

# ***The Winter's Tale and Antitheatricalism: Shakespeare's Rehabilitation of the Public Scene***

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Many things, having full reference  
To one consent, may work contrariously.

—Shakespeare, *Henry 5<sup>th</sup>*

In the evaluation of images, as one renaissance led to another, down to modern times, one value became increasingly autonomous and moved to the foreground: the value of art.

—Alain Besançon

The final scene of *The Winter's Tale*, the miraculous animation of Hermione's statue, is strikingly anomalous in terms of Shakespeare's oeuvre. The naïve reverence of the onstage audience for the statue would be problematic at best in his other plays, even in the other Romances. But in *The Winter's Tale*, their uncritical admiration is rewarded with the happy return of wife and mother. Further complicating our understanding of this scene is its obvious analogies with Catholic worship practices. As Michael O'Connell observes, Shakespeare "involves even the audience in a moment that would seem to confirm the worst fears of the Puritan antitheatricalists" (*IE* 13). Indeed, critics have often interpreted Hermione's resurrection in sacramental terms, and the scene seems to evoke a religious context, as when Paulina calls on the onstage spectators to "awake your faith" (5.3.95). The problem is reconciling Shakespeare's apparent sacramentalism here with his skeptical iconoclasm in plays like *King Lear*, where Lear's blind faith in Goneril and Regan's ritual mimesis of filial love is shattered by events. Hermione's "dead likeness" delivers new life rather than concealing corruption (5.3.15).

For O'Connell, the statue scene exemplifies an incarnational aesthetic and celebrates "the visual and physical elements of theater" (IE 13). While maintaining that the final scene is "in some sense true," O'Connell notes that its claim to truth is tempered by its self-consciousness, providing a necessary antidote to Leontes' arrogant confidence in the opening scenes, where his imaginary construction of Hermione's infidelity proves catastrophic (IE 139). Recognizing the formal originality of the Romances, O'Connell characterizes them as experimental, but he finally agrees with a traditional line of interpretation on *The Winter's Tale* that Shakespeare was exploring "how tragedy may be reversed" through an art informed by "the growth bestowed by Time and 'great creating nature'" (O'Connell, "Experiment" 224, 226). O'Connell writes, "confidence in what is seen . . . characterizes Shakespeare's dramaturgy in the latter part of his career" (IE 136), but he doesn't attempt to explain how or why this shift occurs. O'Connell's reading thus ignores the central problem of the statue scene, its contradictory relationship to all that has come before, without which any interpretation is bound to be, at best, limited and incomplete.

Huston Diehl argues that the final scene illustrates a Protestant aesthetics of wonder that simultaneously asks spectators to question any uncritical tendency toward idolatry in their response to the statue ("Strike" 19-34). Hermione's resurrection, for Diehl, arouses a Pauline wonder in nature, as exemplified by the actor's living body. Diehl ignores, however, that the New Testament Apostle consistently preached a theology of grace, the very antithesis of natural theology. The character of Paulina is more rightly associated with a Pauline experience of resurrection; but in contrast to Paul's personal religious vision on the road to Damascus, Hermione's resurrection is an aesthetic, communal experience. The most important context for Hermione's statue is not Paul's supposed natural theology, but rather Perdita's debate with Polixenes on art-versus-nature, whereby Shakespeare presents Hermione as a token of an art that is purified from the pretensions of both religion and nature (as the Renaissance understood that term): a humbled and chastened art that anticipates Prospero's abdication of art as magic in *The Tempest*.

The statue scene appears to be a reversal of Shakespeare's critique of idolatry in *The Winter's Tale*'s opening scenes and throughout his career (more on this below), and in one sense, it is. But in a more profound sense, this scene is actually a logical development of his iconoclasm, a dialectical development by which his iconoclasm finally turns on itself. By undermining idolatry at its root, Shakespeare attempts to make the stage "safe" for art again, that is, safe from attack by its detractors by demystifying its magical associations. But while Shakespeare successfully pulls off the theatrical coup of the final scene, he does not provide a viable model for future artists. Following Shakespeare the evolution of western art continues to be driven

by iconoclasm, culminating in the formal negations of Samuel Beckett, anti-representational painting, and so on. To some extent, the novel is the heir apparent to Shakespeare's Romances, with its formal diversity and inclusivity, but the novel is a bourgeois genre, and the reading experience is typically private.

*The Winter's Tale* should be understood, first of all, in terms of Shakespeare's turn to romance in the latter part of his career, and especially his critique of tragedy, a movement that *The Winter's Tale* recapitulates in its abrupt turn from tragedy to comedy.<sup>(1)</sup> The opening Acts are the final stage in Shakespeare's iconoclasm, in which he demonstrates that idolatry is essentially a function of the spectator's imagination, not the material figures presented on the public scene. In what follows, I present a generative history of Shakespeare's late artistic development as it relates to *The Winter's Tale*. In contrast to the more familiar dialectical history that it sometimes resembles, generative history is founded on a working definition of the human in terms of our origin, an "originary hypothesis."<sup>(1a)</sup>

This working definition should not be confused with any traditional humanism. The existence of the human species is nothing if not contingent. Our basic problem as a species is community, and the animal forms of social order that served our proto-human ancestors are inadequate to contain the threat of self-destruction. Humans are the species for whom the main threat to our survival is other humans, not the environment. Language (and by extension, culture) exists to ameliorate this basic ethical problem. It does this by enabling new forms of more or less ritualized social organization and interaction. Human history is a "generative" development of our origin. A full scale justification of my methodology is beyond the scope of this essay, but any theory is ultimately justified by the results it produces, and I hope the insights generated here will serve in that regard.

My thesis is that *The Winter's Tale* in general and the concluding statue scene in particular constitute Shakespeare's attempt to rehabilitate the public scene of representation. In the following section, I demonstrate how Shakespearean Romance responds to the problem of form on the public scene of representation, not only in the theater but also in political and religious ceremony. The resentment toward the public scene and its associated hierarchy finds expression in antitheatricalism as well as in political and religious radicalism. Following this discussion of the problem of the public scene, I turn to a detailed reading of the play, beginning what I call the "idolatry of tragedy" in the opening acts: Shakespeare's critique of tragedy and how it allows for the novel developments of romance in the later acts. The art-versus-nature debate in Bohemia is analyzed by explicit recourse to the "originary hypothesis," showing how this debate articulates the theory behind Shakespearean Romance. I conclude with my reading of the statue scene, showing how Hermione's statue as presented by Paulina restores the

public scene and our faith in its figures through a demonstration of its ethical functionality, preserving a community threatened by dissolution. From the “originary hypothesis,” I derive the crucial concept of the public scene (as distinguished from the private scene, i.e., the memory or imagination), as well as an understanding of the ethical functionality of representation.

## Genre and the Problem of the Public Scene

On their first appearance, Shakespeare’s Romances were a radical departure from the usual offerings of the King’s Men. *Pericles*, which first appeared on stage around 1606-1608, hearkened back to an old-fashioned type of drama which the London companies had largely abandoned; its ironic naiveté must have been deliberate and remarkable.<sup>(2)</sup> The late plays continue in the tragicomic vein that Shakespeare mined in *All’s Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, but they also include typical romance elements such as “sudden tempests or disasters, separations between parents and children or between friends or lovers, wanderings and shipwrecks, wives and children lost and found, strange accidents and coincidences, encounters with the marvelous, and eventual reconciliations and reunions” (Foakes 249). Shakespeare probably collaborated with George Wilkins on *Pericles*,<sup>(3)</sup> but there is no question that Shakespeare is the sole author of *The Winter’s Tale*, which is generally recognized as his most fully realized romance (setting aside *The Tempest* for its unique qualities). The seemingly naïve and outmoded romances are, paradoxically, Shakespeare’s most modern plays, because in these plays he confronts the quintessential issue of modern art: the problem of form. It is not accidental that the romances are the final plays of his career.

Romance, of course, has a long history, as do tragicomedy and pastoral; but Shakespeare is more concerned to bring out the internal contradictions of the generic combination than to create a unified aesthetic whole. When Shakespeare started writing tragicomic romance, he was probably responding to contemporary events, including a new fashion for tragicomedy, the popularity of masques, and the opening of the Blackfriars theater to the King’s Men, with its more sophisticated audience and different styles of drama. While the historical events that sparked his turn to romance may have been accidental, Shakespeare’s response was not. John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont were responding to the same influences as Shakespeare, yet their romantic tragicomedy *Philaster*, written around 1609, is completely different from any of Shakespeare’s late plays.<sup>(4)</sup> Fletcher wrote his tragicomedies under the influence of the Italian poet and diplomat Giambattista Guarini, the main theoretician of early seventeenth-century tragicomedy.<sup>(5)</sup> Guarini argued that the genre, as he conceived it, blends tragedy and comedy harmoniously and with decorum, in order “to prevent the listeners from falling into the excessive melancholy of tragedy or the excessive lewdness of comedy,” which

might be upsetting for a modern audience (Guarini, qtd. in Wiggins, 114). Guarinian tragicomedy is a courtly genre, in terms of both style and content. Both Shakespeare's and Fletcher's tragicomedies are quite self-conscious; but in Fletcher this self-consciousness is almost precious. In *Philaster*, for example, the scene in which the prince Philaster is surprisingly wounded by a country bumpkin is to be admired mainly for its contrived nature rather than its pathos.[\(6\)](#) Fletcher's tragicomedies are stylistically ornate; Shakespeare's late style is elaborate but also remarkably fluent, flexible, and directly powerful.[\(7\)](#) Arguing against a rigid neoclassicalism, Guarini writes, "since times change, so customs change with them . . . And truly, if public performances are meant for the listeners, then poems must also keep changing in accordance with changing times and customs" (158). Shakespeare obviously agreed with this point, but his understanding of what modern audiences required was radically different.

Shakespeare seems to delight in the sometimes absurd disjunctions and improbabilities allowed by the inclusive nature of romance. The sudden turn from tragedy to comedy with the appearance of a bear on stage in *The Winter's Tale* is perhaps the most famous example. The use of allegorical or historical narrators is another "distinctly old-fashioned" (Bevington 1438) device that would serve to defamiliarize events on stage for a Jacobean audience. Shakespearean Romance is not a coherent genre in the same sense as ancient tragedy or comedy. The plays are frankly experimental in nature,[\(8\)](#) and this constitutes their modernity, in the sense of belonging to an age in which artists are driven to novelty and experimentation above all. Even the development of novelistic realism can and should be understood as another possible answer to the problem of form.[\(9\)](#)

Form is a problem especially for the public scene of representation on which Renaissance art is usually found. English Renaissance drama is among the most public and scenic of all art forms, since the audience and the actors are physically present to each other in a space that was accessible to Londoners of all classes.[\(10\)](#) No written page intervenes between artist and audience at the theater, and the Globe's spectators were apparently quite lively in voicing their approval or disapproval. Shakespeare, as a member of the King's Men and an actor in many of the plays they put on, would be present for many, perhaps most, of the contemporary performances of his plays. This intimate contact with his audience allowed him extraordinary insight into the problem of the public scene. Several of his sonnets suggest that he was sensitive to attacks on the stage. Shakespeare, for example, laments "Fortune,"

That did not better for my life provide  
Than public means which public manners breed.  
Thence it comes that my nature is subdued

To what it works in, like the dyer's hand. (111.3-6) The speaker identifies the specifically *public* and therefore common nature of his craft as the problem. The public scene here is a marketplace, ruled by the lowest common denominator, thus corrupting the artist, whose "nature is subdued / To what it works in, like the dyer's hand." It is altogether likely that Shakespeare occasionally lamented the sometimes crass nature of the audience that he served, as with Hamlet's rant against the "groundlings" and the actors who pander to them. Plays like *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus* portray the "herd" of people as easily swayed, unstable, and vicious. As Robert Ormsby shows, Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* shares many of the same concerns as the antitheatricalists, who were anxious about the "dangerously affective power that theatre exercises over audiences and the anarchic power exercised by audiences" (43). For an author writing primarily for the stage, the problem of the public scene appears to be the audience, for whom the leading voices are the loudest if not the most refined. A serious dramatic artist like Shakespeare will almost inevitably have an ironic and skeptical stance towards the public scene. [\(11\)](#)

Many of Shakespeare's contemporaries also found the public scene problematic, for a variety of reasons. Stephen Gosson, one of the most vocal and influential opponents of the London theaters, comments on the references to pagan gods in plays:

Setting out the stage plays of the Gentiles, so we worship that we stoop to the names of heathen idols; so we trust that we give ourselves to the patronage of Mars, of Venus, of Jupiter, or Juno, and such like; so we pray that we call for their succor upon the stage; so we give thanks for the benefits we receive, that we make them the fountains of our blessings, wherein if we think as we speak, we commit idolatry, because we bestow upon the idols of the Gentiles which is proper to God. (98) The staging of plays is part of Satan's plot to corrupt England: "So subtle is the devil that, under color of recreation, in London, and of exercise of learning, in the universities, by seeing of plays, he maketh us to join with the Gentiles in their corruption" (Gosson 99). While Gosson was an extremist, his views reflect contemporary anxieties about idolatry which surrounded the public scene, whether theatrical, political, or ecclesiastical.

Commenting on the Martin Marprelate tracts of 1588-9, Russell Fraser writes,

To distinguish among "these stage-players, these prelates, these popes, these devils" seems to Martin Marprelate a splitting of hairs. Identity of interest yokes them together. The bishops, in their usurpation of temporal authority, are abetted—very logically, Martin thinks—by "rimers and stage players (that is, plaine rogues)." (166) The connection between "stage-players" and "prelates" might seem obscure to modern readers, who are likely to assume that the English Church and

secular theater were natural enemies. Fraser explains, in reference to the Puritan divine Henry Burton,

Art, as Burton sees it, is an appanage of Church and State. In a pair of sermons against the bishops and their supposed allegiance to Rome, he proceeds sequentially to an indictment of the stage. That is as he identifies each with a common master. “Court Gnathoes” or parasites have usurped the direction of the Church. And they are not “content, to abuse our pious Princes eares in the Pulpit, but also on the Stage.” Episcopacy, in the lexicon of the anti-episcopalian, “is a scurilous Enterlude.” The definition is striking, as it suggests the oneness of the prelate and player. And now the codicil, in which the wisdom of King James is approved: as wicked rulers and their satellites seek to “devoure Christs Vineyard, while they Suppresse the Preaching of the Word,” so “the Ninivites shall rise in judgment against this generation.” What the dissenter is proclaiming, and menacing in the guise of a figure, is a triple association of the artist, the orthodox churchman, and the Crown. (164-5) The “triple association” is united by its staged and public nature, inviting the suspicions of those who felt excluded. Parliament shared the same associations; in 1645 after the closing of the theaters, the royalist John Cleveland complained bitterly, “since the Stages were voted downe, the only Playhouse is at *Westminster*” (qtd. by Bawcutt, 191).

In the minds of many reformers, the stage was closely connected to England’s monarchy and court, and it is worthwhile to ask why this connection seemed so obvious. The King and his court sponsored and regulated the stage, of course, but it’s far from clear that the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries was understood as royalist propaganda. Rather, the Established Church, the royal court, and the London stages were perceived as centers of idolatry and hostile to the cause of true religion. Idolatry, we must remember, is a function not only of content, but equally location. Holy figures can be profaned by their display upon the public scene, just as, according to Puritans, the English Church made a mockery of New Testament practice, and players committed blasphemy by naming God on the public stage.

The Protestant critique of Catholic rituals as empty theater is well known.<sup>(12)</sup> Martin Luther writes, “No one should be deceived by the glamour of the ceremonies and entangled in the multitude of pompous forms” (235). Exorcism, another Catholic ritual, was sometimes practiced as public spectacle and criticized as such by reformers such as Erasmus in one of his *Colloquies* and Samuel Harsnett in his *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, a source text for Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Stephen Greenblatt writes, “Exorcisms, Harsnett argues, are stage plays, most often tragi-comedies, that cunningly conceal their theatrical inauthenticity” (106). The fictional frame of the play action did not shield it from accusations of impiety

but just the opposite. In 1606, the English Parliament passed “An Act to Restrain Abuses of Players” that penalized players who would “jestingly or profanely speak or use the holy name of God” (qtd. in Wells 238). The public scene was especially subject to the fears aroused by contagious imitation. Antitheatricalists did not acknowledge any significant barrier between stage action and spectator.

The public scene, we should note, is in many ways precisely the opposite of what we call, after Habermas, the public sphere, distinguished, ideally, by conversation, equal participation. The Renaissance public scene, in contrast, lacks this reciprocity between those persons or figures that monopolize the center and their spectators. Significantly, the antitheatricalists did not object to the reading of plays. It was only their public performance they protested.[\(13\)](#) The public scene sparked resentment because it was viewed as justifying the hierarchy and authority of otherwise often disparate institutions, from political to religious to theatrical, while subverting the authority of competing institutions. Renaissance art in general is distinguished by sensitivity to this resentment, which it addressed in various self-reflective forms such as the play-within-the-play or artist figures. The well-known meta-representational elements of Renaissance art functioned as self-critique as well as self-defense, anticipating and pre-empting the objections of the audience.

The London public was deeply ambivalent about the public scene and the figures that inhabit it. On the one hand, they were obviously fascinated by all types of theatrical spectacles, thus making them very profitable. But those who felt excluded by such spectacles also found ready ears for their resentments. Several of the antitheatricalists were former playwrights or actors who may well have felt their talents were not sufficiently recognized. The public scene serves to naturalize the authority of its mimetic figures (“personations”) and scripted actions. Such figures appear virtually magical by their central status. They inspire uncritical adulation, just as the performances of famous athletes, movie stars, and musicians do today. For many, however, the figures that inhabit the public stage appeared arbitrary and exclusive, precisely because of the widespread adoration.

In response to the general ambivalence about the public scene, Shakespeare’s mature drama insistently questions and often undermines its own structure.[\(14\)](#) In the opening scene of *King Lear*, for example, the simple “nothing” of one young woman precipitates the destruction of the entire ceremonial apparatus (equally theatrical and political), revealing its fragility. Lear’s great mad scenes subject the whole social order to question in an unprecedented way. The almost obsessive self-referentiality of Shakespeare’s mature work expresses Renaissance culture’s drive to understand itself, a drive motivated by resentment at the arbitrary exclusions of a hierarchical society; or, put positively, the desire for freedom from formal restrictions: artistic, social, and political.

The dramatic genre most associated with hierarchy is tragedy. In general, tragedy is a probing, skeptical genre, but ultimately it functions to reaffirm the structure of society, at least in its classical form (more on this below). Shakespeare's late tragedies, on the other hand, question their generic conventions and foreshadow the end of high tragedy with the English Revolution.[\(15\)](#) Antony and Cleopatra, for example, in their play, are not just heroic but celebrities; they are conscious of their dramatic status as a role to be played, casting their tragedy into a peculiarly modern light. In Shakespeare's last tragedy, *Timon of Athens*, the protagonist virtually chooses his tragic "fate" and seems almost comic as a result.[\(16\)](#) Shakespeare consistently questions the hierarchy and authority that underpin tragedy. The Shakespearean play-within-a-play stages and reflects upon the classical scene of representation.[\(17\)](#) We find in his late plays artist figures such as Prospero who serve to examine critically the role of the artist in Renaissance society. The self-consciousness of Renaissance art reflects the need of early modern society to understand the nascent transition to a market economy with little use for sacred distinctions.

While comedy does not have the same association with hierarchy as tragedy, comedy's solutions to social problems are similarly formulaic and often include the quasi-ritual humiliation of characters such as Malvolio. Shylock is also a comic villain, but the play gives serious attention to his perspective, so that his sacrificial exclusion throws a shadow on the "happy ending." The self-consciousness of Shakespearean comedy extends to the role of the author as the agent of the conventional ending. In his tragicomedy *Measure for Measure*, Duke Vincentio, in the latter half of the play, becomes an artist figure who highlights the author's role in bringing about a happy ending.[\(18\)](#) Conventional forms begin to seem rigid and oppressive (perhaps more so for visionary artists like Shakespeare than for his audience) in a culture where traditional sacred distinctions are beginning the process of dissolution we call modernity.

As with his previous works, Shakespeare's Romances are metatheatrical and generically innovative. Shakespeare's turn to romance has to be understood first of all as a result of his exploration of the limits of traditional genres. The formal incoherency of the Romances reflects the recognition that there is no real solution to this problem. Ultimately any form is more or less exclusive and in need of justification for modern egalitarian sympathies. Modern art, to the degree of its ambition, tries to undo its own formal pretensions. Shakespeare's Romances are like a jigsaw puzzle in which the pieces don't fit together—not because they are a failed experiment, but because Shakespeare here confronts the limits of form, the epidemic inadequacy of form to meaning in modernity.

The underlying issue is that in the emerging market economy of the seventeenth

century each individual begins to be recognized as an independent center of value. This recognition makes the kind of art that Shakespeare practices increasingly problematic, an art that depends upon the public scene of representation and a shared (relatively speaking) sense of values.[\(19\)](#) One solution to this problem is to give the devil his due, by which I mean to work within a popular aesthetic, although the popular aesthetic of the Romances is framed within a self-conscious reflection upon the function of art. *The Winter's Tale* in particular affirms the power of art to create significant difference, even in a world where traditional hierarchical distinctions are in crisis. Shakespeare's skeptical undoing of generic conventions has the ironic result of a new faith in art, because he recognizes that in the final analysis, form is a problem of the human periphery of the scene of representation, not the center, as it usually appears. In other words, our resentment makes form a problem, not form as such. This insight allows for the utopian possibility of rehabilitating the public scene of representation through the reformation of the spectators, as we find in the final scene of *The Winter's Tale*.

## **The Idolatry of Tragedy**

The first three acts of *The Winter's Tale* are often read as straightforward tragedy, and with some justification. Leontes attempts to kill his childhood friend Polixenes, publicly accuses his wife Hermione of adultery, defies the Delphic oracle, and sentences his daughter to death by abandonment. His actions result in the death of his son Mamillus, as well as the apparent deaths and actual exile of his wife and daughter; and he is indirectly responsible for the deaths of Antigonus and an entire ship's crew. Leontes, however, is not really comparable with the protagonists of Shakespeare's great tragedies, and a tragic conclusion to the play would raise just as many problems as the happy ending. The first three acts of the play actually critique the logic of tragedy.

The onset of Leontes' jealousy in the first act is a famous crux because it appears so suddenly and without any obvious motivation. James Siemon observes that Leontes in these scenes reshapes the world according to "his own fearful needs" (285). Julia Lupton argues that Leontes' jealousy is generated out of the Old Testament taboos against adultery and idolatry, and she finds the psychological mechanisms of "identification, projection, and reversal" at play (186). René Girard also focuses on Leontes' psychology, arguing that Leontes' jealousy originates in the need to have his choice of love objects mimetically confirmed by a mediator (309). Phebe Jensen, on the other hand, sees "Leontes's madness as a form of fanatical iconoclasm partly directed against idolatrous 'coactive' arts and exposed as fear of difference, both hermeneutical and sexual" (295). Jensen, like Lupton, appeals to the Old Testament conjunction of adultery and idolatry whereby, in her reading, the unfounded fear of adultery can be understood as misdirected iconoclasm. In

contrast, I will argue that Leontes exemplifies idolatry through his naïve faith in the material signs that he thinks demonstrate Hermione's infidelity.

There is a crucial semiotic dimension to Leontes' jealousy that previous critics have not recognized. At the onset of his jealousy, he lists what he considers to be the signifiers of their adultery: "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" (1.2.115-118). The nature of these signs leads Leontes to the conviction that Hermione's adultery is a public scandal:

. . . 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? If thou wilt confess,  
Or else be impudently negative  
To have nor eyes nor ears nor thought, then say

My wife's a hobbyhorse. (1.2.266-275) Leontes insists upon the evidence of the senses.[\(20\)](#) Camillo must have "seen" or at least "heard," since "a vision so apparent" inevitably gives birth to "thought," "cogitation" and "rumor." The obvious signs of her infidelity cannot be denied without an impudent refusal of the "eyes . . . ears," and "thought." Leontes' reaction here illustrates the outrage provoked by public figures: how and why the material forms that inhabit the public scene can spark conflict. Leontes's concern is as much for the "scandal" (1.2.329) as for Hermione's supposed adultery. Unlike Macbeth's "fatal vision," which appears and then disappears, "proceeding from a heat-oppressed brain" (*Macbeth* 2.1.37, 40), Leontes can confidently list the apparently irrefutable signs of her infidelity. When Camillo protests the imputation, Leontes asks him, with the seeming logic of madness or dreams:

. . . 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. (1.2.283-295) Leontes lists the iconic and indexical signifiers (to use C. S. Pierce's terminology) of their affection. Signs such as "Kissing with inside lip" are direct expressions of affection, requiring little or no interpretation, and therefore seemingly incontestable. Even animals express affection in like gestures. Such signs are not apparently symbolic or metaphorical, but direct and unmediated, mimetic tokens which are not merely signs, but in effect the thing itself.[\(21\)](#) Leontes collapses the sign into the thing. The list proceeds from what he has perhaps observed to what he has only imagined, demonstrating the logic of mimesis, which feeds upon itself in an inflationary spiral. Talking quietly becomes "whispering" which is transformed into "leaning cheek to cheek," "meeting noses," and finally "Kissing with inside lip." The signs magically multiply in his perception. Leontes seems unable to distinguish the real from the products of his mimetic imagination. The astonished reaction of everyone at Leontes' court establishes clearly that there is no real basis for Leontes' accusations. But it is precisely because Leontes is so focused on the seeming evidence of the senses that he remains blind to the truth. Leontes is, in effect, a refutation of naïve empiricism, demonstrating that the evidence of the senses needs to be interpreted, and that perception is not free from the action of the imagination.

There is an important connection between the material signs of Hermione's infidelity and the logic of magic. Magic and ritual (like art) depend essentially on iconic and indexical signs, which work through the principles of analogy, physical resemblance, or proximity. Such analogies, the famous "chain of being" and the correspondence of microcosm to macrocosm, hold the Renaissance cosmos together.[\(22\)](#) As Leontes comments, more truly than he knows, "If I mistake / In those foundations which I build upon, / The center is not big enough to bear / A schoolboy's top" (2.1.101-104). Although Leontes has simply imagined the problem about which he becomes hysterical, there is some truth to what he says. If the principle of analogy does not hold, if these signs do not truly signify, then "the world and all that's in't is nothing." Leontes' fears reflect the dissolution of the Renaissance cosmos in the face of emergent market forces during the seventeenth century. His fetishistic emphasis on mimetic signs is a defensive reaction to their historical loss of power in Shakespeare's England, the decline of magic and traditional rituals.

Leontes exemplifies the naïve faith in iconic and indexical signs that Protestant reformers feared in Catholic ritual culture. He mistakes the sign for the thing itself. John Jewel observes in *A Treatise of the Sacraments*, quoting Augustine, "It is a dangerous matter, and a servitude of the soul, to take the sign instead of the thing that is signified" (29), speaking to the status of the bread and wine in the Lord's

Supper. The symbolic Word of the Bible, according to reformers, had been disastrously replaced by mimetic tokens and actions. As William Tyndale put it, in his controversy with Sir Thomas More, once the “priests preached Christ no longer, then the common people began to wax mad and out of their minds upon the ceremonies” (76). Such people mistake the bread and the wine of the sacrament for the literal body and blood of Christ, forgetting that the purpose of the ceremony is rather to remember and meditate upon God’s sacrifice, not to re-enact it: “as though a man were so mad to forget that the bush at the tavern-door did signify wine to be sold within, but would that the bush itself would quench his thirst” (Tyndale 76). Leontes acts exactly as do uneducated people at a Catholic Mass according to radical Protestants, waxing “mad” and out of his mind in his idolatrous reverence for material figures. He is the author and actor of a tragedy of his own devising.

But rather than Leontes being sacrificed on the altar of iconoclasm, it is his unreflective faith in signs that is shattered, while he remains to suffer the consequences of his actions. As reformers like Jewel and Tyndale recognized, idolatry is rooted in a superstitious reverence for mimetic signs as magically powerful. But if so, then destroying the material figures (the typical practice of iconoclasm) doesn’t really solve the problem, which is internal not public. The portrayal of Leontes represents the last stage in Shakespeare’s iconoclasm; rather than a spectacular destruction of the golden calf and its worshipers, we find an analysis of the psychology of idolatry that more effectively crushes it by demystifying it, revealing it as pathetic rather than evil. The icon or idol is truly empty because it is entirely personal to the idolater and not worthy of public reverence. Paradoxically, as we will see, this insight restores our faith in signs, because it becomes clear that material signs, the evidence of the senses, are not the problem, but rather the imagination, the real root of idolatry. As Calvin writes, “the human mind is, so to speak, a perpetual forge of idols” (I.xi.8). Ironically, it is precisely the sensual evidence on the public stage, what the audience witnesses in the theater, that refutes Leontes’ charges and convinces us of his diseased imagination.

After Leontes hears that Camillo and Polixenes are fled, he again twists the evidence to suit his fantasy, giving a speech that demonstrates Shakespeare’s awareness of the problems raised by the material sign:

. . . There may be in the cup  
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,  
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge  
Is not infected; but if one present  
Th’abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known

How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,  
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider. (2.1.39-45)The connection of the spider with the effect of its venom, the conjunction of the material signifier with its “meaning,” has been significantly disjoined here. The folk superstition suggests that the meaning of the signifier depends more upon its reception than its material force. To see is to feel and suffer. Leontes is again an idolater, bewitched by magical appearances.

As the antitheatricalists noticed, theaters share the public scene, the same theatrical structure, with Catholic or Anglican ritual. The public scene of ritual, as such, embodies the hierarchical structure of a traditional society. Tragedy is unlike most rituals in that it allows for the questioning of the justice of that structure. But like ritual, tragedy ultimately affirms hierarchy through the fated death of the protagonist. Ancient tragedy teaches that everyone, even (and especially) the most powerful member of society, is subject to the public scene—thus assuaging popular resentment at those in power and reconciling the spectator to his or her peripheral position, since the price of centrality is exile or death.

Renaissance tragedy is a hybrid form that questions the public scene more seriously by framing it (e.g., the play-within-a-play) and thus demonstrating its arbitrary structure. *Hamlet*, for example, is skeptical of the ceremonial scene framing Claudius as he announces his wedding; and *Hamlet*’s protestation of sincerity (“I know not ‘seems,’ madam” [1.2.76]) is a pointed rejoinder to the hypocrisy that rules the court. Yet *Hamlet*, despite its skepticism, bears testimony to the continued power of the scene. *Hamlet* is compelled to put on an “antic disposition,” a false appearance, just as Claudius has done. The seemingly providential intervention of the pirates on his journey to England brings him back to the tragic scene, which finally destroys him along with the wicked. *Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, like Leontes, are all-too-credulous toward the theatrical figures of the scene: the mimesis of love by Goneril and Regan, the evidence of infidelity staged by Iago, and the prophecies of the witches. The tragic form in these cases, however, is ultimately justified by the real existence of evil in the world. We pity and fear the fate of Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists, but their deaths are the necessary purging of a larger evil that disturbs the cosmic order.

The opening acts of *The Winter’s Tale* are in effect a restaging of Renaissance tragedy. First of all, there are no villains to blame for the onset of Leontes’ jealousy, as in *Othello*. There’s no sense of a cosmic battle between good and evil, as in *King Lear*, *Othello*, or *Macbeth*, with the witches. Leontes’ predicament is in effect a domestic tragedy, almost what we could call today a soap opera. Because there is no physical evidence to justify his insane jealousy, Leontes demonstrates that the problem is not form as such, but rather the imagination: more specifically, the

(perceived) mimetic rivalry on the periphery, and not the central figure. The cause is within Leontes, who takes to an extreme mimetic tendencies that we all share. Leontes' apocalyptic ravings are ridiculous, and therefore he becomes subject to the carping of Paulina. By virtue of his power, Leontes does cause a crisis in the opening acts, but it is not a cosmic disorder. The "contagion" remains limited to his imagination, and he does not succeed in persuading anyone else. He never achieves tragic stature like Lear or Othello. *The Winter's Tale* suggests that reforming public figures doesn't help, because the Leontes of the world will create scandal anyway.

The tragic solution to the resentments created by the public scene is the sacrificial death or exile of the protagonist, which resolves the crisis and restores order to the community. This solution, however, is motivated by the same mimetic tendencies that caused the crisis in the first place. Nevertheless, the tragic solution is effective. But the Christian anti-tragedy, the Gospel story, illustrates that the choice of victim is ultimately arbitrary because we are all equally guilty. The New Testament also exemplifies another possible solution: the education, discipline, and conversion of the protagonist, who then provides a practical model for identity. To some extent, *The Winter's Tale* follows the conversion pattern, but it also complicates it.

When Mamillus is reported dead at Hermione's trial, Leontes suddenly recognizes his crime. His repentance is just as abrupt as the onset of his jealousy. The rest of the play hinges on the inability of his penance to change the consequences of his actions. In his earlier tragicomedy *Measure for Measure*, with Angelo and Isabella, Shakespeare explores the drama of conversion, the capacity of the human heart for change. But *The Winter's Tale* suggests that conversion is not enough. Leontes' conversion is sincere and lasting, but still all too easy. Avoiding tragedy in *Measure for Measure* involved the decidedly unrealistic interventions of Duke Vincentio; but in real life, we make mistakes and suffer the consequences. This is the reality that Shakespeare confronts here. Redemption or transcendence requires more than just a simple change of heart. The subject of *The Winter's Tale* is not finally Leontes but the scene itself, the scene of art including the spectators. Like *Measure for Measure*, *The Winter's Tale* employs an improbably happy ending but with considerably more success. How Shakespeare is able to pull off the happy ending in this play, rehabilitating the public scene, is the burden of the rest of this essay.

## **Bohemia and the Turn to Comedy**

Late in the third act, after Hermione and Mamillus are reported dead, and Leontes condemned by Paulina to endless penance, the scene changes to Bohemia, which is given a seacoast for the play. In the midst of a terrible storm, Antigonus abandons the infant Perdita in the coastal wilderness and, according to Shakespeare's most

famous stage direction, exits “pursued by a bear.” The mood changes to pastoral comedy when the Shepherd enters, finds the baby, and the Clown soon follows with a report of Antigonus’ tragicomic death, being eaten alive by the bear while protesting his aristocratic status. The fourth act then begins with a speech by “Time, the Chorus,” announcing the passage of sixteen years, followed by the events surrounding the famous sheepshearing festival. While the first three acts, as I have argued, point up the limitations of tragedy, there is no apparent logic to the move to pastoral comedy.<sup>(23)</sup> The entrance of a bear on stage is deliberately crude, evoking the bear baiting that was popular in London at this time; and the whole transition is abrupt and fanciful. The appearance of Time as a chorus heightens the unreality rather than softens it. In the tragicomedies of Fletcher and Beaumont, combining tragedy with comedy creates an ironic distancing that functions as a sophisticated yet ultimately superficial form of aesthetic ornament. Shakespeare, on the other hand, shocks the audience with radical disjunctions and strange novelties, dramatically revealing the arbitrary nature of aesthetic conventions.

The turn to pastoral comedy in the third act is quite openly a move to popular art, a rejection of the elitism of tragedy. In Bohemia, we enter a world governed primarily by desire rather than resentment. At the same time, there is a metadramatic dimension, as with the debate on nature versus art, that saves the latter half of the play from being a simple concession to popular taste. With Autolycus, Shakespeare creates a figure of the popular artist that pokes gentle fun at both himself and the more credulous members of his audience. Pastoral is a self-consciously artificial mode that often addresses the role of art in society, and Bohemia is no exception in this regard. Popular theater, in the hands of Shakespeare, allows for the exploration of serious anthropological issues.

The sheepshearing festival in Bohemia exemplifies popular art through the various dances and songs, the costumes, ribbons, and the ballads performed by Autolycus; overall, this scene brilliantly evokes and celebrates a once-vital strain of English popular culture. The problem here is that Bohemia is governed by the same forces of the imagination that proved so destructive in Sicilia. The first three acts revealed that the problem of the public scene is not the material figures that provoke scandal but rather the apocalyptic imagination of isolated members of the periphery, such as Leontes. To some extent, this revelation helps to rehabilitate the public scene, and the sheepshearing festival continues this rehabilitation by showing the positive, harmless products of the popular imagination. But even the imaginative productions of Bohemia are not without danger, and Autolycus (as thief) remains as a reminder of the susceptibility of the imagination to deceit.

## Art vs. Art

The debate on nature-versus-art between Perdita and Polixenes, although brief, articulates the theory behind Shakespeare's rehabilitation of the public scene. As Perdita is handing out flowers to the guests of the feast, she says to Polixenes that when autumn arrives,

... the fairest flow'rs o'th' season  
Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors,  
Which some call nature's bastards. Of that kind  
Our rustic garden's barren, and I care not  
To get slips of them. (4.4.81-85)

When Polixenes asks "wherefore," she responds,

... For I have heard it said  
There is an art which in their piedness shares  
With great creating nature. (4.4.86-88)

The artifice of crossbreeding produces "streaked gillyvors" and multi-colored carnations, which usurp the power of "great creating nature." Such flowers are "nature's bastards," illegitimate offspring that should be rejected in favor of the beauty of natural flowers. Human art is inferior to that of "great creating nature."

Polixenes takes exception to her position:

... Say there be [such an art];  
Yet nature is made better by no mean  
But nature makes that mean. So, over that art  
Which you say adds to nature is an art  
That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry  
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,  
And make conceive a bark of baser kind  
By bud of nobler race. This is an art  
Which does mend nature—change it, rather—but

The art itself is nature. (4.4.88-97)

Polixenes rejects the absolute distinction between art and nature. What is art, he argues, but another form of nature? Nature is ultimately the mother of art, of everything on earth that fits its purposes. Art is an instrument of nature in the service of mending or changing itself. Polixenes' argument here recalls Sidney's in *The Defense of Poesy*; in response to the critique of art as a fallen or inferior nature, Sidney argues that art improves upon nature, producing a golden world from nature's brazen one (216).

Perdita's response to Polixenes is a little ambiguous. At first she says simply, "So it is" (4.4.97), seeming to agree with Polixenes. But then, when Polixenes draws the

logical conclusion, “Then make your garden rich in gillyvors, / And do not call them bastards,” she says:

. . . I’ll not put

The dibble in earth to set one slip of them,  
No more than, were I painted, I would wish  
This youth should say ‘twere well, and only therefore

Desire to breed by me. (4.4.99-103) Rather than arguing with Polixenes, she simply refuses, giving an analogy in support. She compares the art that “mends” nature to the art of cosmetics that makes a young woman more attractive than her natural beauty warrants. She disdains that a youth should “Desire to breed by me” on such superficial grounds. She wants to be desired for her natural beauty, not a false appearance. So even though Perdita seems to accept Polixenes’ argument at first, she goes on to reject it, implying that it is sophistical. Art is art, and nature is nature, no matter what Polixenes says. Polixenes may call the art of crossbreeding another form of nature, and Perdita does not care to debate the logic, but it still must be rejected as deceptive for all that.

For the Renaissance, of course, both “nature” and “art” were value terms, and the debate was a traditional courtly and Pastoral *topos*. There was no question of rejecting art altogether, as some Puritans might claim to do. Perdita is not rejecting earthly beauty, in sum, but rather arguing for a particular form of beauty. The issue was one of decorum, the proper form of art. Perdita herself is a dramatic figure of natural beauty staged in the theater, personated by a boy actor, and created by Shakespeare. So while Polixenes may argue that both terms of the debate are “nature,” from our perspective, it is precisely the opposite. “Nature,” in context, refers to a traditional art that humbly imitates nature. In modern terms, the nature itself is art.

This debate offers us an excellent opportunity for the exercise of *originary analysis*, in which a significant distinction is traced back to a hypothetical “*originary scene*” upon which language and culture originated.[\(24\)](#) The advantages of such an analysis are that it allows us to sort out the more significant elements of the debate and to identify what is really at stake in ethical terms. To some extent, Perdita follows such a procedure by giving an example from life (i.e., cosmetics and courtship) that suggests what is ethically at stake; and Shakespeare places this seemingly academic debate in a dramatic context where it has serious ethical implications. The “*originary scene*,” however, is not just one example of culture, but the founding origin of culture, so it has a privileged epistemological status. While the details of the hypothesis are certainly up for debate, as is my application of it, the essential argument of Generative Anthropology is that we need a working hypothesis of the origin of culture in order to ground cultural analysis and save it

from subjectivism.

According to this hypothesis, the originary scene is constituted by a center, occupied by a desirable object, and the periphery, occupied by humans. The converging desires of the periphery make the central object a potential source of violent conflict; this crisis is resolved when the humans produce a sign which designates the central object as sacred and therefore taboo, too powerful and dangerous to be appropriated by any individual. The exchange of signs on the periphery defers the violence threatening the group and makes possible a new social order based on ritual rather than a simple dominance hierarchy such as we find among chimpanzees and other social animals.

In the debate between Perdita and Polixenes, the opposition between nature and art corresponds to the originary opposition between a central object and the signifiers exchanged on the scenic periphery that refer ostensively to (in a sense, imitate) the central object and designate it as sacred. Beauty, in the nature vs. art debate, corresponds to the sacrality or (more generally) significance of the central object. The question, then, is the status of the central object's sacred beauty. Is it "beautiful" because it is designated as such (by our beautiful signifiers, perhaps), or is its beauty independent of human representation, the activity of the periphery? Perdita's common-sense position is that the central object's beauty is an inherent quality of the object itself. Beauty emerges "naturally" from beautiful objects. The best art would be one that humbly imitates this natural beauty. The signifier that designates the object as beautiful is at best redundant, a superficial ornament that adds nothing to its beauty, and in fact degrades it, by distorting it, advertising it, and subjecting it to mimetic inflation. As Shakespeare writes in sonnet twenty-one, "I will not praise that purpose not to sell." Put more positively, Perdita calls for faith in the inherent beauty of the beautiful object, its formal adequacy to its meaning. The example that Perdita gives to support her position is significant: she does not want to be desired sexually on the basis of her cosmetic appearance. Not only would such a painted appearance be an insult to her natural beauty, it might also multiply her suitors and create mimetic competition leading to conflict among them. In addition, such inflated desires might cause one of her suitors to attempt to appropriate her against her will: thus, in originary terms, violating the sacred aura that surrounds the central object. In other words, cosmetics are the first step on a slippery slope that leads to conflict on the one hand or prostitution on the other.

Perdita fears the power of mimesis, and thus she insists on decorum, the separation of the central object from the periphery, the sacred from the profane, the aristocrat from the commoner. Signifiers that imitate a beautiful object should not be inflated and ornate, but modest and verisimilar. The artist's role in this scenario would be minimal at best: calling our attention to or imitating the beauty of nature, the

cosmos, the eternal order. Perdita's position implies that the cosmic order is prior to the originary event, which simply discovers or recognizes it. Any attempt to modify that order would be a dangerous usurping of nature's power.

Polixenes' position is more modern and democratic. He recognizes that the beauty of the central object is enhanced by the signs that imitate it, and he sees this as positive or at least permissible. To extrapolate from his position, the "beauty" of the central object is not something independent of our judgment, but rather it becomes beautiful, or at least more beautiful, through the creative activity of the periphery. Polixenes rejects the absolute distinction between center and periphery. The human is part of and harmonious with nature (as the divine). From an ethical perspective, Polixenes' thesis risks dissolving the boundaries that distinguish the beautiful object and preventing it from becoming an object of contention. History teaches us that only when society learns to view each individual as an independent center of sacrality will it become possible to weaken the taboos surrounding public, sacred figures.

The debate between Perdita and Polixenes is complicated by the dramatic context. Certain aspects of the context support Perdita's position. For example, Perdita is born an aristocrat yet has been raised as a shepherdess. Despite her lack of status and training, however, her inherent nobility, grace, and beauty shine through in her every action. Her value is recognized by Florizel, the prince of Bohemia, who plans to marry her. She doesn't need any supplemental signs to be recognized by a prince. Her beauty emerges naturally without any aesthetic enhancements. Her planned marriage to Florizel seems to contradict her opposition to "crossbreeding," but since she is actually born an aristocrat it only confirms her thesis that natural value will always be recognized without the need for "art."

The earlier scene of Leontes' jealous fit (1.2) also throws light on Perdita's position. In that scene, Leontes recognizes the value of both his wife and his best friend, but as Girard has pointed out, he seeks mimetic confirmation of their value, by means of his wife's persuasion of Polixenes to stay in Sicilia (Girard 309). What Leontes wants, in semiotic terms, is a supplemental sign that validates the desirable objects, his wife and friend. He gets the sign he wants, but then he multiplies its significance in his imagination, creating a situation that leads to conflict and death. The supplementary sign, or art if you will, leads to mimetic confusion and crisis, just as Perdita would anticipate. If Leontes had followed Perdita's advice about respecting, that is, having faith in the inherent value of his friend and wife, then the tragedy of the opening scenes would have been avoided.

We must also consider that while Polixenes advocates "crossbreeding" in theory, he tyrannically opposes it in practice, in regard to his son. Polixenes' hypocrisy

compromises the integrity of his argument. The court, which insists on the superficial signs of nobility, fosters flattery and corruption, as we see in many of Shakespeare's plays and especially in his pastoral works.

But other aspects of the context complicate Perdita's position and support Polixenes. For example, Perdita at first finds her costume uncomfortable. She says that she, a "poor lowly maid," feels awkward "Most goddesslike pranked up," and that she would "swoon" to "To show myself a glass" (4.4.9-14). But later in the scene, she acknowledges the mimetic power of her artificial costume: "Methinks I play as I have seen them do / In Whitsun pastorals. Sure this robe of mine / Does change my disposition" (4.4.133-135). Ironically, while her role as "queen" of the festival is a fiction, in fact she is a princess and likely to be a queen herself someday. So the costume here supplements her natural beauty, but also transforms her in a positive way by revealing a truth about her nature that she doesn't fully recognize herself.[\(25\)](#)

In addition, the play itself, as a tragicomedy, is an example of generic crossbreeding. And *Pastoral*, while it traditionally celebrates nature, is a very self-consciously artificial genre. The orphaned aristocrat who exhibits her true breeding despite circumstances is an ancient dramatic convention. Furthermore, the sheepshearing festival is an artificial, utopian space that elides, at least temporarily, the potential for conflict.

So the basic problem of this debate is that while Perdita's affirmation of nature appears quite serious, it takes place within a very artificial context. This, in sum, is the main interpretative problem of *The Winter's Tale*. To take just one example, the tragic opening scenes raise serious ethical issues that are almost magically resolved in the providential ending. Shakespeare, far from minimizing the contradiction, seems to emphasize it at every turn, as in the abrupt shift from tragedy to comedy. So while Shakespeare seems to affirm decorum through Perdita, he habitually violates dramatic decorum in practice.

The contradiction is real, which is another way of saying that form continues to be problematic. But at the same time, Shakespeare's affirmation of natural form here (through Perdita and the context) is also a dialectical development of his undoing of formal conventions. Once the pretensions of the public scene have been deflated, then it becomes safe again for art, but an art that is recognized as art, not as nature. In the final analysis, the Romances are popular art and not the "high" art of his great tragedies. Perdita's affirmation of natural beauty is serious, but it needs to be bracketed by the understanding that the role of art is changing, that it no longer supports the cosmic order except within the context of "an old tale," "a winter's tale," as the play insistently reminds us. The cosmic order is consciously framed by

a nostalgia which is undoubtedly very powerful, but which is still nostalgia for all that.

Once skepticism has destroyed the idols, then a new opportunity for faith arises. After we've seen the Wizard of Oz operating the levers behind the curtain, he becomes our friend in a new way, although he is not so powerful as we once thought. Once we understand art as art, not as nature, then it becomes adequate to its more minimal and modest content. Understood in context, the "nature" that Perdita affirms is not finally a cosmic order, but simply the sensual, quite human forms of beauty, cleansed of their supernatural trappings. Perdita's rejection of art here is comparable to Prospero's rejection of magic, which is not a rejection of art as such, but a recognition that the Renaissance cosmos is coming to an end. Shakespeare had the generosity of spirit to see this as a good thing and not the end of the world. The future is in good hands with Perdita and Florizel, Miranda and Ferdinand. The final scene provides the dramatic confirmation of Perdita's theory.

### **The Statue Scene**

The concluding statue scene of *The Winter's Tale* is Shakespeare's ultimate attempt to rehabilitate the public scene of art, including the material figures that inhabit its center and the imagination of the audience that gives them life. The "resurrection" of Hermione effectively demonstrates the originary power of art, not only in terms of an aesthetics of wonder, but also, more practically, by uniting a community that is threatened by dissolution after Hermione's death.

Shakespeare prepares for the presentation of her statue carefully in the comments of the gentlemen of the court and in Paulina's introduction. These introductory comments emphasize two apparently contradictory aspects of the statue: its realism and its artifice, thus revisiting the nature-versus-art debate of the fourth act. The third Gentleman reports that the statue is:

a piece many years in doing and now newly performed by that rare Italian master, Julio Romano, who, had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape; he so near to Hermione hath done Hermione that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope of answer. (5.2.96-103) Paulina, as she gets ready to reveal the statue, says, "Prepare / To see the life as lively mocked as ever / Still sleep mocked death" (5.3.19-20). The power of the statue to "beguile Nature," to "mock" life, suggests the virtually supernatural realism of the statue; it appears unmediated like a medieval relic such as the Shroud of Turin. The artist has completely negated his desiring imagination in an openness to the beauty of the object, as Shakespeare was said to have done by Keats through "Negative Capability." The "realism" of the

statue signifies that it has escaped the process of desire that infects mere imitation; the statue is in effect a “natural,” unmediated signifier, hence sacred, wondrous, not unlike the iconic signs used in ritual and magic. The naturalism of the statue is confirmed by its undeniable evidence to the senses.

On the other hand, the play insistently calls attention to the statue as a work of art and hence *not* real. The statue is a product of the exquisite craftsmanship of “that rare Italian master, Julio Romano,” an important Renaissance artist, and inhabits a gallery stocked with “many singularities.” Paulina proclaims, “her dead likeness, I do believe / Excels whatever yet you looked upon / Or hand of man hath done” (5.3.16-17), emphasizing its sublimity yet recalling its human origin. When Leontes notes that “Hermione was not as much wrinkled, nothing / So aged as this seems,” Paulina responds, “So much the more our carver’s excellence, / Which lets go by some sixteen years and makes her as she lived now” (5.3.30-32)—again highlighting the realism, but also the carver’s skill. Despite all efforts at realism, art is ultimately representation, not nature. There are no artworks, as such, in nature.

Furthermore, the statue is “framed” on stage by its audience and Paulina, an artist-figure in this scene who presents the statue and directs its reception. As is typical of *The Winter’s Tale*, we find an insistence on “nature” framed within a highly conscious artifice. This, in sum, is the complexity and difficulty of Shakespeare’s project in the Romances.

On the one hand, to have too much confidence in the statue’s mimetic naturalism would be to repeat Leontes’ mistake of the first act, a form of idolatry that Shakespearean tragedy warns against, the unreflective credence in the undisciplined imagination as stimulated by mimetic figures. On the other hand, to insist on the frame, the artifice, would demystify the statue and reduce its power, which depends on “a willing suspension of disbelief.” We must remember, however, the deeper lesson of the opening acts, that the problem is not with the mimetic sign or central figure as such, but the act of reception—hence the crucial importance of Paulina, who guides the on-stage audience.

Shakespeare is certainly not looking for simple sensationalism here but rather a deeply reflective moment of wonder, recognition, and understanding. Paulina serves to maintain the precarious balance between mimesis and reflection by managing the reception of the statue. Indeed, the reaction of the audience is just as if not more important than the artwork itself. The on-stage audience is amazed primarily by the realism of the statue. Leontes’ first words are “Her natural posture!” (5.3.23). Because of its realism, they react to it almost as if in the presence of Hermione herself. Leontes is struck by remorse: “Does not the stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?” (5.3.37-38)—an emotion that Paulina has

encouraged since Hermione's death. Perdita kneels and asks for a blessing from the statue, reaching for the statue's hand to kiss—a move that Paulina is quick to prevent, saying that the paint is still wet. Similarly, Leontes wants to kiss the lips of the statue, and Paulina again must intervene. The audience is moved by its mimetic realism to ascribe virtually magical qualities to the statue, a persistent theme of this scene. Leontes addresses the statue as a living person: "There's magic in thy majesty, which has / My evils conjured to remembrance and / From thy admiring daughter took the spirits, / Standing like stone with thee" (5.3.39-42). Paulina insists on the "naturalism" of the statue, but she is also concerned to deny that any magic is involved. After preventing Leontes from kissing the statue she says:

. . . Either forbear,  
Quit presently the chapel, or resolve you  
For more amazement. If you can behold it,  
I'll make the statue move indeed, descend  
And take you by the hand. But then you'll think—  
Which I protest against—I am assisted

By wicked powers. (5.3.85-91) Paulina wants the statue to have a powerful effect, but within certain limits. The statue is insistently "art" and not "nature." Both Leontes and Perdita are so taken by the naturalism of the statue that they want to embrace it, to treat it as literally real, but Paulina consistently moves to prevent such an interpretation, which would be a form of idolatry similar to Leontes' in the opening act. We could also compare the initial response of Leontes and Perdita to a sentimental interpretation of the statue, as indeed this scene borders on the sentimental, simple wish fulfillment. Paulina's denial of "wicked powers" functions similarly to ward off a gothic interpretation; a murdered woman literally returning to life would be a moment of horror comparable to the appearance of Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth*. The sentimental or gothic interpretation of the statue confuses the originary, ethical function of art, which is not primarily to satisfy desire through wish fulfillment or revenge, but to defer desire, by substituting a sign for a significant object. Paulina needs to teach this simple yet profound lesson because the evolution of Renaissance culture has threatened to obscure it. Traditional forms of art have become problematic because of their connection to a social structure that is in the process of dissolution. In order to rehabilitate art, it becomes necessary to return to its original function, which, indeed, is always connected to social structure, but not necessarily to any particular one. In his move to popular culture in the Romances, Shakespeare particularly needs to avoid relapsing into simple wish fulfillment or sensationalism. But at the same time, he wants to preserve, to rehabilitate the public scene of art.

After allowing the "naturalism" of the statue to work its magic on the audience, Paulina announces that she can animate the statue; but she insists that not only the

consent but the active engagement of the audience is necessary:

... It is required

You do awake your faith. Then all stand still.

On; those that think it is unlawful business

I am about, let them depart.

[ . . . ] . . . Music, awake her; strike!

'Tis time. Descend. Be stone no more. Approach.

Strike all that look upon with marvel. (5.3.94-100) We may ask why "faith" is necessary if indeed no magic is involved. The rest of the scene clearly indicates that Hermione has been alive for the whole time, waiting sixteen years for the fulfillment of the oracle's prophecy in the return of her daughter (5.3.126-129). What is at stake in this scene is not simply a happy ending that answers to the desire of the audience, both on- and off-stage, but rather art itself in relationship to its audience. "Faith" requires our active, sympathetic engagement but also that we "stand still," that is, that we engage with the statue as art, and not as a real person, as magic.

One of the major difficulties of the statue scene is that the earlier scene in which she died very clearly and emphatically indicated that Hermione was dead—the only place in Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre where he deceives the audience on a major plot point. The dramatic lacuna is not accidental, nor is it simply a cheap trick to increase the wonder of the final scene. On one level, Hermione is indeed dead.

Shakespeare's insistence on the fact of her death suggests that this final scene is an allegory of art, which makes it no less powerful, but on a different level than wish fulfillment.[\(26\)](#) Critics generally agree that Hermione's resurrection is an emblem of the power of art, but, curiously, they tend to ignore or gloss over the problem created by her death (not to mention Hermione's appearance like a ghost to Antigonus in his fatal dream [3.3.15-45]). But the power of her resurrection is created by precisely this contradiction, which on the plot level is indeed "magical." Shakespeare provides us in this scene with an *originary* emblem of art. The artwork is not just the product of the artist's imagination in dialogue with history. Rather, the artwork originates in a specific event: the death of Hermione through the destruction of her body. This event, analogous to the *originary sparagmos*, threatens the community by isolating the individual members in guilty remembrance and creating the possibility of resentful recriminations among the survivors, as we find in the debate over Leontes' possible remarriage earlier in the fifth act.[\(27\)](#) At the same time, the memory of her death is vitally important, providing the basis for the continuity of culture. The resentment that was discharged yet also revived by the *sparagmos* is also important as a motor of ethical progress (as Paulina uses the memory of Hermione's death to keep Leontes in check). The guilt over the *sparagmos* is to some extent assuaged by the memory or "resurrection" of the central figure on the private scene of the imagination,

followed by the creation of figural representations. But Hermione's memory, as with her statue, ambivalently stimulates as well as ameliorates resentful guilt.

The problem of our origin, we recall, is community itself, and this problem requires an institutional or ritual solution. Paulina is not only an artist figure, but more precisely a high priestess; she first presides over the sacrifice of Hermione, majestically announcing to the community, "Look down / And see what death is doing" (3.2.148-9). She then maintains the communal memory of her death, and Leontes' responsibility, who becomes, in this respect, emblematic of each individual in the community, just as in the final scene, he is a representative yet typical ritual participant. Paulina then fashions a mimetic representation of Hermione, and provides music, another powerful mimetic form.[\(28\)](#) The requirement for music clarifies that Hermione's reanimation is a mimetic effect. When Paulina repeatedly remarks upon the naturalism of the statue, she is suggesting to the audience how they should respond, mimetically encouraging the response of wonder. Similarly, when she insists upon faith, she acknowledges that it is precisely the audience's imaginative involvement, their guilt and memory first of all, but also their consent and willing belief, that metaphorically animates the statue.[\(29\)](#) It is the audience's imagination, ultimately, that provides the power of art, not the art object by itself, nor the artist, as Prospero acknowledges in the famous Epilogue of *The Tempest*.

Critics have sometimes tried to connect Paulina to the New Testament Apostle,[\(30\)](#) but they miss the main connection, which is not Paul the preacher and theologian, but rather Paul on the road to Damascus, where the subconscious guilt over his persecution of Jesus and his followers results in his vision of Jesus in the sky, the power of which is symbolized by the blinding light and heavenly voice which knock him to the ground.[\(31\)](#) Just as Paul provided a model of conversion for generations of Christians, so Paulina facilitates such an experience of resurrection for her audience. By providing the statue as a substitute for the dead Hermione, Shakespeare dramatizes the originary priority of representation (as deferral) over sacrificial violence, the *sparagmos*. The reanimation of Hermione through art substitutes in a very real and literal sense for the death of Leontes and the revenge of the community. Shakespeare illustrates in the final scene our continuing need for a public "sacred." What's real in the final scene is not Hermione's literal resurrection, but rather what it *means*, the peaceful presence of the community to itself. Hermione is a symbol of this ultimate human reality.

By dramatizing the origin of figural art within religious ritual, Shakespeare illustrates art's ethical functionality, but he also clarifies the difference between art and religion. The final scene takes place within a context that is metatheatrical and overtly artificial. Paulina emphasizes the point for us: "That she is living / Were it but told you, should be hooted at / Like an old tale" (5.3.116-8). Similarly, Leontes

exclaims, “If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating” (5.3.110-111). Precisely. Shakespeare’s dramatic magic *is* an art as lawful as eating. The problem of high tragedy, we recall, is that it is too close to ritual and its associated hierarchy. Just as traditional rituals are on the decline, so too is tragedy, thanks in part to Shakespeare himself. But in *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare demystifies the public scene of art, cleanses it of its supernatural elements, while demonstrating its continued power and relevance, which is aesthetic and ethical, not supernatural or religious. Unfortunately, the public forms of art that Shakespeare practiced are coming to an end, but *The Winter’s Tale* demonstrates that art continues to have the power to create significant difference.

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## Notes

1. By considering Shakespearean Romance as a reversal of tragedy, my reading bears a superficial similarity to a traditional interpretation whereby Romance answers to certain limitations in tragedy by continuing his concern for forgiveness and reconciliation in a new genre which allows for alternative developments, often conceived in terms of a mytho-poetic cycle of "great creating nature" and reflecting Shakespeare's personal maturation. G.W. Knight's *The Crown of Life: Essays in the Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays* (London: Oxford UP, 1947) is the originator of this now traditional interpretation. Northrup Frye (A *Natural*

Perspective: *The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* [New York: Columbia UP, 1965]) and René Girard (A *Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare*. [New York: Oxford UP, 1991]), among others, also present versions of this argument. In contrast, I show how Shakespeare's turn to Romance is actually a logical development of his iconoclasm; I understand both the problem of tragedy and the answer of romance in new terms, specifically the public scene of representation. [\(back\)](#)

1a. I should clarify that this definition is not normative, nor simply descriptive, nor is it a purely structural definition; but rather an originary definition in the special sense given by Eric Gans. Professor Gans has formulated and developed the originary hypothesis in a series of books and articles over the last three decades. There is also a substantial body of work by his followers in *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* and elsewhere that explains, refines, and applies the hypothesis to a wide range of cultural phenomena. I refrain from repeating those arguments here except in briefest summary. For readers interested in learning more about Generative Anthropology and the originary hypothesis, a good starting point is *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* by Eric Gans (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1993). [\(back\)](#)

2. On *Pericles* as “deliberately naïve,” see Martin Wiggins, *Shakespeare and the Drama of his Time* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000): 114; Michael O’Connell, “Experiment,” 218; and G.K. Hunter, “Tragicomedy,” in *Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004), 355-379, esp. 358-361. [\(back\)](#)

3. Walter Cohen writes, “George Wilkins probably wrote most of the first nine scenes [of *Pericles*] and Shakespeare most of the remaining thirteen”; see “A Reconstructed Text of *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*,” in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 2709-2715, esp. 2710. On *Pericles*’ authorship, see also Suzanne Gossett, “Introduction,” in *Pericles: The Arden Shakespeare*, Third Series (London: Arden-Thomson, 2004), 1-163, esp. 54-62. [\(back\)](#)

4. Cf. Foakes, 252-3. [\(back\)](#)

5. On Guarini’s influence in England, see Wiggins, 102-122. [\(back\)](#)

6. I agree with Arthur C. Kirsch on this point. See his *Jacobeian Dramatic Perspectives* (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1972), 38-51. [\(back\)](#)

7. On Shakespeare’s late style, see Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 101-107. [\(back\)](#)

8. Cf. O'Connell, "Experiment," 215-229. [\(back\)](#)

9. See Peter Goldman, "Blowup, Film Theory, and the Logic of Realism," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 14.1 (Summer 2008): n. pag. [\(back\)](#)

10. While the Blackfriars theater was more class exclusive than the Globe (because of the higher price of admission), the Romances were not written exclusively for the Blackfriars theater. See Wiggins, 111-118. In any case, the Blackfriars theater is also a public space. [\(back\)](#)

11. Defensive prologues to plays of the period are not uncommon. Ben Jonson, to take a notable example, was altogether more cynical about the "Loathéd stage" than Shakespeare. See Jonas Barish, *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1981), 132-154. On Shakespeare's ambivalent attitude towards his London audience (as compared to Jonson's outright hostility), see Alvin B. Kernan, "Shakespeare's and Jonson's View of Public Theatre Audiences" in *Elizabethan Drama*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 2004), 191-204. [\(back\)](#)

12. See Barish, 159-165. [\(back\)](#)

13. See O'Connell, *Idolatrous Eye*, 34-5, for the antitheatrical writers and texts involved. O'Connell gives a different interpretation of the antitheatricalists' objection to public performance. [\(back\)](#)

14. Cf. Barish, 127ff. [\(back\)](#)

15. Cf. Richard Van Oort, "The Hero Who Wouldn't Be: Coriolanus and the Scene of Tragic Paradox," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 4:2 (1999): n. pag.. [\(back\)](#)

16. Cf. Northup Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Columbia UP, 1965), 98. [\(back\)](#)

17. On the neo-classical or Renaissance aesthetic in relation to the classical aesthetic, see Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 148-163. [\(back\)](#)

18. See, for example, Peter Goldman, "'The reforming of Reformation itself': Public versus Private Scenes of Representation in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*," *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry*, ed. Adam Katz (Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2007), 171-208. [\(back\)](#)

19. Cf. T. G. Bishop, who notes that the "reformist polemicists against theatre . . .

indicate the progressive factionalizing of English culture at large" (66). See *Shakespeare and the Theatre of Wonder* (Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1996). [\(back\)](#)

20. Cf. Graham Holderness, "The Winter's Tale: Country into Court," in *Shakespeare: Out of Court, Dramatizations of Court Society*, eds. Graham Holderness, Nick Potter, and John Turner (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 195-235, esp. 209; and Howard Felperin, "'Tongue-tied, Our Queen?': The Deconstruction of Presence in *The Winter's Tale*," in *Shakespeare: The Last Plays*, ed. Kiernan Ryan (London: Longman, 1999), 187-205, esp. 193. [\(back\)](#)

21. I use the term "mimetic" not just to refer to imitation or iconic resemblance, but also to the indexical relationship of sign to referent, a physical correlation operating mechanically and automatically. Terrence Deacon explains how indexical reference depends upon and incorporates iconic reference: *The Symbolic Species: The Co-Evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: Norton, 1997), 77-78. [\(back\)](#)

22. On the importance of analogy as the central principle of knowledge in Western culture up to the end of the sixteenth century, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House-Vintage, 1970), 17-45. [\(back\)](#)

23. C. B. Hardman notes that *The Winter's Tale* does not follow Guarini's advice that tragedy and comedy should be "carefully blended" in tragicomedy. See C. B. Hardman, "Theory, Form, and Meaning in Shakespeare's *The Winter Tale*." *The Review of English Studies* N.S. 36.142 (May 1985): 228-235, esp. 231. [\(back\)](#)

24. On the originary hypothesis and Generative Anthropology, see footnote 1a. [\(back\)](#)

25. Cf. Foakes, 265. [\(back\)](#)

26. Cf. Walter S. H. Lim, "Knowledge and Belief in *The Winter's Tale*," *SEL* 1500-1900 41.2 (2001): 317-334; and Joan Hartwig, *Shakespeare's Tragicomic Vision* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1972), 25. [\(back\)](#)

27. On the sparagmos, see Eric Gans, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1997), 131-151. [\(back\)](#)

28. Music is what I call an "internally-mimetic" form; it depends upon repetition and variation. It can also be seen as imitating or recreating the effects of the originary crisis and resolution. [\(back\)](#)

29. Cf. Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Romance*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972),

242; and Bishop, p. 167. [\(back\)](#)

30. See, notably, Huston Diehl, “‘Does not the stone rebuke me?’: The Pauline Rebuke and Paulina’s Lawful Magic in *The Winter’s Tale*,” *Shakespeare and the Cultures of Performance*, eds. Paul Yachin and Patricia Badir (Hampshire, UK: Ashgate, 2008), 69-82. [\(back\)](#)

31. On this point, I’m indebted to Eric Gans’s analysis in *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation* (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), 87-92, 104-107. [\(back\)](#)