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Stacey Mooney

ABSTRACT

Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale is a play rife with complicated messages about gender, jealousy, family, and forgiveness. This paper focuses on representations of womanhood in the play, specifically the ways in which the characters use language to alternately try to control others or liberate themselves. I compare The Winter's Tale with Shakespeare's source material, the Pygmalion myth, paying special attention to the similarities between the works' tyrannical men, Leontes and Pygmalion, and the differences between their oppressed women, Hermione, Paulina, and Pygmalion's unnamed statue.

Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* is a striking story of rage, fear, forgiveness, and ultimately transformation. After allegedly dying from the shock of being slandered as an adulteress by her husband, Leontes, and the death of her son, Mamillius, Hermione reappears in the Sicilian court as a statue after sixteen years and is magically reanimated by her loyal lady-in-waiting, Paulina. The play's ending has its roots in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, specifically the Pygmalion myth, which tells a story of man who falls in love with his sculpture, which is then brought to life by Aphrodite, also known as Venus. In Ovid's telling of the story, Pygmalion is largely driven to sculpt the perfect woman because of his disgust with real women; in Shakespeare's reinterpretation of the tale, the hatred of women also serves as a motivator for the creation of a statue but with a completely different effect. On the point of being executed by her crazed husband, Hermione and Paulina seemingly fake Hermione's death and plan her reappearance as a statue for a time when it has become clear that her husband is no longer a danger to her or to her children. Hermione's petrification is a reversal of the Ovidian process: a real woman turns to stone with the help of her friend in order to protect herself from her husband's violent tyranny. By looking at the ways in which Shakespeare centers female bodies and agency in *The Winter's Tale*, we can see how he reimagines, reinterprets, and

repudiates the Pygmalion myth, turning it into a story of female solidarity and artistry.

The Pygmalion myth is the story of a man who is disgusted by women and their sexuality and who is enamored with his own artistic skill. In Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pygmalion's tale comes directly after an allusion to the Propets, a group of women who prostitute themselves, and the very first lines of his story tell us that, after seeing them, Pygmalion is so "offended with the vice whereof greate store is packt within / The nature of womankynd" that he lives as a resolute bachelor (206). Although he will later pray to the goddess Venus to grant him the love of a woman, Pygmalion sees women's capacity for sexual love strictly as "vice," a vice that dominates all women's natures and which repulses him so much that he will swear off human women. Pygmalion, a sculptor by trade, carves a statue of a woman out of ivory, and, in his loneliness, he falls in love with it. He endows this sculpture with "grace as nature never gave / Nor can too any woman give," and becomes fixated on it; he kisses it, holds its hand, talks to it, buys it presents, undresses it, and even sleeps with it in his bed (206). Despite his distaste for female sexuality, Pygmalion has no trouble unleashing his own sexual desires on an inanimate object, one that completely lacks the ability to sexually consent. In context, it seems

as though the “grace” that he gives his statue that is denied to human women is passivity. Pygmalion is fine with interacting sexually with women, as long as those women cannot assert their bodily autonomy; his ideal sex object is silent, immobile, and insentient.

When Pygmalion prays to Venus to grant him a wife like his statue, she simply brings his statue to life. He kisses his now live statue “who was as then become a perfect mayd” and they marry (207). Notably, Pygmalion’s new bride is still silenced. Although she is now warm and alive, she has no lines of dialogue and remains unnamed. To Pygmalion, “perfection” in women is still silence; his ideal is a woman with no voice, no thoughts, and no identity or autonomy outside of his control, a control he has exercised over her since her creation. In the Pygmalion myth, female sexuality is only troublesome when women control it. The only type of woman who does not contain a “greate store” of vice is one who allows herself to be completely controlled by a man.

While Pygmalion is initially left unsatisfied by the inanimation of his inhuman love, at the opening of *The Winter’s Tale*, Leontes is frustrated with the actuality and unpredictability of his wife’s real human body, whipping himself into a violent frenzy over the idea that her body might be outside of his control. After watching Hermione have an innocent conversation with his friend, Polixenes, Leontes suddenly falls into a fit of jealousy and fixates on Hermione’s hands and her mouth, complaining that she is “paddling palms and pinching fingers / . . . and making practised smiles” (1.2.114-115). Later in the scene, Leontes more fully deconstructs Hermione’s body in conversation with Camillo: “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?” (1.2.281-285). Like

Pygmalion and his fear of the Propets, Leontes is terrified by the idea that women are sexually autonomous creatures.

In this moment, Leontes’s greatest fear is that his wife is sleeping with someone else, the ultimate wifely disobedience. The idea that his wife may be an adulteress seems to remind Leontes of the fact that Hermione has control over her own body, an idea that terrifies a man used to having complete and total political power. In an effort to regain some semblance of control, Leontes breaks Hermione’s body down into manageable pieces, reducing her from a complete woman with agency to merely a set of hands, a pair of lips, cheeks, a nose, and feet. He can catalogue and blame each of these pieces of her body, even if he cannot control her body as a whole. This litany of Hermione’s body parts also reinforces the idea that, in her alleged adultery, every single part of her body is sullied; even her nose is an agent of sexual sin from Leontes’s perspective. Perhaps even more notable is the fact that, in all of his speeches where he dissects her body, Leontes never once mentions Hermione’s pregnancy. Her rounded belly, the most obvious physical indication of her sexuality and, perhaps, of her alleged sexual disobedience, is left conspicuously unremarked upon by Leontes, although it is likely what enflamed his anger in the first place. Hermione’s pregnancy is the clearest evidence of her bodily autonomy: she is independently creating another human being with her body, a process which Leontes cannot influence or control. He can merely watch and hope that he is the child’s father. The sexual power that is contained within Hermione’s pregnant body destabilizes Leontes’s view of himself as an all-powerful ruler; in an effort to regain control, he metaphorically dismembers his wife’s body.

Leontes’s lists of Hermione’s body parts can be classified as blazons, a poetic technique that was popular during the Renaissance era in which the

speakers of poems describe their lovers by describing their disjointed body parts. Katherine R. Kellet argues that Shakespeare's use of the blazon emphasizes concerns over female agency. He allows characters like Leontes to blazon their beloveds, but at the same time, we are able to see the objects of their desire as active women on the stage; they are present for their deconstruction and often contradict it with their actions, unlike the subjects of Renaissance poetry (Kellet 26). As such, in *The Winter's Tale*, the blazon does not serve as a means of praise, but rather as a means of control. To Kellet, "Leontes' language alludes to the blazon tradition, but it conveys panic instead of praise because of his inability to establish certainty about Hermione's mobile, unpredictable body" (26). Indeed, Leontes only begins to blazon his wife after she appears to be outside of his control; he only begins to talk about her body after he fears that he is no longer in possession of it. While Leontes will later blazon his wife in a more affectionate way, in the beginning of the play, it is clear that his intent is to control his wife, not to extoll her virtues.

Leontes's focus on his Hermione's body indicates not only his desire to control it, but also his disgust with it. In her article, "The tyranny of immaterialism: Refusing the body in *The Winter's Tale*," Camilla Caporicci contextualizes *The Winter's Tale* amidst Renaissance philosophy, specifically those philosophies that concerned the body. Throughout the article, Caporicci focuses on both Stoicism and Neo-Platonism; both philosophies emphasize the separation of the mind, or soul, from the body, highlight the purity and power of the mind, and state the necessity for humans to use their minds to control the urges of their erring bodies. Stoic and Neo-Platonic ideas about the body echoed the sentiments of the Christian philosophy of the era, which also emphasized the necessity of the

separation of the pure mind and the sinful body (32-35). Leontes certainly seems focused on the sinfulness of his wife's body; in his blazon of her, each of her body parts is described as doing something at least vaguely sexual, like kissing, pinching, holding hands, and embracing. His fixation on Hermione's body is due not only to the fact that it is out of his control, but that it is distinctly sexual, a fact that is emphasized by Hermione's pregnancy. Like Pygmalion before him, Leontes is horrified by the sex and sin he believes is "packt within / the nature of womankynd" (Golding 206).

However, in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare also makes it clear that there is more than vice "packt" into women; with the introduction of Paulina in the second act, Shakespeare also introduces the undercurrent of feminine community that will run through the rest of the play. Paulina, who is one of Hermione's ladies-in-waiting, appears after Hermione has been imprisoned by Leontes, and she immediately offers to speak up on behalf of Hermione and her newborn daughter. When Paulina first attempts to enter Leontes's chambers, she is deterred by one of his lords; in response, she asks him, "Fear you his tyrannous passion more, alas, / Than the Queen's life? A gracious, innocent soul / More free than he is jealous!" (2.3.28-30). With this opening speech, Paulina not only calls attention to the fact that Leontes's anger is based in control, she also gets at the true source of Leontes's fear. When Paulina says that Hermione is "more free," she could be referring to her innocence, but, in the context of the play, it is hard to ignore the idea that Paulina is highlighting the fact that Hermione has more autonomy than Leontes is able to control with his jealous rage. Paulina continues to upbraid Leontes for his conduct:

I care not.
It is an heretic that makes the fire,

Not she which burns in't. I'll not call you
tyrant;
But this most cruel usage of your queen,
Not able to produce more accusation
Than your own weak-hinged fancy,
something savours
Of tyranny, and will ignoble make you,
Yea, scandalous to the world. (2.3.113-120)

In this speech, Paulina emphasizes the fact that Leontes's need for control is the problem in this situation, not Hermione's existence. He is the one "making the fire" and "cruelly using" his queen; she is a victim, burning in his rage, a rage which has no basis besides his fickle imagination. In fact, in a turn as a prophetess, Paulina tells Leontes that he will be the one who ends up suffering for his tyranny. Leontes, threatened by Paulina and her staunch support for his wife, has her sent from his rooms.

Earlier in the same scene, Leontes hints at what it is about Paulina that truly bothers him. In response to one her earlier remarks, Leontes reminds her husband, Antigonus, that he had told him to keep Paulina from approaching him and asks him, "What? Canst not rule her?" (2.3.47). Paulina is staunch in her right assert her voice, no matter what her husband tells her to do, and replies, "He shall not rule me" (2.3.50). Leontes's greatest fear is that his wife should escape from out of his control; Paulina embodies that fear, as she openly rejects the idea that her husband would be able to impose his will on her. Paulina is an uncontrollable woman, the thing which Leontes most hates, and in her connection to his wife, she represents a community of uncontrollable women, a community that would threaten both Leontes's worldview and the patriarchal power structures that he represents.

Directly after his encounter with Paulina, and after hearing of the returning of the messengers he had sent to the oracle, Leontes orders his lords to prepare "that we may arraign / Our most

disloyal lady" (2.3.201-202). His fear of autonomous women drives his urge to punish his wife; the more that it seems that women around him are operating on their own agendas, the more desperate he is to gain back some semblance of control by punishing his wife. In this way, he is even more like Pygmalion than he originally appears. While Pygmalion's bride is completely alone, it was the existence of another group of uncontrollable women that drove her creation. It was Pygmalion's fear of the unbridled sexuality of the Propets, whom he saw "leade theyr lyfe in sin," that drove him to swear off human women and sculpt his statue (Golding 206). While Pygmalion's fears were ultimately rewarded with the gift of a silent, solitary woman, Shakespeare will see to it that Leontes will indeed be made "scandalous to the world" and that the women that he fears will be able to retain their power.

When Hermione speaks in her own defense, it becomes clear that she and Leontes have viewed her and her sense of power in completely different ways. Leontes has always feared Hermione's sexual agency, centered in her body; he blazoned and linguistically dismembered her body out of that fear, and he intends to do violence upon her body, ending her life as punishment for the sin of bodily autonomy. However, when Hermione speaks about herself, she almost never mentions her body. Instead, she focuses on her character, describing her life as being "as continent, as chaste, as true / As I am now unhappy" (3.2.33-34). She also emphasizes her status and reputation; she is "A fellow of the royal bed . . . a great king's daughter / The mother to a hopeful prince," a woman with no little political power, albeit power determined by her relationships to men, who is standing before a jury, not to defend her body, but to defend her honor (3.2.37-39). In fact, Hermione only mentions her body once during her speech, and she does so to emphasize the one aspect of her

body that Leontes left out of his blazon: its maternity. As Hermione launches a sort of blazon of her own, listing off all of the injustices that Leontes has done against her, she starts by emphasizing her role as a mother; Leontes has separated her from her son, Mamillius, the “first-fruits of my body” and has sent her daughter “from my breast, / The innocent milk in its most innocent mouth” to her death (3.2.96, 98-99). To Hermione, her body is not a center for sexual sin, but rather a space that she has used to create and nurture two other lives, two lives that, in addition to her own, Leontes has destroyed. Again, Hermione emphasizes the idea that, outside of its maternal function, she does not care for her body or the life attached to it; she is fighting for her honor, “no life, / I prize it not a straw” (3.2.108-109). Unlike Pygmalion’s statue, who is conveniently only a silent and totally subservient body, with no evidence of independent thought, Hermione is a sentient and vocal human being with a rich sense of integrity, a fact that she puts on full display in her trial, but which Leontes still does not seem to understand. Leontes and Hermione are fighting two different battles: he is fighting to control his wife’s sexual body, and she is fighting for her personhood and her reputation as a wife and mother.

Although impassioned, Hermione’s character-based self-defense does not make much of an impact on Leontes, who is blinded by jealous rage, and she must rely on the support of her sister in uncontrolled solidarity, Paulina, to save her from her husband’s ire. Even upon hearing that the oracle had stated that Hermione was faithful, Leontes is still intent on her punishment until he hears of his son’s death, an announcement which also causes Hermione’s collapse. Once it is clear that Leontes’s rage has become fatal, and that it might still prove fatal to Hermione, Paulina arrives and takes Hermione offstage, only to reappear moments later and

declare her dead (3.2). Notably, no one else sees Hermione die or ever sees her body; although Paulina challenges anyone who might not believe her, saying “If word nor oath / Prevail not, go and see,” it appears that no one accepts her offer (3.2.202-203). It is also important that Paulina is sure to place the blame for Hermione’s death squarely on Leontes’s shoulders, using language that mirrors both Leontes’s blazons and that of Pygmalion: “if you can bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye / Heat outwardly or breath within, I’ll serve you / As I would do the gods. – But, O thou tyrant, / Do not repent these things, for they are heavier / Than all they woes can stir; therefore betake thee / To nothing but despair” (3.2.203-208). Paulina breaks Hermione’s body down again in death, recalling the reverse of the transformation in Pygmalion, in which he is overjoyed to find that “in hir body streyght a warmnesse seemed to spread” (Golding 207). She emphasizes the idea that Hermione’s body, which was so reviled by Leontes, is now lifeless, and that, as a result, he deserves to spend the rest of his life in anguish. Even further, her language in this scene hints dramatically at a conspiracy that will provide for the play’s resolution; it is Paulina herself, not Leontes, who will be able to bring the life back to Hermione’s body when the time is right, making her the one worthy of divine worship. When viewed in the context of the end of the play, Paulina’s language in this scene clearly hints at the fact that she knows that Hermione is still alive and clearly serves as a reminder of her power over Leontes; Paulina and Hermione have been able to scheme their way to safety right under Leontes’s nose, and her remark to him here can be read as an attempt to flaunt their shared knowledge and agency.

In fact, as the play continues, Paulina will become even bolder in exercising the power she holds over Leontes as she grows ever closer to revealing the secret of Hermione’s survival.

Even sixteen years after the events of the first three acts, Paulina is still determined to make sure that Leontes knows just how egregious his past actions were. Once again recalling the language of Pygmalion, Paulina emphasizes not Leontes's success at controlling and shaping his wife, but his destruction of a woman who was already perfect: "If one by one you wedded all the world, / Or from the all that are took something good / To make a perfect woman, she you killed / Would be unparalleled" (5.1.12-16). Unlike Pygmalion, who created his "perfect maid," Paulina reminds Leontes that Hermione was a strong, beautiful woman whom Leontes could never recreate, no matter how hard he tried. Leontes, seemingly repentant, submits to Paulina's control, accepting her beratement and submitting to her demands. Paulina's punishment only ceases when she begins to see a change in Leontes's behavior: after Perdita has been found and Leontes has restored his relations with Camillo and Polixenes, it is suddenly announced that Paulina has commissioned a very life-like statue of Hermione, setting the final movement of her plot into motion. Then, once again recalling the transformation seen in Pygmalion, Leontes suddenly appears to have a new appreciation for his wife's body. Although he callously remarks that the statue looks "wrinkled" and "aged," he also states that because it looks as she would have looked if she were still alive, it is a "good comfort," indicating that he has grown to appreciate Hermione's body, and, by extension, her sexuality, as it is rather than how he would like it to be (5.3.28, 29, 33).

After having witnessed Leontes's changed disposition over the past sixteen years, and his change in demeanor when faced with the statue, it is Paulina who, like Venus in the Pygmalion myth, grants Leontes's wish and seemingly brings Hermione back to life. In a deeply theatrical moment, Paulina first offers to hide

the statue if it is too upsetting for Leontes and then reveals that "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" (5.3.87-91). Recalling her speech in the third act, during which she said that anyone that could "bring / Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye / Heat outwardly or breath within" to Hermione's lifeless body was worthy of divine worship, Paulina sets out both to reanimate her friend and to prove herself a god to Leontes (3.2.203-204). With a sudden flourish of music and a command to "be stone no more," Paulina restores Hermione to the world of the living and takes control of the play's final scene (5.3.99). She not only brings Hermione back to life, she directs Leontes to embrace her and to treat her kindly, she tells Perdita to kneel before her mother, and even directs Hermione to look at her daughter, all actions which emphasize that this scene is the culmination of a plot she had put into motion sixteen years prior, one that she and Hermione have meticulously planned and executed (5.3.99-122).

Although ostensibly about the reunion of a long-divided family, the vast majority of the scene is dedicated to cataloging the detail that Paulina, and likely Hermione as well, put into the staging of the resurrection scene, from Paulina's story about having the statue commissioned, Hermione's stony performance, the timely musical cues, and Paulina's mystical speeches; in comparison, the reunion between Hermione and Leontes is described in a few offhand comments by Camillo and Polixenes, Leontes's very recent enemies, taking up only five lines (5.3, 5.3.111-115). While the reunion is brought about because Leontes has changed his behavior and has been deemed safe by Paulina, the scene forgoes detailing the return of warm familial feelings and instead highlights the amount of cunning and skill it took for Paulina and

Hermione to successfully complete their scheme. In a scene where Leontes's repentance and return to political and familial stability arguably should be at the forefront, we are instead reminded that he has been slyly manipulated by two women, one of whom he did not even realize was alive, for almost two decades. Ultimately, *The Winter's Tale's* final scene reminds us that, because of their creativity and their camaraderie, women can and will triumph over a strong-willed tyrant, even a repentant one.

In the Pygmalion myth, a domineering man is rewarded for his misogyny with the creation of a woman who is perfectly beautiful, youthful, and who knows nothing but obedience to him. Shakespeare, clearly inspired by the myth, takes the idea of stone woman being made flesh and uses it as a lesson in female autonomy. Both Pygmalion and Leontes fear female bodies and

their agency and work to control those bodies through any means necessary, whether artistic, linguistic, or political. But, in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare gives the target of Leontes's rage both a voice and a community, things that Pygmalion's stone bride lacks. Leontes's misogyny is not celebrated in this play; rather, he is punished, while the play glories in the power and the manipulations of two very smart and completely uncontrollable women. Both Hermione and Paulina passionately speak their minds, and when Hermione is turned to stone, it is not in an effort to create the image of a perfect woman, but rather to save herself. When Paulina transforms Hermione, it is not in an effort to reward a man who confuses hatred and control for love, but rather to return Hermione to her life once her safety has been restored and to assert their power over the man who destroyed both of their families.

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