

**The Queen Triumphant:  
Gender and Power Struggles in  
*The Winter's Tale***

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Despite the strongly patriarchal atmosphere in which they were produced, many of Shakespeare's plays explore altered versions of standard gender and power relationships that call into question or even subvert the patriarchal paradigm. MacDonald touches on this in his essay "The Unheimlich Maneuver," in which he states that "power in Shakespeare's dramatic worlds often devolves from some rather unlikely sources, and... those who wield the most impressive shows of power are altogether likely to harbor fatal weaknesses".<sup>1</sup> In the case of *The Winter's Tale*, this unexpected source of power is a strong female character—the queen Hermione—and the weak and blustering authority figure is the acknowledged absolute ruler of Sicilia. King Leontes is an emotional, irrational man who is insecure about his position of power and is mistrustful of his wife because of the influence that she wields over him; Hermione for her part possesses a combination of dignity and self-control that appears to intimidate her husband. Shakespeare pits these two characters against each other in a highly charged and destructive power struggle. Many readers and critics interpret the end of this struggle as the [graceful] capitulation of the queen, which re-emphasizes the power of her husband and upholds the patriarchal values of Elizabethan England, or as an emphasis on feminine gentility that also stays within these same traditional bounds. I would argue that the play presents Hermione as a strong and powerful character, in high contrast with the weakness of her husband; that she maintains her power throughout—that the destructive insecurities of the king are ineffective in subduing her; and that her triumph is so emphatic at the end of the play that it can be read as a subversion of patriarchy.

Leontes first manifests his insecurity about his power by turning an irrationally jealous eye upon Polixenes in Act 1 Scene 2.

Although the two kings “were trained together in their childhoods, and there rooted betwixt them then such an affection” that only strengthened with age and maturation, Leontes is remarkably quick to suspect his boyhood friend of treasonous adultery (1.1.22-24).<sup>2</sup> His abrupt descent from professions of friendship into accusations of treachery is provoked by the display of friendly affection between Polixenes and Hermione; Leontes is extremely jealous of anyone who gains favor and (platonic) intimacy with his wife. This jealousy could be due to insecurity about his royal position—although the two kings are supposedly equals, he obviously resents the friendship between his queen and Polixenes which reinforces this state of equality—but his envy is more strongly centered in his discomfort with the queen herself. We are told that he tried for “three crabbed months” to gain Hermione’s favor before she consented to marry him (1.2.104); even though she has since born him a son and is now pregnant with his second child, he still seems to be unsure of whether she is in his power, and sees the intimacy between Polixenes and Hermione as a threat to his own standing with his queen.

The irrational and paranoid “infection of [his] brains” soon expands to place Hermione herself in doubt and disgrace (1.2.147). By persuading Polixenes to stay, Hermione proves that she has more influence over the Bohemian king than Leontes does. In her supposed disloyalty, she poses an affront to his masculinity; Leontes is as fearful of being labeled as a cuckold and having his patriarchal authority flouted by a wayward female as he would be of violent insurrection. As noted previously, the king is still somewhat in awe of and uneasy about the woman he has married. By mentally debasing her to the level of a “hobby-horse” who “deserves a name/ As rank as any flax-wench that puts to/ Before her troth-plight,” he raises himself above her to a position of injured innocence (1.2.278-280).

As his insecurities drive him further into a state of misguided and desperate vindictiveness, he becomes more and more the delusional tyrant. He invents “a plot against [his] life and [his] crown” supposedly contrived by the objects of his insane jealousy, and has Hermione imprisoned for her imagined betrayal (2.1.49). When his daughter is born and Paulina presents her to Leontes as evidence of the queen’s innocence, he instead interprets the infant as yet another threat to his power. He is so tormented by his cancerous inferiority complex and so eager to obliterate any reminder of his incompetence and imagined ‘cuckoldry’ and to reaffirm his position of power that he is willing to take the life of a helpless infant.

During the scene with the newborn Perdita, Paulina warns the king that his irrational behavior “savours of tyranny” (2.3.119-120); by the time of Hermione’s trial, Leontes has degenerated to true despotism. In an obvious attempt to reinforce his power and ensure that his queen is not proven innocent—an event which would bring more shame upon him than her supposed guilt ever could—he sets up an autocratic court of law, in which he is both accuser and judge. He pays no attention to the composed, graceful defense of the queen, clinging to the delusions that allow him to denigrate and dominate her by believing her false and condemning her to death.

In his attempts to quell his insecurities and reaffirm his position of absolute authority, he oversteps the bounds of friendship, loyalty, and even law. But when he challenges the power of the divine, he is at last undone. Apollo himself intercedes for the queen, disclosing through his oracle that “Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless,” and “Leontes a jealous tyrant” (3.2.132-133). In desperation, Leontes cries out that “there is no truth at all i’t’h’oracle. The sessions shall proceed. This is mere falsehood” (3.2.139-140). He claims to possess greater authority than the god, thereby inciting the wrath of the divine and causing the death of his son, the loss of his queen, and the destruction of his power, honor, and credibility. The close of the first three acts of *The Winter’s Tale* leaves Leontes a reviled and remorseful tyrant; his jealousy and vengeful attempts to conquer his wife and keep her “within [his] power” have only reinforced her blameless superiority and caused his own downfall into infamy (2.3.26).

Hermione’s character provides a striking contrast to that of her husband. While he gropes for every possible opportunity to display his authority and allows his own emotions and insecurities to dictate his actions, she remains calm and rational. Anna Jameson, in her nineteenth-century examination of the character traits of Shakespeare’s heroines, describes this “exterior calm” as an indication of “the most profound pathos, the most vivid impression of life and internal power”.<sup>3</sup> She credits the queen with a “perfect command over her own feelings” and “complete self-possession” that allow her to maintain her dignity and power, despite her husband’s jealous attempts to wrest them from her.<sup>4</sup>

It is apparent that Hermione has possessed this internal power and has exercised it over Leontes for as long as she has known him. As mentioned above, she kept him waiting for months before finally consenting to be his wife. Given his easily manipulated and inconstant emotions, he probably ‘fell in love’ with her without

thinking and immediately began pressuring her to marry him; Hermione, on the other hand, held him off and let “three crabbed months sour themselves to death” before making the decision to become his queen (1.2.104). We see therefore that even in the early stages of their courtship, Hermione was the more powerful partner—a fact that Leontes seems to be very aware of and uncomfortable with, given the fact that he still rebukes her for holding him off after years of marriage.

When Leontes comes to rail at his wife with his fanciful accusations and order her imprisonment in Act 2 Scene 1—the first actual confrontation between the two—Hermione maintains her composure remarkably well. Although confused and horrified by his slanderous allegations, she does not become irrationally angry or defensive, nor does she throw back insults at her husband, even when he calls her a “traitor,” “bedswerver,” and “adulteress” (2.1.91,95,90). Leontes is acting and speaking completely on misguided emotion, and is obviously trying to rouse an emotional response from her; if she bursts into tears and wails at his feet or pleads with him for mercy, he will gain what he wants—the upper hand in their relationship. Hermione, however, does not weep or plead. She tells her husband calmly, “You, my lord, / Do but mistake,” and warns him that he will regret his irrational and slanderous behavior (2.1.82-83). She then turns to the lords witnessing this power struggle to explain that she is “not prone to weeping, as [her] sex/ Commonly are” but that instead she has “That honourable grief lodged [within her] which burns/ Worse than tears drown” (2.1.110-111,113-114). Her self-control and her announcement of her intent to be patient and rely upon the rationality of the court further arouses Leontes’ jealousy and rage. He interrupts with “Shall I be heard?”, trying once more to assert his control over the situation. Although the scene ends with Hermione’s imprisonment, the queen leaves as composed and “honourable” as ever, having won yet another battle in the constant power struggle between Leontes and herself. She has maintained not only her dignity but the support of the lords, who plead with the king on her behalf and re-emphasize the irrationality and foolishness of his behavior.

The trial of Hermione can be seen as the culminating battle between the king and queen. He sets himself up as both the righteous accuser and the discerning judge (and comes off instead as the false accuser and the tyrannical judge) in a last-ditch effort to establish his superiority; she comes armed only with her own self-control. In her defense, she once again refuses to weep, plead,

or say anything that will weaken her position of blamelessness. "Innocence shall make false accusation blush, and tyranny tremble at patience," she says, predicting her own triumph, and she contrasts her dignity with the jealousies and lawless rigour of Leontes (3.2.29-31). "For honour, 'tis a derivative from me to mine, and only that I stand for" (3.2.42-44). She directly challenges the king's affectations of absolute power by appealing to "powers divine" to vindicate her and to Apollo to be her judge (3.2.27,115). The god obliges this petition in the message of the oracle, which declares her beyond doubt to be honourable and chaste and demotes Leontes to a jealous tyrant.

Predictably, Leontes does not take this emphatic defeat well; he challenges the authority of the god and condemns his wife to death. When Apollo punishes this affront by immediately killing Mamillius, Hermione exacts her own vengeance upon the king by faking her own death.<sup>5</sup> She refuses to allow him the luxury of repenting of his "injustice," of carrying out his intent to continue to husband her (3.2.146)—instead she escapes his court and leaves him to be racked by remorse and "shame perpetual" (3.2.237).

During her sixteen-year absence, it is evident that Hermione's power over her husband continues to affect Leontes. When pressured by his attendant lords to "forget [his] evil" and "forgive [him]self," he replies, "Whilst I remember/ Her and her virtues I cannot forget/ My blemishes in them" (5.1.5,6,6-8). He is still tormented by the memory of her blameless dignity, and seems to have accepted the superiority of the queen's virtues over his affectations and insecurities. Time and Paulina's persistent reminders of his guilt and her "unparalleled" nature have mellowed his raging drive for power and matured his insecure personality. He has made no attempts to replace her, even though he knows that remaining heirless will cost him the establishment of a dynasty in Sicilia; he chooses instead to mirror the long-suffering loyalty of his wife that he once made the mistake of doubting and profaning.

While Leontes grieves and pines ceaselessly for his queen, the fact that Hermione remains in seclusion for a full sixteen years indicates her complete psychological independence from him. Her memory maintains power over him, but he has no reciprocal power over her; she is content to remain in hiding until her daughter is restored and the king fully subdued. When she finally returns to the arms of her husband, she does so by descending goddess-like from a pedestal and embracing him wordlessly. Paula Berggren describes this ending as an embodiment of "the spirit of *The Winter's Tale*, which exorcises the violence of masculine jealousy and

redeems it through... patience."<sup>6</sup> Having conquered him, Hermione teaches Leontes the patience and self-control that are the sources of her power. "Leontes has to learn the woman's part, by unknowingly emulating Hermione as if he had tried on a woman's robes, before he can find her again."<sup>7</sup>

It is useful to note here a less hopeful and less subversive interpretation of the ending of the play. Marilyn Williamson, in her book *The Patriarchy of Shakespeare's Comedies*, argues that *The Winter's Tale* upholds patriarchy rather than subverting it. Although Leontes does have to learn from Hermione's patience and self-control before he can recover his wife and daughter, Williamson contends that this concession does not make him any less powerful: "the ruler has needed to absorb female values which preserve life, but those values do not alter his power."<sup>8</sup> Her interpretation of the play does not grant Hermione any triumph in the royal power struggle, but leaves Leontes in possession of "total authority, which absorbs and controls female creativity;" "the absolute power of the ruler to control the lives of others is unquestioned... although the ruler... may at first be tyrannical, he transcends that impulse. This change of attitude does not lessen his power."<sup>9</sup>

While this is reading certainly makes sense in the context of Elizabethan patriarchal attitudes, I would argue that Shakespeare is doing more here than simply reaffirming the conventional values of his day. The fall of Leontes, although it does not include his complete removal from political power, is nonetheless great enough that he cannot emerge from it unchanged; he does not transcend his irrational and tyrannical impulses on his own, but is punished by both the god Apollo and by Hermione and is forced to learn gentleness and patience over the period of sixteen years—under the 'patient' tutelage of Paulina. His continued remorseful and distracted state, even after such a long interlude, shows him to be far too dependent upon his queen to be an independent and absolute authority. She still wields such power over him that he would rather remain childless, thereby ensuring the end of the royal lineage, than dishonor her by taking another wife; a king who believes himself to be in possession of absolute power would not be likely to manifest such compunction when faced with the downfall of his dynasty. In addition, the manner in which Hermione is finally prepared to be reconciled with her husband—in a chapel, "awakened by faith", descending from a pedestal—is too suggestive of the divine power and mystery of forgiveness to be merely the return of a forgiving and subordinate wife (5.3.95). Lastly, Shakespeare clearly portrays the queen as such a strong

character and the king as such a weak and insecure one throughout the first three acts of the play that the sudden reversal of these roles in the last scene seems unlikely; the altered power/gender relationship that he creates is too well-developed to simply be cast off at the last minute and replaced with a typical patriarchal form.

Taking into account the political and ideological atmosphere of the court for which Shakespeare wrote at this point will give more weight to my fairly radical interpretation of *The Winter's Tale*. While we as members of twenty-first century society tend to consider the idea of female equality and empowerment as a more recent development, it did in fact have a place in the courts of Europe during the Renaissance. Evidence of this can be found in Baldesar Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, a definitive text of Renaissance virtues which was widely read and followed and with which the court of England during Shakespeare's time was altogether familiar. Castiglione, through the voice of his character 'The Magnifico Giuliano de Medici, argues that equality exists between the sexes: "male cannot be more perfect than the female, since both the one and the other are included under the species man."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to state that, based on the philosophical belief of the day that "those who are weak in body are able in mind," "there can be no doubt that being weaker in body women are abler in mind and more capable of speculative thought than men."<sup>11</sup> He describes the virtues of a great woman by citing several historical examples of women who possessed power, self-control, fortitude and loyalty. It is not farfetched, therefore, given these widely although not universally accepted ideals, to assume that Shakespeare may have based Hermione upon these characteristics and the relationship between the king and queen of Sicilia on this principle of gender equality. Giuliano asserts that "women wish to... gain their freedom and shake off the tyranny that men have imposed on them by their one-sided authority;" this can certainly be applied to Hermione's struggle against her tyrannical husband.<sup>12</sup> He also asserts, rather bravely, that "woman does not receive her being from man but rather perfects him just as she is perfected by him."<sup>13</sup> The manner in which Hermione tames Leontes by the end of the play is a reflection of at least the first half of this theory.

Giuliano's best example of female excellence is Isabella of Spain, whose name would strike a chord with the Elizabethan nobles who both adhered to the *Book of the Courtier* as a model and were the primary audience for Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Isabella was one of the most powerful and renowned figures of the Renaissance—her fame would not have lessened much in the

generation between her lifetime and Shakespeare's day. Her daughter, Katherine of Aragon, the queen rejected by England's Henry the Eighth, was the heir to her mother's grace and ability. The wrong that she suffered at Henry's hands, and her posthumous vindication through her daughter Mary who eventually came to the English throne, would be quite fresh in the minds of the Elizabethan court (although the changed religious and political climate of protestant England may have cast a less favourable light on the memory of Katherine).

Shakespeare worked directly with this history in his play *Henry VIII*, written at much the same time as *The Winter's Tale*; I will not risk digressing from my original argument by bringing in the text of a second play here, but I do wish to point out the unmistakable correlations between Hermione's self-defense in *The Winter's Tale* and the self-defense of Katherine of Aragon. Hermione's calm and graceful defense closely mirrors Katherine's—both in the Shakespeare play and in the historical account—in its intelligent and self-possessed character; and just as Katherine's bastardized (and then reclaimed) daughter continued the Tudor line, so does Hermione's daughter Perdita reappear to assure the continuation of the Sicilian dynasty. These are connections which would have been even more obvious to Shakespeare's contemporaries than they are to us. These similarities, along with Castiglione's text, provide an historical context in which the presence of both gender equality and a powerful and triumphant female savior-figure in *The Winter's Tale* is undeniable.

### Notes

1. Ronald MacDonald, "The Unheimlich Maneuver: Antithetical Ways of Power in Shakespeare," in *Shakespearean Power and Punishment: A Volume of Essays*, ed. Gillian Murray Kendall (Madison: Associated University Presses, 1998), 198.

2. All Shakespeare quotes are from *The Oxford Shakespeare*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).

3. Anna Jameson, *Shakespeare's Heroines* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1898) 160.

4. Jameson, 167.

5. It must be noted here that Hermione's reappearance at the end of the play can be interpreted either as the result of magic or as her return after living in hiding until the completion of Apollo's prophecy. I assume the latter interpretation in this paper, as it helps to strengthen my thesis. I cite in my defense Hermione's speech to her daughter: "thou shalt hear that I, / Knowing by Paulina that the oracle / Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved / Myself to see the issue" (5.3.126-129); there are several other passages that can be used to support this reading. However, in the end, it must be admitted that Shakespeare simply does not specify whether Hermione hid or was magically restored.



6. Paula Berggren, "The Woman's Part: Female Sexuality as Power in Shakespeare's Plays," in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 30.

7. Berggren, 30.

8. Marilyn L. Williamson, *The Patriarchy of Shakespeare's Comedies* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 153.

9. Williamson, 153.

10. Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. George Bull (London: Penguin Books, 1967), 218.

11. Castiglione, 218.

12. Castiglione, 221.

13. Castiglione, 221.