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Onstage/Offstage (Mis)Recognitions in *The Winter's Tale*[1]

Abstract

How do the offstage and the narrative mode contribute to the construction of knowledge in *The Winter's Tale*, making it perspectival and situated? This article discusses how not two, but three recognition scenes interact, bringing together the play's first and second part, by enhancing the role of the offstage/onstage dialectic, both within each one of these three scenes, and in their mutual dialogue. This reading relies upon an interpretation of the play's overall signifying system, based upon a principle of correspondences tying together the fabric of drama at different levels: lexical, performative, thematic, conceptual. It shows how foregrounded patterns of iteration dependent on the criterion of likeness do not make for stable significance outside of the realm of art (or artifice). Instead, they appear to be a possibly self-deluding response to a troubled awareness of the unreliability of signs and appearances, betraying concern about the (potentially tragic) inevitability of doubt.

Keywords: Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*; *anagnorisis*; narrative in drama; the offstage

1. Epistemological Tensions

Increasing interest in story-telling in drama and the offstage has begun to refocus critical attention upon narrative power in theatre, exploring the ways in which it erodes the stage boundaries and enlarges its scope (Wilson 1989 and 1995; see also Bigliazzi ed. 2016). As Jonathan Walker has recently argued, since Aristotle and the premodern theorists, down to Philip Sidney and other early modern writers, the mode of spectacle has always been that of "put[ting] palpable persons and objects on display, thus favoring (and encouraging its audience to favor) that which is directly perceptible to the eyes and ears as the basis of their knowledge in the theater" (2017: 5). Aristotle recommended that all *pragmata*, or the events and deeds

1 This article re-elaborates questions long discussed with Alessandro Serpieri. To him it is dedicated.

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shown on stage, should be probable and rational, and those which are not should be voiced by a God at the end. Horace too warned against the representation of incredible scenes (such as Procne's metamorphosis) or inappropriate ones (such as Medea's murder of her own sons and Atreus' cannibalistic meal). He clearly advised that, except in these two cases, the action should unfold in plain sight, because "[t]he things reported to the eares move not the mynd so sone, / As lively set before thyne eyes, in acte for to behold".[2] Visible onstage business was indubitably more spectacular than its translation into words. As Gruber noticed, "[n]ot only does Horace suppose narrative and drama to be incongruous (if not in principle exclusive) but also, therefore, privileges 'showing' for the very reasons that Plato scorned it, namely, its efficacy in causing spectators to credit the artistic illusion with truth" (2010: 11). Such prescriptions were taken up and voiced, among others, by Sidney in his *Defence of Poesie*, where he recalled "Aristotle's precept, and common reason" that "the stage should always represent but one place; and the uttermost time presupposed in it should be . . . but one day" (1909: 107). Not surprisingly, his critique of coeval theatre practices, "where you shall have Asia of the one side, and Afric of the other, and so many other under kingdoms, that the player when he comes in, must ever begin with telling where he is, or else the tale will not be conceived" (ibid.), singled out contemporary dramatists' preposterous choice of having characters explain and tell where they come from. Such opinions were to become part and parcel of neoclassical poetics, which, in the name of verisimilitude, was to relegate the irrational, improbable, or inappropriate to the offstage.[3]

But when we consider the great bulk of early modern English non-neoclassical drama, we are faced with something radically different. As Walker has underscored, early modern playwrights inherited criteria of credibility and intelligibility from premodern theorists, but rather than absorbing them passively, they significantly revised them, devising an "unofficial counterdiscourse to a traditional understanding of how dramatic form was

[2] Drant (1567: <Fol. 6r and v>); Horace: "Segnius irritant animos demissa per aurem / quam quae sunt oculis subiecta fidelibus et quae / ipse sibi tradit spectator" (1999: ll. 180-2).

[3] As Gruber noticed, Racine's object in his Preface to Britannicus (1669) was "to install the concept of verisimilitude at the basis of a coherent dramaturgical practice" according to which it was necessary to make invisible "certain objects [which] are too unyieldingly 'real' or 'raw' for the stage (a functioning clock on the wall is a famous example)", and "some actions [which] if they are simulated (such as an actor's pretending to die) appear too overtly 'theatrical'" (2010: 4). For a discussion of circumstantial proof with regard to the construction of time and space in drama, as well as to the function of narrative, see Hutson (2015; on Sidney 22-9).

supposed to function" (2017: 16). The primary concern was "the perceptual and cognitive work that playgoers perform" (17). This entailed that for a playwright to be successful it was mandatory to "balance what theatergoers know and when they know it by accelerating and decelerating their understanding as crucial moments in the action" (ibid.). Thus, it became of paramount importance to take "[c]ontrol over the epistemology and, by extension, the intellectual perspective of theater audiences" (ibid.).

When in the late eighteenth century Samuel Johnson critcized Shakespeare's use of the offstage in the first recognition scene in *The Winter's Tale* 5.2, he simply responded to a different poetics. He was disappointed not to see the episode staged, but to hear it narrated by three Gentlemen, and branded Shakespeare slothful.[4] He had not been given what he had been promised, and felt "victimized by what appears to be a strategy of bait-and-switch" (Gruber 2010: 6). In fact, Johnson missed the whole point. He did not ask why at a crucial moment in the action the report proves to be a dramatic pivot; why the action is entrusted to the offstage, and why it is by way of its invisible unfolding behind the scenes that the conceptual design of the story in fact comes full circle. He did not perceive that the offstage here is "foundational to the dramatic mode" (Walker 2017: 17) as it depacifies audiences creating "the possibility for more complex . . . dramatic meaning". In so doing "it helped inaugurate a new protomodern notion that knowledge is situated, perspectival, nonuniversal, and always subject to revision" (16).

In the following pages, I will discuss how the offstage and the narrative mode make our knowledge perspectival and situated in *The Winter's Tale*. I will focus on the relation between storytelling and the recognition scenes within the broader structure of the play and its overall signifying system. My contention is that the dialectic between the offstage and the onstage produces a modal, conceptual and cognitive tension curiously expressed by the title itself, which advertises the play as an old, fabulous tale with more than a tinge of ambiguity. Curren-Aquino has perceptively noticed that while the title alludes to "strange and fanciful oral narratives intended to while away the long, cold hours of the dark nights of winter" (Shakespeare 2007: 5), the first mention of the word "tale" is Mamillius' in the "domestic company of women" (ibid.). Sometimes read as a sign of the young boy's 'effeminacy' and intimacy with his mother, within a context of prob-

[4] "It was, I suppose, only to spare his own labour that the poet put this whole scene into narrative, for though part of the transaction was already known to the audience, and therefore could not properly be shewn again, yet the two kings might have met upon the stage . . . and the young lady might have been recognized in sight of the spectators" (Johnson 1908: 90-1).

lematized genderedness (Lamb 1998), this mention is complicated by the sadness of the story Mamillius is referring to (a "sad tale . . . / One of sprites and goblins", 2.1.25), prefiguring a potential for tragedy. This sense appears to be reinforced by the fact that the episode is "quickly followed by one of the most disturbing moments – the abrupt, violent severing of Mamillius from the comfort of the female domain he has known" (7). But then Time intervenes, providing "a pivotal image, part verbal, part visual" (Ewbank 2012: 205) of its own triumph and power, including his 'telling' the play's story. As an old-fashioned Presenter and authorial voice, Time interrupts the action, replacing it with a narrative. Tales will multiply in the second part of the play, bringing together reports (3.1, 3.3) and ballads (4.4), and once again "old tale[s]" (5.2.25, 53; 5.3.117) in a context of wonderment and amazement, changing "the sad wintry tale of the first part (tragedy)" into "the (overall) joyous spring-like tale of the second part (comedy)" (Shakespeare 2007: 7). And yet, with bitter overtones. As Mowat underlined, the three Gentlemen's report of the recognition scene also contains a recapitulation of the events. They move "freely through past time", while their "references to the incredibility of the tales reduces the whole play to a 'winter's tale' and condition our response to the action we have seen, and to that which will come" (2011: 86). To how all this happens I am going to turn now.

2. Iterative Patterns: Likeness as Artifice

The Winter's Tale is in many respects a dual play, made up of two major stories, genres, registers and even diverse emotional temperatures.[5] And yet, it is also whole and compact. Some time ago Northrop Frye remarked that "[t]he two parts are related in two ways, by sequence and by contrast. The cycle of nature, turning through the winter and summer of the year and through the age and youth of human generations, is at the center of the play's imagery" (1968: 184). In this light, "the symbolic reason for the sixteen-year gap is clearly to have the cycle of the year reinforced by the slower cycle of human generations" (185). This cyclic and symmetrical mechanism is based on a contrastive pattern that "in Shakespeare normally includes a superficial *resemblance* in which one element

[5] Suffice it to mention Pafford (Shakespeare 1963: lv): "The Winter's Tale has hatred in the first part and love, where there was hatred, in the last, but no empty gap between. Not only does the middle part stir the mind and heart of itself, but by the contrast of its beauty, love, youth, confidence, happiness, country life, and venial roguery, it intensifies the dramatic effect of the ugliness, the oppressive adult madness, hatred and murderous crime at court in the first part and the sober serenity of the last".

is a parody of the other" (ibid). I have emphasised the word 'resemblance' because when recurrences make us grasp a broader design than what may appear at first glance, we are ensured that at bottom there is a centre, although the "play is drawn together by repeated insistence on the ambiguities of appearance" (Siemon 1974:10). Patterns of similarities and antitheses make up a system of correspondences that renders signification stable, coalescing disparate meanings into higher unities. Likeness becomes a foundational principle of meaning-making which ties together signs and safeguards continuance of belief in a meaningful world. However, the more this system of correspondences is emphasized, the more it betrays deep anxiety about its cancellation. Once the ancient system of similarities was lost, as Foucault famously argued, "the written word cease[d] to be included among the signs and forms of truth; language [was] no longer one of the figurations of the world, or a signature stamped upon things since the beginning of time" (2005: 62). This is precisely what this overtight structures seems to hint at, suggesting that if ambiguities of appearances cannot be cancelled, they can be glossed over through artifice. Studies on wordplay in this drama and of antagonistic discourses of power, authority, and subversion have elucidated the extent to which *The Winter's Tale* is grounded in discursive clashes, disclosing how radical instability of meaning may affect the mind and, consequently, all affective relations, despite all attempt to make the system cohere and stabilize signification.[6]

Thus, rather than the symbolism of cyclic natural processes embedded in the generational and 'seasonal' models belonging to the tragicomic pattern of succession and reversal, it is this idea of resemblances and differences that is of interest when we come to explore the function of the offstage in producing, or contesting, knowledge. In this sense the episodes of *anagnorisis*, or recognition, are central for an understanding of how epistemological boundaries are crossed and questioned. We are accustomed to thinking that this play has two main recognition scenes in Act 5. I will argue that there is yet another one preceding these, right at the beginning of the play, and that it is strictly linked with the other two in terms of stagecraft and the handling of the onstage/offstage dialectic within a binary sequential/reversal system of signification. These scenes mirroring each other also by way of their stagecraft bring together *peripeteia* and *denouément* within a model of binary correspondences.

[6] Mahood (1968) has fully illustrated the power of punning, especially in Leontes' language, while Matchett (1969) has elucidated Polixenes' unintentional use of an ambiguous language of adultery. On the interaction and competition of different levels of discoursing, see Laird (1994/) and (1996/97), and Hunt (1995/96).

As suggested above, this model based on patterns of "sameness with a difference",[7] is not coincidental or neutral, but deeply imbued with epistemological preoccupations. At a micro-structural level, it appears to produce audible echo effects, including various figures of repetition and contrast, especially evident in the antanaclasis, or the repetition in a dialogue of the same word with different meanings, often with a provocative or polemical intent. Here are just a few examples: in 1.2 Leontes and Camillo confront each other on the issue of Hermione's supposed adultery; the word "business" is pivotal in their contrast, polemically splitting reference in the two speakers' diverse allusion to Hermione's betrayal and Polixenes' visit, respectively:

Leontes . . . Lower messes
Perchance are to this *business* purblind? Say.
Camillo *Business*, my lord? I think most understand
Bohemia stays here longer.
(1.2, 224-7; emphasis mine)[8]

Soon afterwards, during the same exchange, Camillo's use of the word "satisfy" to convey the idea that Polixenes will remain in Sicily to 'satisfy the sovereign's friendship', is provocatively contrasted by Leontes' own emphatic use of the same word, meaning that Hermione will 'satisfy' her desire:

Camillo To satisfy your high-ness and the entreaties
Of our most gracious mistress.
Leontes Satisfy?
The entreaties of your mistress? Satisfy?
Let that suffice. . . .
(1.2.229-32)

Then, in 2.1, responding to Leontes' accusation of adultery, Hermione incredulously retorts that he is perhaps "sport[ing]", that is, 'mocking her'; Leontes' bounces that word back to her provocatively insinuating her illicit

[7] According to Curren-Aquino, they "encourage the reader/spectator to remain fluidly engaged in remembering, redefining, and reassessing the past as it bears with the present future" (Shakespeare 2017: 22). This model has often received attention. For instance, Siemon (1974) has extensively illustrated that the iterative and serial dimension of the ritual action of the play allows to explore "the possibilities for good and evil in society by balancing against one another variations of a single theme". In his turn, Proudfoot (1976) has offered a thorough investigation of verbal links, demonstrating that although their force "may be ironic or thematic . . . their pervasive effect is to suggest the unity of the play at a rather deeper level of unconscious association" (69).

[8] All quotations are from Shakespeare (1998).

enjoyment of Polixenes. Loss of co-referentiality is here conducive to dramatic fencing:

HERMIONE What is this? Sport?
LEONTES Bear the boy hence; he shall not come about her.
Away with him, and let her sport herself
With that she's big with, for 'tis Polixenes
Has made thee swell thus.
(2.1.58-62)

Such echo effects are triggered on other levels too which do not concern the rhetoric of the exchange, but behavioural, gestural, or lexical and stylistic parallelisms. Only a bunch of examples may suffice here. In 4.4 Polixenes' tyrannical raging against Florizel and Perdita, just discovered to be in love (414ff.; and Camillo on this at 464ff.), duplicates Leontes' tyrannical fury against Hermione and Polixenes in the first three acts. In the same 4.4 scene Camillo alludes to Florizel as to a second Mamillius (ll. 545ff.), and then Paulina does the same in 5.1 ("Had our prince, / Jewel of children, seen this hour, he had paired / Well with this lord", ll. 115-17); soon afterwards Leontes sees in Florizel the image of Polixenes and calls him "brother" (ll.127, 146) in a chain regression of phantasmatic pairs. As father (Polixenes) and son (Florizel) are like each other, guaranteeing for Leontes continuance of affective meaning and memory, Hermione and Perdita too mirror each other.[9] As regards binary patterns investing the language of gesture, in 4.4.414 Polixenes takes off his shepherd's garment and reveals himself as Florizel's father; a few lines later Florizel doffs the clothes he had exchanged with Autolycus and he too discloses his true identity. The context is clearly metatheatrical, with Camillo overtly directing the action (Camillo: ". . . it shall be so my care / To have you royally appointed, as if / The scene you play were mine", ll. 588-90; and at ll. 643-51 he tells Perdita how to disguise herself). Apocalyptic invocations of total destruction, including the spilling of the germs of human life, typical of other Shakespear-

[9] On parental duplications and the instability of appearances see Siemon (1974: 11-12). In respect to the play's source, this resemblance between mother and daughter attenuates here the sense of incestuous attraction Leontes feels for his yet unacknowledged daughter (5.1.222ff.). In Greene's novella, Pandosto's sense of guilt for his "disordinate" and "unlawful lust" for the young Fawnia will eventually contribute to pushing him to commit suicide: "Pandosto calling to mind how first he betrayed his friend Egistus, how his jealousy was the cause of Bellaria's death, that, contrary to the law of nature, he had lusted after his own daughter, moved with these desperate thoughts he fell in a melancholy fit and – to close up the comedy with a tragical stratagem – he slew himself": Shakespeare (1998: 274).

ean heroes,[10] are first expressed by Antigonus (2.1.147-50: "I'll geld'em all – fourteen they shall not see / To bring false generations. They are co-heirs, / And I had rather glib myself than they / Should not produce fair issue"), and later by Florizel (4.4.475-8: "Let nature crush the sides o'th'earth together, / And mar the seeds within. Lift up the looks. / From my succession wipe me, father; I / Am heir to my affection"). Twice Leontes and Florizel give voice to a bitter feeling of human precariousness, showing awareness of our life's dependence on chance or gods' caprices:[11] the former feels like "a feather for each wind that blows" (2.3.153), and the latter compares men to "slaves of chance, and flies / of every wind that blows" (4.4.537-8). They twice use the word "fancy" to connote their distempered passion: mad jealousy the former (in 2.3 Leontes is accused by Paulina of having a "weak-hinged fancy", l. 118), uncontrolled love the latter: both affected or infected by overheated imagination. As Orgel suggests, by the time of Shakespeare, "fancy" coalesced the meanings of imagination and love, identifying the power to apprehend images as opposed to reason. Thus, "[i]n making reason subservient to fancy, Florizel is inverting the ethical hierarchy of the faculties" (Shakespeare 2012: 193):

Florizel I am [advised], and by my *fancy*. If my reason
Will thereto be obedient, I have reason.
If not, my *senses*, better pleased with madness,
Do bid it welcome.
(4.4-479-82; emphasis mine)

Finally, but no less significantly, lexical echoing also invests the issue of knowledge and/or ignorance:

Camillo I dare not know, my lord.
Polixenes How, dare not? Do not? Do you know and dare not? (1.2.371-2)
Old shepherd I cannot speak nor think,
Nor dare to know that which I know. (4.4. 448-9)

Without further lingering on such patterns,[12] these few examples suffice to suggest that this iterative system is not coincidental but has a cohesive function showcasing the power of art – or artifice. Of course, bina-

[10] In *Macbeth*, Banquo urges the weird sisters to foretell him the future by looking into "the seeds of time" (1.3.58); then Macbeth himself implores them to the same end (4.1.49-60). In *King Lear*, Lear invokes the breaking of the human mould and the spilling of the human seeds to annihilate humanity (3.2.6-9). References are to Shakespeare (2015) and (2005), respectively.

[11] Fortune is also prominent in *Pandosto*, and often responsible for adventurous turns in the other romances; cf. Serpieri (ed. and trans. 2001: 295).

[12] On which see references in note 7 above.

risms are not unusual in Shakespeare, starting with the common duplication of plots and subplots. However, in a play whose *peripeteia* is triggered by a radical misinterpretation of signs, the play's attempt to signify at the higher level of its overall structure (itself made up of different planes), and to produce a metadiscourse upon reliable meaning-making by sticking to the principle of likeness, insinuates that that principle is not 'any' device to make the play's parts cohere. It is, in fact, what keeps in check the potential for a seemingly *ante litteram* Derridean free play (2005) within a context with neither centre not finite meaning. It is a way to give back a centre to the world and allow for another type of free play within a closed system of likenesses and antitheses – that of 'poetic' language (Jakobson 1960; Lotman 1977).

3. *Peripeteia* and (Mis)Recognition

As pointed out by Simon Haines, if gnosis in Greek referred to "certain knowledge, based on observation, and opposed to mere *doxa* or belief", and "the negative terms were *agnoia* and *agnostos*,[13] 'not-knowing'", *an-agnorisis* means "'not-not-knowing': the recovery of what was formerly known but has been concealed or forgotten", and more precisely "the cleaning away of the film of overlaid ignorance" (2015: 218). It implies a movement towards knowledge, whether in terms of the recovery of something known, unknown and then known again, or of something known that was previously unknown (as in Alessandro Piccolomini's *Annotazioni alla Poetica di Aristotele*, 1575; see Cave 1988: 61). Terence Cave has remarked that this shift away from ignorance is also a "shift *into* the implausible", since what is revealed is "beyond common experience" and shares in the marvellous: "Anagnorisis conjoins the recovery of knowledge with a disquieting sense, when the trap is sprung, that the commonly accepted co-ordinates of knowledge have gone away" (2). But there is also a case which implies recovery as recreation, involving confrontation with the other in a process of mutual catharsis and regeneration. Haines' words are worth mentioning in full:

> In Book 24 of the *Iliad* Achilles finally comes to understand himself as an affliction, as the doomed, untimely one; and that is when he is able to behave, at last, properly, giving Hector's body back and treating Priam with respect. This recognition is reciprocal. Old king and young warrior show themselves completely to each other, each recognizing through the other the reality of

[13] Sometimes with active meaning, albeit more frequently with a passive one ('unknown').

> his own condition. In Achilles, Priam looks at the death of all his sons, of his dearest son, and sees himself as desolation; in Priam, Achilles looks at the desolation of his own father and the death of his friend and sees himself as a short-lived calamity visited on the world. He is able to act in this changed recognition of himself, and revise his understanding of the ethic of honour and *aristeia*: to see that he had ceased to act by it. . . . We recognize ourselves and each other in what we do, not just what we feel. . . . two known but blurred perspectives on the self, one's own and another's, one's own actions and even passions as recognized by another, resolve into or come into focus as a single clear image. . . 'know thyself' turns out to be an injunction we can only fulfil for each other. The self doesn't just come into focus: it knows itself differently. (2015: 219)

Considered from these three different yet contiguous perspectives, the recognition scenes in *The Winter's Tale* should not only be increased by one, but should also be regarded as punctuating a tragi-comic progress from *hamartia* to reconciliation. The first one appears to be based upon a process of mutual self-disclosure leading to mis-recognition/mis-recreation; the latter two are scenes of recovery involving a passage from ignorance to knowledge, not originating in self-scrutiny, and yet affecting self-knowledge. I will call the first case of *anagnorisis* a negative discovery, as it consists in a mutual psychological process inverting the traditional 'positive recreation' as presented in the *Iliad* above. This episode produces the initial *peripeteia*, superimposing recognition and the change or reversal of fortune. Aristotle praised this particular case when he observed that "[t]he finest recognition is that which occurs simultaneously with reversal, as with the one in the *Oedipus*" (Aristotle1987; 1452a32-33: καλλίστη δὲ ἀναγνώρισις, ὅταν ἅμα περιπετείᾳ γένηται, οἷον ἔχει ἡ ἐν τῷ Οἰδίποδι). But, of course, Shakespeare was not bothering with Aristotelian precepts, which he could not know, at least directly, and moved along those lines because the overall design of the play required it.

The question of knowing and/or unknowing is from the start a primary concern of the play. It affects the characters' relations, bringing man and wife to 'produce a change' in each other, while changing individually because of the knowledge (or misknowledge) they acquire. It is in fact a contrastive and 'parodic' *anagnorisis*, adjusted to the mechanics of tragedy. Typically, Shakespeare transforms the traditional external cause of *peripeteia* into Leontes' 'discovery' of his own distrust of Hermione and Polixenes. This coincides, as Coghill suggested, with the coming to light of Leontes' own latent suspicion of wife and friend: "as in the source-story which Shakespeare was following, [he] has long since been jealous and is angling now (as he admits later) with his sardonic amphibologies to catch Polixenes in the trap of the invitation to prolong his stay, before he can escape to Bohemia and be

safe" (1958: 33). But even if we dismiss this latency, as Matchett does, and believe that we are instead shown "Leontes becoming jealous . . . making his audience suspicious first so that Leontes' jealousy comes less as a surprise than as a confirmation" (1969: 95), what we are presented with here is a 'recognition'. The audience is brought to discover the process itself of how jealousy is destructively born and manifests itself.[14] The play's progress towards the revelation of Hermione's adultery is more a journey towards Leontes' uncritical acquisition of 'self-knowledge' than a discovery of Hermione's assumed infidelity. It coincides with the audience's recognition of Leontes' own 'recovery' of an idea of himself as a cuckold – resident in his mind as a latent feeling or as a potential fear – and of his consequent 'self-recreation' into the 'negative Other', who disowns wife, son, and daughter.

This occupies the first part of the play and unfolds through several steps:[15] Polixenes' mention of his nine-month stay in Sicily (1.2.1-8); Leontes' invitation to remain longer and Polixenes' refusal; Leontes' annoyance with Hermione's silence and his request of intervention (l. 27); her consequent talking Polixenes into accepting her invitation (ll. 45-60); Polixenes' memories of his past friendship with Leontes, before they were corrupted by women, and Hermione's irritated reaction (ll. 79-81). The picture is drawn: two couples face each other, Leontes-Polixenes *vs* Leontes-Hermione, and both risk being disrupted by devilish female seduction. The tragic plot is ready to be set off:

LEONTES Is he *won* yet?
HERMIONE He will stay, my lord.
LEONTES At my request he would not.
Hermione, my dearest, thou never spok'st
To better purpose.
HERMIONE Never?
LEONTES Never but once.
(1.2.85-8; emphasis mine)

The follow-up is on record. What has not been remarked, however, is how at this point the offstage impacts upon the unfolding of the action we

[14] Matchett offered an excellent reading of how Shakespeare in this play involves the audience "in the ongoing dramatic process" (1969: 103). With regard to this scene, he further remarked that "[t]he dramatic surprise should come later, in fact, when we discover that he and we were wrong. As is so often the situation, we are misled in our understanding of the play because we know the story too well and therefore know all along that Hermione is innocent. Whether anyone is guilty should, at the beginning of the play, be an open question" (95).

[15] In addition to Coghill (1958) and Matchett (1969), for a fuller discussion, which space does not allow here, see also Serpieri (2001), Bigliazzi (2005: 117-22) and (2009).

behold. Nor has it been noticed how the narrative that gradually develops out of the visible action and starts moving away from the stage, begins to pry into what stands behind it, and to give shape to possible, alternative stories that might take place offstage while the action occurs in full view. To what extent and how may the gestures we see accompany the exchanges support Leontes' own narrative? Curren-Aquino refers that "Helena Faucit (in Macready's 1837 production) initiated the practice of giving one hand to Leontes on 'husband' (106) and the other to Polixenes on 'friend' (107)" (Shakespeare 2007: 92). But the action might be even more complicated. I will only recall that, right before Leontes' expression of his "*tremor cordis*" (1.2.109-10), Capell felt the need to add a stage direction, absent in the In folio, normally retained by modern editors, suggesting a gesture of affectionate friendliness between Hermione and Polixenes:

Hermione 'Tis grace indeed.
Why, lo you now, I have spoke to th'purpose twice.
The one for ever earned a royal husband,
Th'other, for some while a friend.
[*She gives her hand to Polixenes*]
(1.2.104-7)

That gesture proposed by Capell, as Curren-Aquino observes, might have been justified by "reference to 'paddling palms and 'pinching finger' (ll. 114-15)" in Leontes' following aside, so that "the impact of Hermione's joining hands with Polixenes is presumably increased for Leontes by the recollection just before (ll. 102-4) of his and Hermione's joining hands in betrothal" (Shakespeare 2007: 92). This is when the action on stage and its narratization, coupled with what Leontes thinks must have occurred offstage, start to diverge significantly. In the absence of other reliable reports or contrary ocular proofs, he narratizes for himself, and shortly afterwards for Camillo too, a story of adultery occurred in the concealed offstage space of his own mind: in an invisible locus behind the scenes that suddenly takes on the hallucinatory, troubling reality of infidelity. Leontes' vividly detailed narrative brings us into the recesses of his secretly voyeuristic fears:

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? Is this nothing?
Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing,
The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings
If this be nothing.
(1.2.281-93)

The reference to nothing in this passage has sometimes been interpreted as the expression of the philosophical paradox of an ontologically predicable 'not-nothing',[16] or, alternatively, of a pre-cartesian scepticism rooted in a painful awareness of radical unknowing. This is Stanley Cavell's position, who reads Leontes' words literally and finds in them a nihilistic desire leading to destroy all and all meaning. Leontes' incapacity to recognize himself in his son becomes the reason for the unanswerable questions contained in these lines, as well as of his consequent irreducible nihilistic drive. Cavell traces their origin in Leontes' unresolved Oedipal tension with Mamillius, a hypothesis that has been debated on both dramaturgical[17] and rhetorical grounds.[18] For sure, Leontes no longer believes in other people, but only in his own mind's eye. This triggers a play with signifiers according to which "joining hands" becomes 'like' "paddling palms" and "pinching finger" (ll. 114-15), leading Leontes on the dangerous path of a painful imaginary story no longer adherent to facts. Once the principle of likeness has gone astray

[16] Caygill (2000) interestingly assimilates various ambiguous occurrences of "nothing" in Shakespeare's canon to a monstrous codification of a 'not-nothing' from which there derives "neither unequivocal being nor unequivocal not-being but a series of equivocal events linked by dissension, betrayal, civil war and madness – not being but not nothing" (105). For a longer discussion of this topic see Bigliazzi (2005).

[17] Cavell argues that an unsolved Oedipal conflict becomes apparent when, in 2.1, Leontes sees Mamillius together with his mother in an assumedly complicit attitude the moment the boy starts telling her the "sad tale's best for winter" (25). Contrary to this position, Vickers (1993: 310) holds that "reference to the text at this point (2.1.32ff) will show that Leontes has come in a great anger to his wife after receiving the news that Polixenes and Camillo have left in haste. He cannot know that Mamillius is telling his mother a tale, appears not even to have noticed it, since he enters impatiently questioning one of his attendants about Polixenes' hasty departure – 'Was he met here? His train? Camillo with him?' (2.1.33). Leontes in fact takes no notice of the child for 24 lines, until he orders him to be carried off lest Hermione corrupt him further. Leontes' jealousy may be manic, but he is in no sense a rival to his son for Hermione's love, so the 'conflict' cannot be Oedipal".

[18] This is again Vickers' position: "Leontes is using the word 'nothing' not in this [metaphysical] sense but as an ellipsis for 'evidence of adultery'. Nor does he 'wish' there to be nothing – in his delusion, indeed, he wishes there to be something, since it would justify his suspicions. Leontes' folly is to take a series of rhetorical questions as if they were evidence admissible in court; Cavell's folly is to treat them as metaphysics" (ibid.). See also Bigliazzi (2005: 120-2).

in his 'tale', all other 'assumed likenesses' are lost: the women say that Mamillius is 'like' him, yet he remains dubitative, and when Paulina insists on saying that the newborn baby is 'like' him too, his disavowal is absolute:

Paulina It is yours;
And might we lay th'old proverb to your charge,
So *like* you, 'tis the worse. Behold my lords,
Although the *print* be little, the whole matter
And *copy* of the father – eye, nose, lip.
The trick of's frown, his forehead, nay, the valley,
The pretty dimples of his chin and check, his smiles,
The very mould and frame of hand, nail, finger.
And thou good goddess Nature, which hast made it
So *like* to him that got it, if thou hast
The ordering of the mind too, 'mongst all colours,
No yellow in't, lest the suspect, as he does,
Her children not her husband's.
(2.3.95-107; emphasis mine)

Ocular proof is useless: those facts are not incontrovertible but only perceived similarities; the onstage action is no evidence of truth either, as it is ambiguous and lays itself open to 'fanciful' manipulation. The offstage as the locus of possibility has invaded the onstage through Leontes' infected imaginary and his story-telling, making that alternative story 'real' and triggering the tragic *peripeteia*. Leontes may be wrong, and we understand that he is. But what we see is uncertain and ambiguous, and what we hear from Leontes gives it *a* meaning, albeit the wrong one. The *anagnorisis* of Leontes' jealousy will have lasting consequences upon Hermione. The onstage will retain the effects of the "epistemological disturbances that the offstage activates" (Walker: xv).

The sceptical question 'may Hermione be, or ever be, an adulteress' constitutes an inevitable latency in a universe where signs are discovered to be unmotivated and likenesses arbitrary. Leontes disowns his friend's and wife's signs of loyalty and love; he enters the game of free play with signifiers, rooted in his diseased and decentred imaginary, and probes the abyss of the possible, losing all – himself included. In order for this shaken universe to recompose itself, not one but two more recognition scenes are required, echoing the diptych-like structure of the play (Frye 1968); the offstage as the origin of alternative dangerous narratives needs neutralization.

4. Offstage/Onstage Recognitions

Not surprisingly within a play pivoting on patterns of iteration, the final *climax* leads up to two recognition scenes, significantly in the alternative modes of narration and enactment. Surprisingly, instead, it is the onstage one that is the less probable and credible of the two. Let us start from the first recognition, which Johnson was to criticize harshly, as we have seen. Frye related its convention back to Roman drama, noticing that "Shakespeare here combined two traditions which descended from Menander, pastoral romance and New Comedy, and has consequently come very close to Menandrine formulas as we have them in such a play as *Epitrepontes*" (1968: 187). However, he also noticed that Shakespeare must have been "less interested in [the first one] than in the statue scene, which is all his own" (ibid.), because he decided to have it reported. Like Johnson, Frye missed the point. Why then conceal it from view?

It presents itself in the form of a narrative distributed among three Gentlemen, whose language, as Hunt recalls, has often been considered "precious, artificial", "Arcadian and Euphuistic" (1995/96: 86). At this point of the action the motif of the "tale" suggests incredibility and 'trumpery', as in the case of Autolycus' ballads (Frye 1968: 192). But apart from such motivic overtones, the narratives which are functionally related to this one are two reports of events actually occurred: that of the two messengers sent to Delphos in 3.1, and the clown's tale of the mariners' shipwreck and Antigonus' death (3.3.80ff.). As Garber has pointed out with regard to 3.1, "[t]he unimaginable splendor of the temple and its occupants and the transcendent religious experience undergone by the messengers are here magnified, rather than diminished, by their indirect presentation" (1984: 47). This suggests that the storytelling of an experience removed from sight to the offstage, as the visit to Delphos, is not a synonym of unimportant or impossible things to show; rather, it corresponds to a precise dramatic choice impacting upon both the course of the action and the way this is meant to be perceived by the playgoers.

The courtiers' report falls within this category of the "unscene", that is, a removed-from-sight action whose ineffability or ambiguity is strategically enhanced through a narrative (Garber 1984). Mowat noticed that its relevance lies in its narrative quality: the courtiers "are not characterized, there is no conflict among them, no sense of action moving forward" (2011: 86). I will add that its function is also dramatic and conceptual as it links back to another narrative from which it comparatively derives its meaning: to Leontes' story of Hermione's adultery. It is not literally an unscene, but it may be considered as one in so far as it draws on Leontes' disturbed inwardness – itself an 'offstage' – before materializing itself onstage, finally becoming the pivot of the tragic *peripeteia.* It is with this distant narrative especially that the Gentlemen's final account is contrastively and conceptually connected.

From the point of view of stagecraft, two recognition scenes in series are not a good choice. This explains why variation was needed here, and adds to the fact that the fabulous transformation of the statue into a woman required preparation. As Garber justly observed:

> The moment of "wonder" experienced by the hushed spectators in the chapel has been prepared for not only by Paulina's skill in staging, but also by the previous scene, in which the playwright uses all the resources at his command to describe an ineffable moment: the inexpressibility topos, the deflected scene or unscene, and the actual silence of characters gripped by string and conflicting or transcendent emotions. (1984: 48)

But there is something more to it, and, as suggested above, it is connected with Leontes' imaginary tale.

The report of the first Gentleman first establishes his testimonial reliability based on ocular and auricular proof ("*I was by* at the opening of the fardel, *heard* the old shepherd deliver the manner how he found it; whereupon, after a little *amazedness*, we were all commanded out of the chamber. Only this, methought *I heard* the shepherd say he found the child", 5.1.3-7; emphasis mine). Then he talks about the reaction of the King and Camillo as he "perceived" their "admiration" and their silent, visual language, speaking of their wonder in dumbness. He continues noticing that the "wisest beholder" was unable to "say if th'importance were joy or sorrow – but in the extremity of the one it must needs be" (5.1.16-19). Insistence on verbs of perception ("seemed", 11; "appeared", 16) reinforces the sense of epistemological instability in the face of the Gentleman's own claimed reliability, which testifies to both the reality of the event and the difficulty in discerning the actual reaction of the bystanders. What emerges is once again the ambiguity of signs, obscure even to the "wisest beholder". This remark enhances the sense of the ineffability of this experience and, at the same time, underscores the inevitable mutability of interpretation. Doubts are thus cast on the idea itself of recognition. But signs are not all the same. As we know from Aristotle (*Poetics* 1454b19-55a21), *anagnorisis* may be based on external signs or events or things that belong to or anyway concern the people involved in the recognition (as in the case of Iphigenia's letter in *Iphigenia in Tauris* or Orestes' cloth in *Coephori*), or on natural signs (such as Orestes' curl or his footprint in *Coephori*). Interpretation is also crucial and it should be based upon a deductive process (*syllogismos*).[19] The signs the first Gentleman alludes to with regard to the people's reaction are not of these kinds. They are symptoms of passion. Although they may vary, in Shake-

[19] Boitani (1991) expatiates on this topic by discussing, on the one hand, the treatment of the story of Electra and Orestes in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, and, on the other, Hamlet's interpretation of signs. On Aristotle's *anagnorisis* see MacFarlane (2000).

speare's time it was believed that their meaning could be discerned once the codified language of passions was known. Famously, Thomas Wright dedicated the whole fourth chapter of his *The Passions of the Minde in General* (1604) to their "discovery" from behaviour and "external actions", such as in "play", "feasting", "drinking", "gesture", "voice", "hands and bodies" etc. Wright's treatise contained in fact a detailed grammar of all signs of passion. Thus, the inability of the "wisest beholder" to discern the spectators' emotional response to the scene is both indication of the exceptionality of the event and an oblique distant comment on Leontes' own misinterpretation of Hermione's ambiguous signs in 1.2. Those were both verbal and gestural, and involved courteous discoursing with Polixenes as well as body language. Leontes' destructive 'narrative mania' sparked off by those signs which he interpreted as betraying passion was not the response of a "wise beholder"; but what the Gentleman's comment tacitly implies is that no-one can be a hundred percent sure, a remark that retrospectively affects our understanding of that early scene too.

The second Gentleman adds fresh news and shifts the focus onto the ineffability of his own narrative: bonfires have been lit and the oracle's prediction has been fulfilled; the King's daughter has been found and the wonder of it cannot be expressed even by ballad-makers. Words fail the real and even fantastical narratives come short of it. Then a third Gentleman arrives, Paulina's steward, and the second Gentleman asks him whether the King has really "found his heir", since "[t]his news which *is called true*, is so like *an old* tale that the *verity* of it is in strong suspicion" (27-29; my emphasis). There follows the report of the evidence of the tale's truth:

> Most true, if ever truth were pregnant by *circumstance*. That which you *hear* you'll *swear you see*, there is such *unity in the proofs*. The mantle of Queen Hermione's; her jewel about the neck of it; the letters of Antigonus found with it, which they know to be his character; (30-5; emphasis mine)

Not all proofs mentioned here are 'things belonging to the person involved', as the mantle, the jewel and the letter, and what follows opens to subjective interpretation based upon appearances, not deductive thinking, enhancing family resemblance and noble breeding, whatever the latter expression may mean:

> the majesty of the creature in resemblance of the mother; the affection of nobleness which nature shows above her breeding; and many other evidences proclaim her with all certainty to be the King's daughter. (35-39)

As we have seen in the early scenes, likeness is by itself no guarantee of identity recognition. Perdita has been disowned despite her assumed physical likeness to Leontes. But Leontes had a "weak-hinged fancy", it will be said. And yet, what value may 'likeness' have here? One needs more than

one reporter to confirm the verity of the story for it to be believed. Has the broken system of correspondences really been mended?

It is then the turn of the two Kings' reunion. The third Gentleman literally rehearses the scene for the second Gentleman, who had not seen it:

> Then have *you lost a sight which was to be seen, cannot be spoken of.* There might you have beheld one joy crown another so and in such manner that it seemed sorrow wept to take leave of them, for their joy waded in tears. There was casting up of eyes, holding up of hands, with countenance of such distraction that they were to be known by garment, not by favour. Our King, being ready to leap out of himself for joy of his found daughter, as if that joy were now become a loss cries, "O, thy mother, thy mother!"; then asks Bohemia forgiveness, then embraces his son-in-law; then again worries he his daughter with clipping her. Now he thanks the old shepherd, which stands by like a weather-beaten conduit of many king's reigns. *I never heard of such another encounter, which lames report to follow it, and undoes description to do it.* (ll. 42-57; emphasis mine)

This performance relies for vividness on shifting tenses and on the Gentleman's ventriloquist doing the King's own voice in a mixed narrative, as Plato would have it (Bigliazzi 2016: 11-13). Like the second Gentleman, the audience have not seen that encounter, but this voco-visual performance vicariously brings on stage fragments of the unseen scene, gestures, looks, and voices, dramatizing the action for us to behold it. Then details of Antigonus' death follow, a story that is once again "*Like an old tale still*, which will have matter to rehearse though credit be asleep and not an ear open – he was torn to pieces with a bear" (60-2; emphasis mine). It too concerns a recognition and involves the production of factual proofs: "a handkerchief and rings of his that Paulina know" (64-5). Sorrow and joy invade everybody, Paulina especially, who, "had one eye declined for the loss of her husband, another elevated that the oracle was fulfilled" (73-4). Finally, when Perdita is informed of the death of her mother, the spectacle of her grief is said to have been so painful that it made even those who were "as most marble there" change colour – a passing metaphorical mention that indirectly prepares the amazing scene of the metamorphosis of the statute (Garber 1984: 48).

The following exchanges shift the attention to Hermione's simulacrum and Giulio Romano's art in ways that suggest the re-establishment of the principle of likeness as guarantor of 'truth'. However, this is the truth of art, not of life: it concerns the hyperrealistic verity and the signifying processes of the copy, not of the original, and this deflects meaning from verity to verisimilitude as the deceiving power of a work of art (Romano is said to "beguile" even nature, "so perfectly he is her ape", ll. 97-8). Hermione is so near to Hermione, Paulina remarks, "that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope of answer" (99-100). Likeness has been restored as the ruling principle of identity, yet within the realm of art, not of nature.

5. The Evidence of Signs

The Gentlemen's report of the offstage recognition not only avoids the redundancy of two contiguous scenes onstage, preserving the amazing effect of the second one, but it also, and especially, lays the basis for a discussion of signs and their evidential nature that would have hardly been possible if carried out on stage. It suggests that some signs resist interpretation and that likeness is subjective. At the same time, this narrative re-establishes the link between words and things broken by Leontes' 'unhinged' narrative: their report is true to the events, showing that the offstage is not only the locus where 'untrue' or falsifiable things happen. It also hosts true events, amazing though they may be, requiring the narrative ingenuity and mutual confirmation of more than one witness (three in fact) to be believed. The context has been aptly fictionalized, and what follows in the 'statue scene' is the demonstration that in real life identity can hardly be proved by likeness only, which, after all, is a very subjective criterion. Only in an "old tale" may 'likeness' guarantee 'being', turning the simulacrum into the original.

All this occurs on stage as a mirror process of the first (negative) *anagnorisis*: the narrative othering Hermione into Hermione-the-adulteress is conclusively reversed into the visible transformation of Hermione-the-statue into Hermione-the-woman – from the original to the simulacrum and back. Yet we are warned that our senses will be "mocked" – precisely as Leontes' own mind and senses had been sixteen years earlier. The word "mock" had first been employed in 2.1.14 when the First Lady had 'mocked' Mamillius by saying that her eyebrows were blue. Then in the clown's tale in 3.3 nature's violent preying on the mariners and Antigonus had grotesquely mocked them ("but first, how the poor souls roared, and the sea *mocked* them; and how the poor gentleman roared, and the bear *mocked* him; both roaming louder than the sea or weather", 95-8; emphasis mine). The five more occurrences of this word are, not surprisingly, in 5.3, where the amazing recognition of the 'living statue' is conjoined with perceptive beguilement.[20]

What follows is well known, and hardly plausible. Existence is recovered through the impossible change of 'being like' into 'being': of the simulacrum into the original, and similarity into sameness. Signification is replaced by the evidence of tautology (the sign is the thing, the thing is the sign). "Were it but told you", Paulina says, it "should be hooted at / Like an old tale" (5.3.116-17): one more proof that oracular evidence in this play is no assurance

[20] Compare *King Lear*, 4.7.59-63 (Lear: "Pray, do not mock me: / I am a very foolish, fond old man, / Fourscore and upward, not an hour more nor less; / And to deal plainly, / I fear I am not in my perfect mind"), and *Pericles* 5.1.133-5, 152-3 (Pericles: "Oh, I am mocked, / And thou by some incensed god sent hither / To make the world to laugh at. . . . This is the rarest dream / That e'er dull sleep did mock sad fools withal").

of truth as what we see is in fact worth an "old tale"; it is indeed one. A seen scene is no more true than an unseen one – except that telling what occurs in the offstage appears to be less reliable because invisible, and therefore shaking our epistemological certainties, which does not mean less true.

As the *peripeteia* had been sparked off by the deformed view of Leontes' infected mind's eye, renarratizing the onstage action starting from his wife's and friend's "paddling palms and pinching fingers" (1.2.114), now, symmetrically, the Gentlemen's tale prepares the re-composition of the broken system of relations soon to occur in the following onstage scene of the metamorphosed statue: all this takes place in ways that openly challenge criteria of reality.

This is a metatheatrical scene and, compared to the previous reported recognition scene, defines itself as belonging to the realm of fiction. An ontological gap divides it from Leontes's (negative) *anagnorisis*, where he was both spectator and author of an utterly plausible story. Therefore, this last recognition is incompatible with it and cannot restore full meaning nor make up for the past mistakes more than the discovery of Perdita. Although assumedly restored to life, Hermione does not re-establish order at the level of 'reality'. This remains tainted with the effects of tragedy. As often pointed out, she speaks little and never to Leontes. Alcestis, before her, as a possibly distant model,[21] does not speak at all, remaining a veiled silent figure to the end. Instead, Hermione does speak, but to the gods and Perdita, for whom only she says she "preserved" herself (5.3.127).[22]

The onstage/offstage dialectic is here finally dismissed; epistemological uncertainty and perspectival mobility forgotten. And yet, the glaring evi-

[21] See Gollancz' s "Preface" in Shakespeare (1909: viii-ix), and, more recently, Ketterer (1990) and Dewar-Watson (2009).

[22] My reading here diverges from Matchett's, for whom "[s]ilence . . . becomes the final language, the language of love and forgiveness which all can understand, the wordless communion in which the exchange is most complete" (1969: 14). In this light, Hermione's response to Leontes' accusation with "You speak a language that I understand not" (2.1.78) would suggest submissive acceptance. Holderness offers a different interpretation, pointing out that "[w]hen Hermione does speak, she speaks only to her daughter; her silence towards Leontes is remarkable, and she defines the purpose of her preservation as a desire to see 'the issue' of her daughter's loss and recovery. The text continually turns back on its own romance materials, criticizing their implausible *dénouments* as the creaking machinery of 'an old tale' (V.iii.117); and Leontes' arbitrary assigning of Paulina to Camillo in marriage as machinery of an almost grotesque implausibility" (1990: 234-5). See also Traub (1992: 45): "[Hermione's] silence toward Leontes bespeaks a submissiveness, or perhaps an emotional distancing, most unlike her previous animation. Rather than a victory for the wronged heroine, the final scene works as a wish-fulfilment for Leontes, who not only regains his virtuous wife and loses his burden of guilt, but also reassumes his kingly command of all social relations, represented by his deft matchmaking and integration of the two remaining isolated figures, Paulina and Camillo".

dence of 'the impossible' occurring before our eyes does not belong to us; it cannot erase, nor does it pretend to, the potential for alternative narratives in real life and for the latency of doubt.

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