello continually refers to Iago as "honest Iago," and calls him a man "of honesty and trust" (I.iii.284). We (the audience) all know Iago to be the basest of malicious schemers and liars; why do other characters find him so trustworthy? Stephen Orgel, in his essay "*Othello* and the End of Comedy," writes that "dramatically, making him [Iago] unattractive and graceless [as he is so often portrayed on stage and screen] accounts for his hostility and resentment, but does nothing to explain his extraordinary persuasiveness" (93). Orgel goes on to posit that a kind of jealous romantic attachment to Othello on Iago's part—reciprocated by Othello's narcissistic pleasure in this attachment—as a more compelling dramatic motivation for Othello's character. This attachment, then, provides a more nuanced (read: irrational) tragic force:

In staging the play, to make Iago a sort of allegorical extension of Othello, would, of course, make for a much more complex Othello than we are used to, one that would continually raise the question of how far the play's claim that the tragedy is all Iago's fault, which is essentially a claim that jealousy is explicable and reasonable...is borne out by the action (92).

Still it isn't absolutely necessary to propose that Iago is sexually attracted to Othello if we still want to claim that the two characters share an intimacy that is unrivaled in the play, as I want to claim. Male homosocial bonds (in many forms) are almost always privileged in dramatic action on the seventeenth-century stage, as Eve Sedgwick and others have pointed out.²¹ That isn't news, and *Othello* and Iago are not exceptional in that way. Still the play asks us to question why Othello trusts Iago and not Desdemona. If she is truly

²¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (Columbia 1985).

replaced in Othello by Iago, what is it that affords Iago the prominence that she is subsequently denied?

Their bond, I would venture, is cemented by a hatred of (or at least an extreme anxiety concerning) female sexuality. They share a misogynist's imagination, to put it somewhat reductively.²² This extreme anxiety, for Othello, is rooted in the realization that one can *have* a wife, but not her desires: "O curse of marriage,/ That we can call these delicate creatures ours,/ And not their appetites!" (III.iii.268-270). Othello recognizes, then, that female desire is resistant to a husband's attempts to turn it to private property, to employ Cavell's formulation. The resistance of female sexuality to control produces in the tragic (masculine/erotic) imagination an even more intense and violent desire to assert authority and control. Othello's resolution to kill Desdemona, by that logic, sadly makes sense; how else could he absolutely ensure that she does not desire aberrantly?

The tragedy of *Othello* is that there is no competing imaginative project that might challenge Iago's (and Othello's). Desdemona and Emilia cannot survive; why not? Perhaps one can't answer that question without appearing to assign blame where no blame is due. The tragic imagination is violent and (some would say) by generic definition, irresistible. In other words, it is no surprise that tragedies accumulate victims.

Challenging *Othello*'s claim that jealousy is always explicable and reasonable—the logical result of a Machiavel's manipulations—is a good idea, insofar as I would venture that jealousy is specifically *not* a rational emotion. I will argue that *The Winter's Tale*, in Leontes, certainly provides a counterpoint to Othello's more "rational" jealousy.

²² Though we should perhaps question whether Iago really *believes* anything that comes out of his own mouth, as he fashions himself something of an anti-Christ: "I am not what I am" (I.i.64)

Is it necessary to search for a negation of *Othello*'s putative claim from within *Othello*, or might we say that *The Winter's Tale* goes further than *Othello* is willing to go in depicting the unpredictable, irrational eruptions of the tragic imagination? After all, as Orgel notes, "it is also possible to imagine this play [*Othello*] without Iago" (91); I would assent, and add that in some sense, an *Othello* without an Iago is a *Leontes*.

III. Imaginative Resistance in The Winter's Tale

Stephen Orgel reminds us that "inherent in patriarchy...is always a divided loyalty, a potentially tragic element" (84). Tragic potential is therefore ubiquitous—even in (or perhaps especially in) comedies, which so often rely on the pitfalls of patriarchy for humorous grist. The difference between tragedy and comedy, then, is not in the problems they ask their characters to face, but rather in the solutions they allow those characters to imagine and work out, a difference in the resolutions they are willing to allow (Orgel 85). This seems an especially fitting observation to make in a discussion of *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*, which (as I've already noted) boast strikingly similar themes and strikingly dissimilar final acts. *The Winter's Tale* is not a comedy, at least not for three acts. Is it a tragedy? Yes and no. There is tragedy in the play—but there is also reconciliation and, maybe, a miraculous resurrection.

Hermione's final resurrection—the central image of *The Winter's Tale*—is a miracle with implications that threaten to overshadow and even distract us from what is truly wonderful about the scene. It is tempting to look back through the play for clues (which can be found) that Paulina has been hiding Hermione all along, or to assume that Shakespeare is questioning the validity of all so-called miraculous events. One might

even choose to mount a courageous defense of Hermione's literal resurrection from the dead (after all, Apollo's prophecy seems to have been miraculously fulfilled through circumstances that Paulina could not possibly have orchestrated). Even Leontes, who has supposedly awakened his faith, desires to know the means by which Hermione has been resurrected: "But how is to be questioned, for I saw her, / As I thought, dead" (V.iii.139-140).²³ However, each of these supposed interpretive rabbit holes surrounding the *reality* of Hermione's resurrection are actually dead ends that unhelpfully obfuscate the more compelling implications of the miracle: Hermione's resurrection into a new reality *outside* of Leontes' epistemological control. This resurrection is only possible through Paulina and Hermione's competing imaginative act (the orchestration of a miracle), their resistance to Leontes' tragic imagination, and the unmasking of female evil as a masculinist fantasy.²⁴

Iago is not necessary here. The opening scenes of *The Winter's Tale* effectively capture the acute psychological distress of a man possessed by hysterical jealousy that has nothing to do with the machinations of a bitter Machiavel. But like Othello, Leontes' violence is born out of an epistemological crisis; a crisis that results from an imagined emasculation, the fear of becoming the cuckold. Acute anxiety about female sexuality is pervasive in the first acts of *The Winter's Tale*, and is actually prior to the epistemological crisis. We see this in Polixenes' description to Hermione of his childhood friendship with Leontes. Their youthful bliss is nothing short of ethereal and Edenic:

²³ All quotations taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale* (Oxford 1996), ed. Stephen Orgel.

²⁴ This formulation of Paulina and Hermione's imaginative resistance comes from Cristina Leon Alfar's *Fantasies of Female Evil* (University of Delaware 2003), 165. I'll return to some of Alfar's claims.

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i'th' sun,
And bleat the one at th'other; what we changed
Was innocence for innocence—we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed
That any did. Had we pursued that life,
And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared
With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven
Boldly, 'not guilty', the imposition cleared
Heredity ours.

(I.ii.66-73)

The implications of Polixenes' overwrought encomium are not lost on Hermione. There is a reason that Leontes and Polixenes could not "pursue that life"—whatever that might entail—of innocence. One suspects that Hermione already knows what (or rather *who*) is responsible for the fall from grace when she prods Polixenes: "By this we gather/You have tripped since" (I.ii.75). Polixenes is happy to confirm that it is indeed women that are responsible for the loss of boyhood immortality; even faithful wives cannot escape this culpability:

O my most sacred lady,
Temptations have since been born to's, for
In those unfledged days was my wife a girl;
Your precious self had then not crossed the eyes
Of my young playfellow.

(I.ii.75-78)

It seems that boys could be boys if it wasn't for girls becoming women. In Polixenes' account, sex is of course original sin; but more than that, it is *female* sexuality specifically which interrupts prelapsarian male homosocial bonds. As in *Othello*, sex in *The Winter's Tale* is contaminating, even when it is monogamous. It is no surprise, then, that

anxiety about female sexuality is compounded exponentially when it is suspected of being aberrant.

What begins as suspicion quickly turns to outrage when Leontes is convinced of his wife's infidelity with his best friend Polixenes. This jealousy is maybe born out of sight, but what Leontes actually sees is unclear. It is at this point that his tragic imagination starts to work on him, and in his paranoia he proclaims that

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 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.—Mamillius,
Art thou my boy?

(I.ii.108-119)

Leontes is most likely looking at Hermione and Polixenes while giving this speech, but what he can see of their interaction is clearly mixed up with what he is imagining to be their surreptitious flirtation. We might suspect that he has seen them holding hands, but it is highly unlikely that he has seen them “paddling palms and pinching fingers,” or even “making practiced smiles” and sighing as if in love. Why, then, the precipitate suspicion—even the seeds of conviction—that he has been made the cuckold? Leontes acknowledges—with language nevertheless suggestive of suspicion—that Hermione and Polixenes' friendliness may be a natural display of royal propriety and affection, an interaction born “from heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom, / [that] well become the

agent.” Hermione will even make this claim herself when she attempts a defense of her actions at trial. There is a perfect explanation available for the affection between Hermione and Polixenes—an affection in fact commanded by Leontes—but Leontes refuses to consider it. Instead, the imagined fear of emasculation—of becoming a cuckold—throws him into a certain conviction of infidelity, the betrayal of best friend and wife, which causes him to question even the legitimacy of his son (despite the fact that Mamillius bears a striking resemblance to Leontes).

In her chapter on the play in her book *Fantasies of Female Evil*, Christina León Alfar writes that “*The Winter’s Tale* is a play in which a male character, here the monarch, identifies two women [Hermione and Paulina] as sources of evil because they both pose a threat to his masculinist sovereignty” (164). This is not dissimilar from my own claim, drawing on Montaigne, that it is imagined impotence that sparks violence toward the other in *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*, as the knowing cuckold must be resigned to a kind of metaphorical impotence. It is the transgression of his fixed identity as powerful sovereign and possessor of the Queen which Leontes fears; this violent fear of transgression paradoxically leads to transgression of others on Leontes’ part. This might remind us of Stanley Cavell’s assertion that “the violence of masculine knowing, explicitly associated with jealousy, seems to interpret the ambition of knowledge as that of exclusive possession” (10). The inevitable realization that female sexuality cannot be made private property—at least insofar as Leontes cannot *know* with certainty that Hermione is faithful—produces a fundamental misogyny in the tyrant, and this misogyny is, in some sense, fortified through male bonds. I have already argued that *Othello* and *Iago* share a misogynist’s imagination which allows them an intimacy unparalleled in that

play. Leontes' homosocial misogyny is also imaginative: he commiserates with all imagined cuckolds, who, according to him, would include almost any man foolish enough to believe that his wife is faithful. He opines:

And many a man there is, even at this present,
Now, while I speak this, holds his wife by th'arm,
That little thinks she has been sluiced in's absence,
And his pond fished by his next neighbor—nay, there's comfort in't
Whiles other men have gates, and those gates opened,
As mine, against their will.

(I.ii.190-196)

It might be objected that Leontes' speech does not truly glorify male bonds; after all, the "next neighbor" who cuckolds is a man. But we should also remember Eve Sedgwick's incisive and witty insight: to cuckold is by definition a sexual act performed by one man on another man. Either way, Leontes identifies himself with other cuckolds, not cuckolders. His innocence is obviously taken for granted, and he comforts himself in the knowledge that many other men are also unfortunate victims of aberrant female sexuality. His claim to have been "opened" against his will, then, is suggestive. One way to read Leontes' "gate" is metaphorical and rather straightforward: the transgressing of the gate by the cuckolder allows him access to another man's private property—the wife's sexuality. But I wonder if we might also read the gate more (but not entirely) literally as a divide between self and other, an access point to interiority. A man's gate is transgressed by another man (here we think of Sedgwick), and the penetrated man is transformed into a cuckold. I mean this to reinforce my assertion that it is a deep-seated fear of emasculation—of the transgression of self—which activates the tragic imagination in these texts.

And the tragic imagination is always in competition with competing imaginations. When Leontes confides in his courtier Camillo about his jealous suspicion, Camillo is incredulous. He cannot believe that Hermione could be guilty of such an offense; indeed, almost everyone around Leontes will cast doubt on his accusations. But an almost unanimous competing interpretation on Hermione's fidelity cannot convince Leontes. He is one of the only characters in the play who does not have faith in Hermione; many of the other characters (especially Paulina) act heroically in Hermione's defense despite overwhelming pressure from the king. When Camillo denies having any suspicion of Hermione's infidelity, Leontes simply cannot accept his opinion, which should be encouraging. Instead, he comically insists that Camillo *must* have seen with his eyes what Leontes has only imagined:

Ha' not you seen, Camillo—
But that's past doubt; you have, or your eyeglass
Is thicker than a cuckold's horn—or heard—
For to a vision so apparent, rumor
Cannot be mute—or thought—for cogitation
Resides not in that man that does not think—
My wife is slippery?

(I.ii.264-270)

Leontes' dismissive judgment is not reserved just for women. He is only looking for Camillo and others to affirm him in his certainty, imploring Camillo to "Say 't, and justify 'it" (1.2.275); any evidence to the contrary will be promptly discarded or discredited as blatant lies. Competing interpretations that do not align with Leontes' private vision are willfully ignorant, and therefore treacherous, in Leontes' eyes. This is a familiar crisis in Shakespeare's universe: what recourse can dissenters possibly claim

when the tragic imagination is also the King's imagination, a vision which commands the ultimate authority? Many attempt to persuade Leontes to see the injustice of his accusations; all of them fail. It is significant, though, that only two dissenters are willing to seriously challenge Leontes' authority by calling him what he is: an evil tyrant. My claim is that it is the bond that Hermione and Paulina form in their resistance to Leontes that allows Hermione to survive Leontes' violence, and consequently allows the play to survive its tragic three acts.²⁵ Hermione has nothing to lose. She is a condemned woman. But Paulina might lose everything for her rebellion, and does in fact lose her husband, who is probably not rebellious enough.

When Leontes accuses Hermione, she has no recourse to vindicate herself. But that does not mean that she does not resist Leontes. When Leontes has labeled Hermione an adulteress to her face, she replies,

Should a villain say so,
The most replenished villain in the world,
He were as much more villain. You, my lord,
Do but mistake.

(II.i.78-80)

To which Leontes retorts, "You have mistook, my lady, / Polixenes for Leontes" (II.i.81-82). Leontes is of course unaware that he is playing the villain that he accuses Polixenes of being. The violence he perpetrates is in part a result of his inability to imagine himself as a potential villain. Hermione, for her part, recognizes that there is nothing she can say or do to clear her name and set Leontes right. At her trial, she delivers a moving and

²⁵ Elizabeth Williamson makes this point and links *The Winter's Tale* to *Much Ado About Nothing* in her essay "Things Newly Performed: The Resurrection Tradition in Shakespeare's Plays" when she writes that "both Hero and Hermione survive because they have allies who are able to covert their husbands' jealousy into repentance" (123). This essay can be found in the very helpful *Shakespeare and Religious Change* (Palgrave 2009), ed. Kenneth J.E. Graham and Philip D. Collington.

impassioned speech in defense of her honor that falls on (Leontes') deaf ears. Her prophetic warning to Leontes reminds him that he will be sorry if divine revelation should grant him the vision to see his folly:

How will this grieve you,
When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that
You thus have published me! Gentle my lord,
You scarce can right me throughly then to say
You did mistake.

(II.i.96-99)

When Leontes threatens her with death, she confesses: "The bug which you would fright me with I seek" (III.ii.90). Leontes, in his certainty in Hermione's guilt and his refusal to take her defense seriously, has made her wish for death, as she recognizes herself to be like-dead in the face of his accusations.

When the oracle arrives proclaiming what everyone but Leontes has known and believed all along, Leontes even rejects the divine words in favor of his conclusion that Hermione is guilty. The words of the prophecy couldn't be clearer:

Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless,
Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant, his
innocent babe truly begotten, and the King shall
live without an heir if that which is lost be not
found.

(III.ii.130-134)

But it is unclear why the oracle—which he declares "mere falsehood"—is not enough to convince Leontes of his guilt, when the subsequent arrival of the servant announcing the death of Mamillius snaps him abruptly into the recognition of his grave sin. Why does Leontes immediately see the death of Mamillius as Apollo's divine retribution when only a minute before he had denied his oracle? The news of Mamillius' death is too much for Hermione, who swoons and is carried offstage. When Paulina returns to inform Leontes

that Hermione is dead, the violence of Leontes' unjust certainty has completed its tragic work.

The Winter's Tale, however, does not end tragically. In the final scene of the play, we find the statue of Hermione returning to life. The question of what has enabled this redemptive conclusion might produce different answers. There is the incredible fulfillment of the divine oracle in the return of Leontes and Hermione's lost daughter, through circumstances that Paulina could not have possibly controlled. One might argue that it is Leontes' remorse and the awakening of his faith which bring about the play's final miracle. Sarah Beckwith writes that "For Leontes, his remorse is the path to finding the independent reality of Hermione."²⁶ This independent reality that Beckwith refers to signifies Hermione as subject, existing outside of Leontes' interpretive will and in a realm of uncertainty. But we also might question whether Hermione's resurrection *should* be interpreted as wholly liberatory. After all, a resurrection that is predicated on the reform of the patriarch, as Cristina Leon Alfar reminds us, stops short of an open celebration of female rebellion against tyranny (165). The final acts of *The Winter's Tale* could be described as the hero's quest for moral and political redemption; Hermione's resurrection, in that sense, is simply the reward for the patriarch's contrition.²⁷

²⁶ Sarah Beckwith, *Shakespeare and the Grammar of Forgiveness* (Cornell University Press, 2011) pg. 133. This quotation comes from Beckwith's chapter "Shakespeare's Resurrections," in which she explores the "theatrico-religious paradigm of resurrection" in *The Winter's Tale*, arguing that scenes of resurrection in Shakespeare's post-tragic plays might be understood as moments providing sacramental access to reconciled community, a redemption of memory "through a new form of intersubjectivity" (138). Beckwith's work is therefore foundational to my own, as I take up and run with an ethical/imaginative dimension of her religious/communal study of Shakespeare's resurrections.

²⁷ Janet Adelman makes a similar claim about the conclusion of *The Winter's Tale* in her book *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (Routledge 1991) when she writes that "*The Winter's Tale* ends with the return of a masculine authority grounded in a benignly generative maternal presence" (194).

But Alfar does not ignore the critical bond formed between Paulina and Hermione that allows Hermione to survive Leontes' violence. She writes that "to assume female power is effaced in *The Winter's Tale* is to discount the power of Paulina, who challenges Leontes' accusations against Hermione, gives a name to his tyranny, and becomes—at his contrition—his foremost advisor, keeper of his celibacy, and enforcer of his daily exercise of repentance" (164). And how does Paulina manage this feat? I will claim that she checks Leontes' patriarchal authority through a powerful competing imaginative act; not only does she orchestrate a miracle, she imposes a vision on Leontes—in a kind of reversal of Iago's malicious infection of Othello—by "keeping the memory of the 'dead' queen and his responsibility for her death fresh in [his] mind" (Ibid). It is Paulina's imaginative act that keeps Hermione alive, both literally and figuratively, and allows for the redemption of Leontes' tragic imagination.

Reconciliation requires survival. Is it too obvious to say so? Perhaps the real miracle of *The Winter's Tale* is that Hermione can survive Leontes' epistemological stranglehold as Desdemona cannot survive Othello's. Is that a miracle?²⁸ Beckwith writes that in *The Winter's Tale* "the miracle is only ordinary just as another human life is both miraculous and ordinary... If Shakespearean tragedy has been about the consequences of the denial of acknowledgment, then the late romances will find in an exploration of the languages of penitence and repentance an exploration too of the

²⁸ Sean Benson considers these romance resurrections almost-miraculous, writing that "quasi resurrections constitute an enduring Shakespearean mode of ensuring a comic ending, often against all odds." For a full-scale account of the resurrection tradition and Shakespeare's plays, see Benson's *Shakespearean Resurrection: The Art of Almost Raising the Dead* (Duquesne 2009). The preceding quotation from pg. 78 of that book.

possibilities of acknowledgement” (135&145). This recognition and reconciliation, to echo Montaigne (or my reading of Montaigne), allows for newfound intimacy.

When Leontes and the reanimated Hermione embrace, their reconciliation is complete. It is a moment of forgiveness and recognition, the sort of moment that almost all resurrection narratives provide (Beckwith 127-131). Should we be concerned that she is silent in that embrace? Alfar notes that “many critics are disturbed by Shakespeare’s metamorphosis of Hermione to stone and perhaps even more so by her reanimation from statue to seemingly forgiving and silent wife” (163). Still, the scene does provide a moment of paradox in which Leontes must exist, not being able to fully comprehend the past sixteen years, the present miracle, or what his future with Hermione might bring. He is now in the presence of his fully alive wife, and she appears to him the human whom he so violently objectified. Hermione has survived Leontes’ attempts to turn her to stone.

But we should be wary of forgetting that Shakespeare’s late romance is also tragic.²⁹ We have seen it transmute from tragedy to something else entirely by the survival of the play past the third act—might it not transmute again were it allowed to live past the fifth? Another angle at this skeptical question: does the conclusion of *The Winter’s Tale*, in its miraculous resurrections and restorations, help us forget the violence Leontes has enacted as a jealous tyrant? If so (and if that’s a problem), a relatively recent production of the play by a Russian company attempted to address the issue.³⁰ When performing the play in London during May of 1999, the director of the “deeply

²⁹ And John Donne’s reminder that all births (and rebirths) render us vulnerable to deaths anew: “Our very birth and entrance into this life is *exitus a morte*, an issue from death, for in our mother’s womb we are dead...But then this *exitus a morte*, is but *introitus in mortem*, this issue, this deliverance from that death, the death of the womb, is an entrance, a delivering over to another death, the manifold deaths of this world.” (from “Death’s Duel”).

³⁰ I take my account of the production from the previously cited Frank Kermode’s *Shakespeare’s Languages*, 272.

considered” production took considerable liberties with the final scene, which he played with an atmosphere of “awed dismay” rather than joyful celebration. At the conclusion, Hermione, Leontes, and Perdita form an unmoving group statue. Frank Kermode describes their reunions involving “something like mutual, enlightened fear” (272). As the living become statuesque, Time returns to the stage with the dead Mamillius; the boy’s disappearance in the tragic culmination of the third act might seem a distant memory. He kneels before his mother and father briefly, before Time again takes him by the hand and leads him offstage. It is a powerful reminder of the cost of Leontes’ tragic imagination, even in the wake of its redemption. Our tragedies may turn to comedies, but even our comedies are suffused with tragic potential. We are, like Shakespeare’s creations, perpetually on the brink of our own redemption or destruction. *The Winter’s Tale* reminds us that it takes a powerful—perhaps even miraculous—competing imaginative act to survive the violence of the tragic imagination.

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