

Feminine Veneration Over Patriarchal Domination: Reading Ecology in *The Winter's Tale*

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Early in act two of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Mamillius, the young son of Leontes, states, "A sad tale's best for winter."¹ Although it is often grouped with Shakespeare's comedies, many scholars categorize *The Winter's Tale* as one of the playwright's late romances. A critical reading of the play quickly proves the young prince's point and connects the brutal realities of winter to Leontes's court in Sicilia. The play is a "generically confused"² hodgepodge, beginning in a form resembling high Greek tragedy, and concluding with an ending almost too miraculous and happy to be attributed to the mind that poeticized Tarquin's rape of Lucrece, and dramatized the baking of young Goths into pies in *Titus Andronicus*. Stephen Orgel notes that as early as 1672, ". . . Dryden, looking back at the drama of the last age, singled out *The Winter's Tale*, along with *Measure for Measure* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, for particular criticism," while also drawing attention to criticism from virtually every era that called the play, "ridiculous," and even, "beyond all dramatic credibility."³ While these criticisms are valid in many ways, an analysis of *The Winter's Tale* through an ecofeminist lens proves to be incredibly fruitful. Distinct parallels can be drawn between the structure of the text and the cyclical realities of Nature. The play can be read as offering explicit criticism of man's domination of his

environment and an encouragement to substitute the domination, demonstrated primarily by Leontes, with veneration, primarily illustrated by Hermione and Perdita.

Jennifer Munroe writes that “Although both the husbandman and the housewife practice an ‘art’ . . . their arts are not equal. The husbandman’s art makes him ‘maister of the earth.’”⁴ As Munroe is referencing the husbandry manuals of the period, it is safe to conclude that this notion of being a master of the earth referred to the early modern man controlling literal earth, that is to say, his land. However, Leontes proves to be committed to asserting his masculine dominance over his realm and the people in it at all times. This moves us away from the idea of man’s control over a piece of land that he owns and personally maintains, toward the concept of a king dominating his nation. Leontes’s dominating force would not have been new, nor would it have been shocking to the play’s original audience as, “For the first time in two centuries the Divine Right of Kings became a serious political philosophy..” under the leadership of King James I who, “...resisted, as a matter of principle, any questioning of the royal judgement, and was especially concerned with maintaining and strengthening the royal prerogatives.”⁵ To argue that *The Winter’s Tale* was designed to criticize the reign of James I is not something that this paper is prepared to assert; however, a consideration of the similarities between James I and Leontes in terms of their styles of kingship and perceived desires to control their environments effectively broadens the concepts of Nature and facilitates an ecologically focused reading of the play beyond Perdita’s references to flowers in act four.

Kakkonen and Penjak note that “First and foremost, ecofeminism tries to make visible the connections—historical, conceptual, and experiential—between gender domination and environmental deterioration and profiteering by male prepotency,”⁶ and these connections are first demonstrated by Leontes’s treatment of Hermione and the resulting barren stasis of Sicilia. Leontes’s “bad husbandry” results in an incredible amount of waste, and a thorough analysis of his domination of Sicilia, Nature’s active presence in Bohemia, and the characters who inhabit these two opposite worlds illustrates the futility of man’s attempts to master Nature and his environment. This reading ultimately stresses that

such domination will undoubtedly interrupt Nature's cycle, a cycle that is restored to Sicilia at the end of the play when Perdita returns, bringing with her the desire to nurture as opposed to control.

Sean Kane argues that *The Faerie Queene* is about, ". . . the relations of living organisms to the external world where the organisms are human beings, and the external world comprises of the environments provided by history and society as well as nature."⁷ While Shakespeare's play and Spenser's poem were written at very different times in England's history, Kane's assertion, that the presence of the natural world is not the only way in which a text can be examined from an ecological standpoint, can be applied to Shakespeare's play as well. It becomes clear that an examination of space in the play, and the human interactions that occur in that space, supports a reading of *The Winter's Tale* as an ecological text. This idea is echoed by Simon Estok who writes, "Certainly space (and how it is conceptualized) in a play such as *The Winter's Tale* is very important . . . it determines the structure of the lived experiences of the people in those imagined spaces."⁸

The play opens and spends the majority of its time in Sicilia, and it is the pollution of the Sicilian environment by Leontes that sets the events of the text in motion. Greta Gaard writes that "The relational inter-identity that is the starting point of ecofeminism conceives environment and identity as co-constituted, and 'home' as a socially constructed location, an act of place-and-identity co-creation that takes time, energy, and commitment,"⁹ but the depths of Leontes's desire to dominate his environment make this co-creation tantamount to impossible. Most readings of the text focus on Leontes's jealousy over the affair he suspects between Hermione and Polixenes. Jealousy is definitely present; however, to read Leontes's jealousy as one of a sexual nature, without considering other possibilities does not give the text the consideration it deserves and does not hold up in a careful reading that is actively paying attention to the ecological undertones of the play. This is best explored through an examination of the scenes leading up to Hermione's imprisonment. Leontes, as always in his quest to control his environment, wants Polixenes to stay in Sicilia: "Clear from the beginning of the play . . . is the proposition that Leontes is hardly a master of human art over the potentially wild landscape, an incompetence that compromises his authority."¹⁰

This “wild landscape” can be defined as anything Leontes does not have complete control over. This includes Nature, his wife, and Polixenes, as evidenced by his admission that he could not convince Polixenes to stay in Sicilia. When Hermione’s request is successful, Leontes laments, “At my request he would not. / Hermione, my dearest, thou never spok’st / To better purpose” (1.2.87-9). In this instance, Hermione proves to be more of an active husbandman than passive housewife through her ability to sway Polixenes, and it is this first display of her feminine power and ability to influence that begins Leontes’s fall as “His estimate of his own influence goes from one extreme to the other.”¹¹

These first scenes, and the play as a whole, are riddled with references to or images of gardening, farming, and the cultivation of land in general, and “ecofeminism underlines the relation of men to culture and that of women to nature.”¹² When Leontes first praises Hermione for getting Polixenes to stay in Sicilia, she responds by saying, “I prithee tell me; cram’s with praise, and make’s / As fat as tame things” (1.2.90). In her use of the term “tame things,” Hermione connects herself to that which is domesticated. This could be a reference to her talents at housewifery and hosting; however the connection of the word tame to animals kept for the purposes of land cultivation and farming means that we are instantly reminded that Hermione is meant to be the domesticated body in this scenario, not the one with the control and ability to determine who does what. This idea is furthered as Hermione’s speech continues, and she makes references to field work and ploughing saying, “You may ride’s / With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs ere / With spur we heat an acre” (1.2.93-5). The terms acre and furlong are clearly a means of measuring land, and in his notes on the scene, Orgel emphasizes that these measurements would have been based on the amount of land that domesticated animals could plough in a given workday.¹³ In connecting herself to the laborious work of tilling land, Hermione further casts Leontes as the farmer or husbandman in the situation; however, her ability to succeed in his venture, to keep Polixenes in Sicilia, makes Leontes second guess his competency and ability to control his realm and the relationships in it.

This idea that Leontes’s jealousy is not simply sexual, but is significantly more complex, originating in his mistrust of his own

abilities as ruler, husband, and master of his realm, is furthered by his reaction to the affair he believes has been the result of his failings as a husbandman. In his mind, he has tried and failed to control his environment, but the one thing he has managed to cultivate is a relationship between his wife and his boyhood friend turned rival. Even the lines that most suggest that Leontes's jealousy is solely sexual can indicate a distinct ecological undertone. For example, the line, "And his pond fished by his next neighbour" (1.2.193), is clearly quite sexual, but it also once again connects Hermione to the natural world as a piece of property that Leontes presumes to own and believes he can benefit from by controlling who fishes from it. In the patriarchal world of Sicilia, the adultery or the loyalty of a wife is only part of the greater concern to control and dominate one's environment. This is evidenced by the fact that, "we find Leontes much more preoccupied with the idea of revenge against his male rival than with his wife: he regrets that the "harlot king" has escaped and is therefore "beyond [his] arm."¹⁴ In other words, it is his perceived inability to control Polixenes at this point that most vexes Leontes. This opposes the popular notion that his downward spiral is brought on by lustful jealousy.

After Polixenes flees Sicilia with Camillo, Hermione is the only person left who remains a threat to Leontes's dominance over his environment, and therefore she must be punished. Leontes "is a man whose power resides in language, a man who controls women, a man who treats women and the environment as passive objects that, ideally, lack their own volition and voice."¹⁵ Hermione is barred from Mamillius and is imprisoned, stripped of her comforts even during the birth of her daughter. She laments, "My second joy, / And first fruits of my body, from his presence / I am barred like one infectious" (3.2.94-6). Hermione's imprisonment, seclusion, and trial, then, act as Leontes's method of returning Hermione to her passive role as a domesticated entity: Nature contained by a man-made enclosure. As discussed above, Hermione herself has made connections between her own body and facets of the natural world that Leontes, as ruler, might tame—the land, livestock, etc.—but "ecofeminist values oppose all forms of hierarchy and domination,"¹⁶ and Hermione's willingness to be compared to "tame things" (1.2.91), and other parts of the natural world which are often dominated, speaks to the fact that

she exists in a patriarchal society insistent that women are “raised to be obedient.”¹⁷ Despite these comparisons, the better reading of Hermione’s connection to nature is that she herself is Nature, as evidenced by her ability to outperform Leontes’s attempted husbandry. Roberts writes, “Women’s fertility, her cyclical anatomical processes, and her subordinate position...confirmed her closeness to Nature and reinforced the view that she was to be controlled by male Culture.”¹⁸ Leontes cannot have ultimate control over his environment while his wife, and by proxy Nature, are free to thrive; he will never attain true dominance while Nature is left unrestrained. As Hermione is stripped of her agency and comforts, Nature is stripped of its wild chaos and is contained to suit the needs of men.

Leontes’s final act of dominance over the Sicilian environment occurs at Hermione’s trial. He has every opportunity to set things right, as Hermione insists upon her innocence and begs Leontes to understand her behavior. She stresses, “I loved him, as in honour he required; / With such a kind of love as might become / A lady like me” (3.2.62-4). Even facing death, Hermione emphasizes that her actions were in service to her lord and master, and that her only crime was in succeeding where he was unable to. Nothing works to sway Leontes, although Shakespeare does provide the reader with one brief instance of hope. This moment occurs as the Officer reads the sealed message from the Oracle at Delphos. The message tells nothing but truth, even foreshadowing the ultimately happy ending of the play saying, “the king shall live without an heir if that / which is lost be not found” (3.2.132-3). However, Leontes dismisses the words of the Oracle, words that he believed would give credence to his charges against Hermione. As the oracle goes against Leontes’s authority, he quashes the evidence its message provided: “There is no truth at all i’t’h’ Oracle. / The sessions shall proceed; this is mere falsehood” (3.2.137-8). His decision to dismiss the message of the Oracle and to only listen to his own desire to punish those who questioned his control pollutes Sicilia with familial waste, and “His daughter, his son, his wife and his friends are each withdrawn from the space he seeks to control.”¹⁹ Mamillius dies, Hermione appears to die, Perdita is sent away with Antigonus where she is left for dead, and Nature’s cycle halts in Sicilia, stopping growth and condemning the people left behind to life in a perpetual winter.

The last scene of act three and the entirety of act four signal a significant shift in the text in more ways than one. The transition to Bohemia leaves the death and winter of Leontes's court behind and introduces the reader to the regrowth, rebirth and regeneration of spring and summer in a land where respect for Nature is valued over domination. We also see a shift in genre as Shakespeare moves away from the high Greek tragedy he developed in the court of Leontes, and towards a lighter comedic tone in a green space where, "animals—both savage and domestic—abound, a woman reigns as queen, and a pickpocket triumphantly practices his illicit trade."²⁰ However, as Charlotte Scott notes, "The introduction to Bohemia is notoriously dramatic: conditioned by shipwreck, exile, stormy skies, a ravenous bear, hallucinations and death. . . Bohemia begins as a threatening and destabilizing experience."²¹ The Bohemian wilderness can be read as a rendering of the chaotic and wild nature of Nature itself, and while there are tragic undertones present during the reader's introduction to Bohemia, they are necessary for the eventual restoration of Sicilia. The opening of act four is Shakespeare's way of emphasizing the fact that wild chaos, as opposed to human control, is crucial to Nature.

The most tragic events before the regeneration of act four begins are the deaths of Antigonus and the Mariners; however, their deaths, "eradicate the potential contamination of Bohemia by the things of Sicilia, with the exception of the baby, who will now be raised by the shepherds, whose approach to nature, we learn, is much different than Leontes's."²² The scene opens on the shores of Bohemia and we are instantly made aware that there is a general sense of foreboding among the Sicilians. The Mariner worries, "In my conscience, / The heavens with that we have in hand are angry, / And frown upon's" (3.3.4-6). There is a general sense that the men from Sicilia are outsiders and that Nature is responding to their threatening presence. Shortly after, Shakespeare writes the most famous stage direction of all time, [*Exit, Pursued by a Bear*] (3.3.56), and Antigonus dies accepting that, in the wilderness of Bohemia, men who seek to control or interfere with Nature eventually become the hunted. Michael Bristol writes, "The bear as symbol of the excessive cruelty of royal tyranny has ironic resonance . . . in that it is Antigonus, the compliant servant who does the king's bidding, rather than any of the other persons who

spoke against Leontes who suffers this extravagant punishment.”²³ This is significant as it suggests that Nature, through the natural necessities and urges of its inhabitants, is somehow stepping in here to right a wrong, or in this case, the many wrongs that transpired in Leontes’s Sicilia: “The male bear puts an end to the last vestige of Leontes’s anger against his wife and daughter,”²⁴ and it is, “as if Nature operates here not out of malice but an alternative sense of justice, and we are reminded that Antigonus’s demise came not from the bear’s violent desires but rather his basic need to eat.”²⁵

Antigonus’s death, while unfortunate, can be understood and accepted by the reader due to his loyalty to Leontes and the fact that he did as was commanded of him despite knowing how incredibly wrong it was. However, Perdita almost ends up dying as well due to the destruction of Antigonus. Tom Macfaul notes that, “Shakespeare’s most famous moment of a character being absorbed into nature is the death of Ophelia in *Hamlet*”²⁶, and in the same way that Ophelia was integrated into the pond that formed her watery grave, so too could Perdita have been swallowed by the Bohemian wilderness, were it not for the Old Shepherd.

The introduction of the Old Shepherd primes the reader for the events and ramifications of act four when he says, “thou metst with things dying, I / with things new-born” (3.3.104-5) in the sense that in many ways, his finding Perdita results in a kind of rebirth for her away from the “rot and pollution”²⁷ of Leontes’s court. The Old Shepherd and the Clown nurture Perdita and introduce her to their lifestyle, where Nature is venerated as opposed to dominated. Perdita is raised to eventually become, “the sheep-shearing ‘Queen’ of her adopted land and the hope of the future for her father and Sicilia.”²⁸ Although her title does not hold the power and prestige that Leontes’s crown holds, Perdita proves herself to be the one and only hope for her father through her knowledge and respect for her environment and through championing the cause of a Nature that remains free from human control and intervention.

Munroe writes that Perdita “operates as an ambassador of the natural world, not its superior . . . Perdita’s superior social position is demonstrated not by her assertion of authority over it but rather in the way that her horticultural art represents rather than alters nature.”²⁹ This sentiment is echoed by Polixenes who, in disguise, meets Perdita at the sheep-shearing and states, “Nothing she does

or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, / Too noble for this place” (4.4.157-9). Perdita’s royal birth combined with the reverence for the natural world taught to her by her found family in Bohemia, cement her as the antithesis to her controlling father, and this stands out almost instantly to Polixenes, who knew Leontes and had first-hand experience of his attempts to control everything in his path.

Perdita’s knowledge of Nature implies a kind of respect that leads into one of the most obviously ecological exchanges in the text, as she discusses the gillyvors. Scott writes that, “Perdita rejects the streaked gillyvors because their synthesis of colour suggests human intervention to the point of manipulation,”³⁰ saying, “our carnations and streaked gillyvors, which some call nature’s bastards” (4.4.82-3), to which Polixenes replies by stating, “This is an art / Which does mend nature—change it rather—but / The art itself is nature” (4.4.95-7). The text blurs the line between art and nature here, but in the end, Perdita comes out on the side of reverent distance, and Polixenes, on the side of human interference. While Polixenes is not suggesting the domination that Leontes craved, his determination to prove the necessity of interference connects him to the patriarchal “male Culture” stressed by Roberts, that asserts the need for man to subdue Nature and by extension, the feminine. This exchange between Perdita and Polixenes makes it clear that through *The Winter’s Tale* Shakespeare aligns the feminine with Nature and nurturing, and the male with dominance and control. The degree of this alignment depends on the character and which environment they inhabit, and Perdita’s cements her position as the only character able to bring the spring and regeneration of Bohemia to the brutal winter of Sicilia. The scene also harkens back to Hermione’s references to the cultivation of land when Perdita stresses, “I’ll not put / The dybble in earth to set one slip of them” (4.4.99-100); however, instead of casting a man as the farmer, as Hermione cast Leontes, Perdita asserts that she will be the one taking care of the land, and as such, will not abide human intervention that seeks to alter and manipulate Nature. Scott notes, “The ‘cunning’ use of the ‘dybble’ that Perdita refuses exposes her reluctance to intervene in an industry dependent on management... Perdita’s representation of intervention as supporting ‘nature’s bastards’ attempts to impeach human interference in specifically

moral terms.”³¹ Like her mother, Perdita proves over and over again that she is a better “husbandman” than Leontes, illustrating the power of respect and nurturing over dominance, and she brings her knowledge and reverence for Nature back with her when she returns to Sicilia.

The play begins in a Sicilia defined by domination and by Leontes’s need to categorize and control all things. Bohemia introduces the reader to the rebirth and regeneration possible in the spring and summer months and illustrates that “it is precisely the high summer of life that Leontes has lost for himself and Hermione”³², when he attempts to prevail over Nature and his environment. Acts one to three spawn death, waste, and a stunted growth and development in Sicilia, while act four introduces the healing and regenerative powers of the summer months into the world of the play followed by act five, where the restorative powers of nurturing are exemplified by the “statue” of Hermione coming to life. Paulina, as the “stage manager of the event”³³, gives the audience yet another woman in the play who Leontes tries to control and categorize, but who ends up playing a role in the healing of the Sicilian environment. The statue scene demonstrates that, like Perdita, Paulina is an apt caretaker.

The notion that “art can improve on nature through human intervention is radically undermined by the revelations” of the final statue scene.³⁴ Prior to the revelation of Hermione’s life, Leontes is reunited with both Polixenes and Perdita, so in many ways the Sicilian environment is restored before the big reveal; however, Shakespeare does not show us these restorative exchanges. There is no concrete answer as to why that is, but this paper posits that the reason is to allow the audience their happy ending while still highlighting the true power and restorative abilities of the final cycle of Nature represented in *The Winter’s Tale* through the highly regenerative and restorative act five. Seeing the statue, Leontes laments, “I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?” (5.3.37-8), giving the audience the first real hint that Perdita’s return has affected him, and inspired him to acknowledge his failings. Leontes’s reaction to the statue and especially the beauty in Hermione’s aging over the last sixteen years highlights his healing, and then Hermione’s quasi-resurrection asserts not only the status of Nature as superior to art and the

manmade world, but also that Nature's cycle has come full circle, and healed all of the damage and waste in Sicilia caused by Leontes's controlling tendencies.

"The play closes belonging to three women who all believe in nature—Perdita's purism, Paulina's mock statue, and Hermione's aging face testify to a belief in the nobility of the real thing, when the 'art itself is nature.'"³⁵ The fact that women, in every instance, prove to be the closest to Nature is no coincidence, and reading *The Winter's Tale* through an ecofeminist lens emphasizes the need for the protection of Nature and, by extension, a respect for the role of women in society. Munroe notes that according to Markham and the husbandry manuals of the period, "the wife's practical knowledge of the natural world makes her closer to Nature itself, which in turn underscores the need for the wife to be mastered by the husband just as he, as the books for men insist, must master Nature."³⁶ I contend that *The Winter's Tale* is absolutely criticizing man's attempts to dominate Nature and his environment. In the world of the play, attempting to dominate a woman is as futile as attempting to dominate Mother Nature herself, a lesson that cost Leontes the life of his son, and sixteen years of stasis away from his wife and daughter. Although it is both a romance and a comedy at points, *The Winter's Tale* is really a cautionary tale, designed to be read as a warning to those who dare to dominate rather than nurture and respect.

Notes

1. William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 2.1.25.
2. Simon C. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 97; Rene Girard, "The Crime and Conversion of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*," *Religion and Literature* 22.2/3 (1990): 193-219.
3. Stephen Orgel, Introduction to *The Winter's Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1.
4. Jennifer Munroe, "It's All About the Gillyvors: Engendering Art and Nature in *The Winter's Tale*," in *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011): 144.
5. Orgel, "Introduction," 12-13.
6. Gordana Galić Kakkonen and Ana Penjak, "The Nature of Gender: Are Juliet, Desdemona and Cordelia to their Fathers as Nature is to Culture?" *Critical Survey* 27.1 (2015): 19.
7. Sean Kane, "Spenserian Ecology," *ELH* 50.3 (1983): 461.
8. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*, 92.

9. Greta Gaard, "New Directions for Ecofeminism: Toward a More Feminist Ecocriticism," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 17.4 (2010): 658.

10. Munroe, "It's All About the Gillyvors," 146.

11. Rene Girard, "The Crime and Conversion of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*," in *Religion and Literature* 22.2/3 (1990): 196.

12. Kakkonen and Penjak, "The Nature of Gender," 19.

13. Orgel, "Introduction," 99.

14. Jeanne Addison Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild: Geography, Genus and Gender* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 159-160.

15. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*, 95.

16. Gaard, "New Directions for Ecofeminism," 648.

17. Kakkonen and Penjak, "The Nature of Gender," 25.

18. Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild*, 26.

19. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*, 92.

20. Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild*, 161.

21. Charlotte Scott, *Shakespeare's Nature: From Cultivation to Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 155.

22. Munroe, "It's All About the Gillyvors," 147.

23. Michael D. Bristol, "In Search of the Bear: Spatiotemporal Form and the Heterogeneity of Economies in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.2 (1991): 160.

24. Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild*, 83.

25. Munroe, "It's All About the Gillyvors," 147.

26. Tom Macfaul, *Shakespeare and the Natural World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 60.

27. Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare*, 98.

28. Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild*, 84.

29. Munroe, "It's All About the Gillyvors," 151.

30. Scott, *Shakespeare's Nature*, 176.

31. Scott, *Shakespeare's Nature*, 180.

32. Macfaul, *Shakespeare and the Natural World*, 79.

33. Roberts, *The Shakespearean Wild*, 163.

34. Scott, *Shakespeare's Nature*, 184.

35. Scott, *Shakespeare's Nature*, 186.

36. Munroe, "It's All About the Gillyvors," 148.