

**“I have drunk, and seen the spider”:
Conjuring Empathy or, How to Style
Words in *The Winter’s Tale***

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Upon hearing the Delphic oracle’s report exonerating Queen Hermione of infidelity, Leontes briskly remarks, “There is no truth at all i’t’h’ oracle. / The sessions shall proceed—this is mere falsehood” (3.2.137-138).¹ Rendering the prophecy a bogus non-sequitur, and establishing speech as a powerful force affecting how people deal with each other, Shakespeare’s last solo-authored king uses words with remarkable style. Leontes’s shocking but stylish denial of the queen’s innocence demonstrates not only his virtuoso deployment of language shaping critical actions, but also how badly he needs his words to have an impact on others and the world at large. As Lynn Enterline observes, the king “desire[s] to master the world by controlling all language.”² Tragically, Leontes’s magisterial, if icy demonstration of rhetorical agency is also an example of verbal abuse. To be sure, we have all experienced this type of language—directed at ourselves, someone else, or a group while we were present, and in films, television programs, or social media. Additionally, this violent discourse can be a devastating issue in relationships, romantic and otherwise.

Deeply attuned to the problem of harsh words directed at another person or a collective, in his penultimate romance, *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare analyzes the complex dynamic between

violent language and its stunning performance. Showcasing the traumatic upshot of what might be called “wounding words,” hurtful language which impacts interlocutors as it is penetratingly felt in body and mind, my piece argues that the play stimulates the offstage audience’s empathy as a cure for verbal abuse and analyzes how language influences its members’ “fellow feeling” response to performance. Cognizant of the power of words to wound and heal, Leontes’s striking investment in rhetorical domination, featuring his stylish utilization of effortlessly confident language, illuminates his belief that, as Stanley Cavell puts it, “To speak is to say what counts.”³ Of course, saying what counts is germane to expressing empathy—the affective response of feeling with, and not simply for another person. Consequently, I want to suggest that in *The Winter’s Tale*—a stunning meta-theatrical investigation of empathy’s compelling impact upon the Early Modern theater and the audience—words and empathy often conjure up each other, and emerge as an antidote for verbal abuse, or other forms of unkind language.

Ellen MacKay argues, “To deal in performance is always and inescapably to deal in conjuration.”⁴ Her claim foregrounds the Early Modern playhouse as a space of illusion where actors serve as its Protean agents. Frequently, in Shakespeare’s corpus, performative conjuring is executed by using powerful words to instantiate change. In *How to Do Things With Words*, J.L. Austin argues that words can simultaneously perform an action: “To say something is to do something . . . by saying or in saying something we are doing something.”⁵ Austin calls this type of speech a *performative sentence* or a “performative,” which “indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action—it is not normally thought of as just saying something.”⁶ Therefore, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick observes, “Austinian performativity is about how language constructs or affects reality rather than merely describing it.”⁷ In order for a speech act to be successful, precise ritualistic and felicitous conditions must also be fulfilled. For example, “The *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be . . . appropriate, and [often] the speaker himself or other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ actions or . . . uttering further words.”⁸ By turns deploying what Austin calls *illocutionary acts*, or “utterances

which have a certain (conventional) force" and *perlocutionary acts* establishing "what we bring about or achieve by saying something, such as convincing, persuading, [etc.]," the main characters in *The Winter's Tale* deftly fill its scenes with performatives, demonstrating that this is a play where words transformatively impact actions and the other way around.⁹ As it has been said, "Words have the power of the sword." To this end, I want to suggest that during a performance of this marvelously intense romance, members of the offstage audience sustain transient affective wounds from the verbal abuse which they hear and feel inexorably—on body and in mind—and that the rhetorical damage which the play inflicts is cathartically healed by the processes of what I call "empathetic witnessing." Similarly to Hermione, the audience learns from the trauma of verbal abuse as it is borne upon the body.

I argue that Shakespeare helps the audience to manage the shocking events and sometimes excruciatingly harsh words of the play by deploying the affective trauma which psychologists call "Stockholm Syndrome" as a landmark performative mechanism. First observed in the 1970's, this is a phenomenon where hostages adjust to their terrifying condition by empathizing with their hostage takers, even bizarrely defending them after escaping from their clutches. Fritz Breithaupt observes that because "the experience of being taken hostage is so existentially traumatic that it can in fact shake the contours of the self," the profound violence of the hostage situation simultaneously engenders the hostage's experience of "self-loss" and triggers "fellow feeling" with the hostage taker.¹⁰ Thus, in the case of hostage-taking, "Empathy does not originate here as an end in itself, but rather as a concrete medium that keeps channels of communication open."¹¹ And as we might expect, the hostage taker increasingly assumes monologic control over the connection which, rather than remaining "a dialogical I-you-relationship...becomes a 'you with me' relationship."¹²

Mainly responsible for generating Shakespearean Stockholm syndrome, Leontes engages the offstage audience in the affective undercurrents of what I would call "l'extimité pain," or the pain of external intimacy. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek explains of Jacques Lacan's concept of *l'extimité*, "The symbolic order is striving for a homeostatic balance, but there is

in its kernel, at its very centre, some strange, traumatic element which cannot be symbolized, integrated into the symbolic order—the Thing, Lacan coined a neologism for it: l'extimité—external intimacy.”¹³ Perhaps l'extimité pain occurs in two phases. The first is characterized by genuine affective distress which is ironically provoked by the normal entries of others into the intimate world of individuals. The second is delineated by the shocking verbal abuse (explicitly contrary to the longing for kind words) that often follows hard upon the entrance of these people into the same private world. Frequently, the verbal abuse that is deployed during times of l'extimité pain is triggered by the strong emotion of jealousy which Émile Littré defines as, “A sentiment which is born in love and which is produced by the fear that the loved person prefers someone else.”¹⁴ Although their jealousy is hardly obvious at all times, Hermione and Leontes's experience of l'extimité pain is shown in Roland Barthes's description of Werther's response to Charlotte, who heartlessly presents his gift of orange slices to another man:

“The oranges I had set aside, the only ones as yet to be found, produced an excellent effect, though at each slice which she offered, for politeness's sake, to an indiscreet neighbor, I felt my heart to be somehow pierced through.” The world is full of indiscreet neighbors with whom I must share the other . . . “You belong to me as well,” the world says.¹⁵

Barthes speculates that Werther concludes his anecdote by bitterly reflecting, “It was scarcely worth my while to set aside these oranges for her, since she gives them to others.”¹⁶ Ultimately, Werther confesses of his jealousy: “I am *vexed* with the others, with the other, with myself (from which a ‘scene’ can be generated).”¹⁷ In the case of Shakespeare's “good queen” (2.3.56) there's negligible admission of these human feelings of vexation, or honestly put, jealousy. And in the case of the king the reaction swiftly becomes horrifying. But if we look closely, the couple's interactions with others are often permeated by the sharp sting of jealousy—instigated by the couple's yearning to possess each other—and the fantasy that one might completely control another person with the force of his or her desire. Of course, the phenomenal jealousy of Hermione and Leontes (one implicit, the other explicit) is somewhat to be expected because, if subtly, the couple are obsessed with each other—and

with talking every day of their lives. Hermione, especially, craves Leontes’s praise. Erotically, she murmurs to the king, “Nay, let me have’t—I long. . .” (1.2.101).

To be sure, a central theme of *The Winter’s Tale* is the mutual passion of king and queen—and its haunting undertones of l’extimité pain. Because they are so deeply connected, the “traumatic kernel” provoking their experience of this stripe of pain is the (ironically normal) presence of others within their world, excepting perhaps Prince Mamillius. Over the course of *The Winter’s Tale*, I suggest that audience members are affectively ministered to by witnessing the destruction and miraculous reconstruction of the love between an equally powerful king and queen whose words separate and bring them back together. And by foregrounding the crucial question of the offstage audience’s desire—how what it wants is cathartically performed onstage—the play satisfies its members’ collective, if perhaps unexpressed longing to hear transformative words and to be healed by them. Since light and darkness are forces that exist in almost all human beings (and generally speaking, those whom Shakespeare found most interesting), Hermione and Leontes courageously reveal their desires, shadows, and pain to the light—and to our empathetic witnessing of their remarkable love story.

Famously, the play platforms “the winter’s tale” that the audience never hears fully told. The only person to receive most of the narrative is pregnant Hermione, and the teller is her ill-fated son, Mamillius. Evocatively, Hermione asks the prince to tell her a ghost story. However, because Mamillius may sense the impending threat to his mother’s life—tragically, the queen will be imprisoned and exiled for sixteen years—he opts not to tell everything onstage. Because ghosts are dead people, Mamillius’s superstition is that speaking of ghosts will lead to the creation of one. He isn’t wrong. But, macabrely, the death that his tale presages is his own.

Strikingly, Hermione makes the request for the winter’s tale herself. Re-joining Mamillius and the court ladies, she asks him to “Pray you sit by us, / And tell’s a tale” (2.1.22). Perceiving the grief that his father’s wounding words have recently caused to his mother, Mamillius empathetically observes to Hermione, “A sad tale’s best for winter” (2.1.25). Intuitively, the prince tells the “winter’s tale” as a performative cure for Leontes’s snowballing

verbal abuse, thus demonstrating the fact that, as Russ McDonald observes, “Language . . . has become an instrument for constructing a harmonious, protected realm within a bare and hostile world.”¹⁸ Extending solace to Hermione as they are spoken, Mamillius’s performative utterances illustrate how, as Austin explains, “To utter the sentence . . . is to do it.” or, in other words, “To say something is to do something.”¹⁹ In fact, the prince’s tale may, wondrously, become the play itself. As Cavell remarks, “I have heard it said . . . that the remainder of the play, after we no longer hear what Mamillius says, or would have said, is the play as it unfolds.”²⁰

Before Mamillius begins to speak, Hermione offers a few specifics on what she wants to hear. When the prince conjuringly reveals of his narrative selection, “I have one / Of sprites and goblins” (2.1.25-6) the queen agrees: “Let’s have that, good sir. / Come on, sit down, come on, and do your best / To fright me with your sprites.” (2.1.27-8). Significantly, Hermione doesn’t want to hear a story about goblins; she asks the prince to discourse on “sprites” instead. Of course, the queen’s preference for a tale about “sprites” is an affectionate reference to the young prince who is (at this moment) full of life. Moreover, she prudently cautions her son not to discourse on foul goblins in front of the court ladies. But if we take Mamillius’s reference to these unnerving creatures as tacitly alluding to his father (who has recently been behaving like a “goblin” to his mother), the queen’s request for a story about “sprites” (and not goblins) also signals Hermione’s growing unease with Leontes’s recently distressing behavior. During her trial, the queen will bravely clarify to her husband, “The bug which you would fright me with I seek” (3.2.90). At this moment, as she recalls Mamillius’s “winter’s tale,” Hermione seeks out the “bug” or “goblin” in the king’s words, or perhaps within the king himself, who transiently plays the goblin (or “bugbear”) whom she protectively sought to keep from her son’s mind.

Initially, Leontes’s violent jealousy (what Mamillius’s telling stimulates) is occluded by the tale’s more innocent claim to be domestic entertainment.²¹ As Mamillius creepily explains to Hermione (and for a moment to the rest of the audience), “There was a man— / Dwelt by a churchyard—I will tell it softly, / Yon crickets shall not hear it” (2.1.28, 30-1). From what we are told,

sometime in the past a nameless man (who probably symbolizes father Leontes) lived near a churchyard. According to the prince’s haunting narrative, this was a ghostlike individual who hadn’t yet acknowledged his symbolic death, the fact that he had already begun to die emotionally, if not physically. Because without Hermione’s love Leontes feels that he is dying—and he enforces tragic consequences for his emotional pain. Listening, and perhaps unconsciously calling attention to her erotic desire to be filled up by words, Hermione coaxes the prince: “Come on then, / And give’t me in mine ear” (2.1.32).

Immediately after Mamillius begins the winter’s tale, Hermione’s husband enters and explodes into fury. Intense Leontes explains his hurt feelings thus:

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 extraordinary metaphor of the spider in the cup is the king’s unobvious explanation to the queen that he’s seriously aware of the fact that Hermione has committed adultery with Polixenes of Bohemia. Irrately, Leontes points out that, really, the problem is he knows, cannot help but know, is tormented by the knowledge of what the Queen has already done—and therefore his entire psyche is consumed by the hideous cognizance that as he magnificently puts it, “I have drunk, and seen the spider.” The king’s speech demonstrates how as Linda Charnes observes, “Real life is what is most hypnotically represented.”²² Leontes clarifies that if he hadn’t found out about his wife’s bald sinning against him and their marriage he wouldn’t currently have a problem with her. The issue is his tortured awareness of what she has already, stonily—and probably repeatedly—done. (To the king’s mind, the adulterers are flying in the face of his royal prerogative to soundly bed his own wife, as often as he desires). So, Leontes lashes out with a stunning and humiliatingly public diatribe against the wretched queen—a vituperative, highly stylized expression of pain, shame, and rage at

what he imagines (albeit incorrectly) to be marital infidelity. He is unbelievably angry with her.

The dazzling image of the spider lying in wait at the bottom of the cup (and Leontes's gorge rising when he spies the lurking arachnid) foreshadows the king's vengeful plan to weave a plot-proof web where he will—at least in his own mind and with devastating consequences—convict the innocent queen of adultery with, as he indignantly monikers Polixenes, “the harlot king” (2.3.4). Startled by Leontes's entrance (and despite perhaps being tacitly pleased by the spectacle of the king's jealous rage), Hermione pointedly asks her husband, “What is this? Sport?” (2.1.58). But the question proves futile, as at this moment the queen has underestimated the king's exacting and jealously Stockholmsian mindset. Incensed with Hermione, Leontes coldly orders the gathered lords: “Bear the boy hence: he shall not come about her. / Away with him” (2.1.59-60). Tragically, the stage directions indicate that, “Mamillius is taken away.” Forever. And in the same scene, Leontes inexorably commands of his wife, “Away with her, to prison” (2.1.103). He jails her so that no one else can have her.

By the first scene of the second act, the audience is confronted with multiple tragedies of separation. Yet, Shakespeare begins *The Winter's Tale* by showing us a couple who are in love with each other—and, I think, never quite fall out of love. Movingly, Hermione and Leontes embody the Biblical sentiment in Genesis 2:24: “That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body.” In other words, cognizance of their bodily separation—the condition of being Other to one another—leads the king and queen to experience a tenet of Lacanian *l'extimité*, the inexorable fact of the Other's being as “something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me.”²³ Perhaps one reason why the couple remains in love is because Hermione matches flashy Leontes verbally—and there was probably a lot of charismatic bantering during the king's torturously long summer courtship of her as well. But when Leontes begs Polixenes to stay with them a while longer, Hermione doesn't immediately intervene. In fact, the king must prompt her: “Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you” (1.2.27). This may be the highest praise that Leontes feels he can offer to anyone. He wants to hear how his wife's mind works. In her first words in the play, Hermione succinctly argues her case:

I had thought, sir, to have held my peace until
You had drawn oaths from him not to stay. You, sir,
Charge him too coldly. Tell him you are sure
All in Bohemia's well; this satisfaction
The bygone day proclaimed. Say this to him,
He's beat from his best ward. (1.2.28-33)

Since her words are primarily intended to please her husband, the queen may briefly hesitate before speaking. Craving Leontes's approval of her speech, Hermione explains to the king that she has given the matter some thought and is surprised by what he believes to be the necessity of her intervention. However, since it gratifies Leontes to show off her verbal skill, she will continue to speak, if necessary. Hermione sees and loves Leontes as a complete person—and of course she will argue for Polixenes's staying. Recognizing Leontes's performative introduction of (as Sedgwick puts it), "the topic of marriage itself as theater," Hermione skillfully enacts the proverb: "*le mariage, c'est les autres*: like a play, marriage exists in and for the eyes of others."²⁴ In her speech, Hermione calls Polixenes's earlier promises "oaths," which she observes are serious vows. Comically, she also explains that were he to swear that he longs to see his son Florizel, the hard-hearted couple would relent and she and the court ladies would emasculatingly "thwack him hence with distaffs" (1.2.37). But when all is said and done, Hermione solicits Polixenes on behalf of Leontes: "Yet of your royal presence I'll adventure / The borrow of a week" (1.2.38-9). Using the word "adventure" as a verb, the queen presents the extra days in the kingdom as good fun, intimating to the foreign king: "Let's think of my bantering with you, my having my way with you, as a game which will only elicit more pleasures." And because she is aware of her husband's jealous penchant for always assuming the worst about her interactions with other men, Hermione empathetically reminds the king (in the only time that she uses his name in the play), "Yet, good deed, Leontes, / I love thee not a jar o'th' clock behind / What lady she her lord" (1.2.42-3). Because she longs for Leontes's praise, Hermione manipulatively refrains from using his name frequently so that she can retain the upper hand in conversation. Of course, the queen probably secretly enjoys saying her husband's name, allowing him to hear it—very occasionally—from her treasured lips. Because as Žižek observes, "it is the name .

. . . which supports the identity of the object,” Hermione transiently controls Leontes by utilizing “the radical contingency of naming, the fact that naming itself retroactively constitutes its reference.”²⁵ By naming Leontes, Hermione confers his identity to him.

In response to Bohemia’s repeated avowal that he really can’t stay—“I may not, verily” (1.2.45)—Hermione swiftly remarks,

Verily?
 You put me off with limber vows. But I,
 Though you would seek t’unsphere the stars with oaths,
 Should yet say “Sir, no going.” Verily
 You shall not go. A lady’s “verily” is
 As potent as a lord’s. Will you go yet?
 Force me to keep you as a prisoner,
 Not like a guest: so you shall pay your fees
 When you depart, and save your thanks. How say you?
 My prisoner? Or my guest? By your dread “verily”
 One of them you shall be. (1.2.46-56)

As the queen uses the word, “verily” means “truly” or “sincerely.” In the final scene of the play, Leontes (recalling Hermione’s speech) asks of Paulina’s mysterious stone statue, “Would you not deem it breathed, and that those veins / Did verily bear blood?” (5.3.64). In his later usage, Leontes’s “verily” evokes his wife’s humanness, her pregnant body and its moving aliveness. Of course, at this moment the queen’s language demonstrates that she is both human and humane—a thoughtful human being who uses words (in this case, perlocutionary utterances manifesting change) to great effect. As Leontes’s queen observes to Bohemia, “A lady’s ‘verily’ is / As potent as a lord’s” (1.2.50-1.) After Polixenes agrees to stay on at least until mid-week, Hermione changes the topic of conversation to ask him about the kings’ childhoods together. According to Polixenes, original sin was unknown to the boy princes whom he nostalgically depicts, “as twinned lambs that did frisk i’t’h sun / . . . what we changed / Was innocence for innocence” (1.2.67-9). But this male-only Eden didn’t last. As Hermione (indicating her person and pregnancy) wryly points out, “By this we gather / You have tripped since” (1.2.75-6). The queen uses the pronoun “this” to refer to several things: her pregnant body, the fact of her marriage to Leontes, and their conversation. She jokes to Polixenes that since she’s carrying the king’s second child, he and Leontes

have obviously “tripped,” or “fallen” since those halcyon days of childhood innocence. Of course, man’s universal “fall” into sexual pleasure—and the deep, contingent joys of the marriage bed—are represented by Hermione’s dramatic onstage pregnancy and the upcoming birth of Princess Perdita. Observing that his wife is herself quite a trip, Leontes bemusedly asks Hermione, “Is he won yet?” (1.2.86). And she confidently assures the king, “He’ll stay, my lord” (1.2.87). Inarguably, Hermione has satisfied the Austinian dictate that by *saying* something (arguing her case), she has simultaneously *done* something (achieved Polixenes’s staying). And of course, as a result of her stylish rhetorical performance she has been instantiated as what Bradin Cormack dubs “the third sovereign in the room” whose language highlights “the sovereign source, in *her*, of a measurable effect in the world.”²⁶ Seriously impressed by his wife’s speech, Leontes confesses, “At my request he would not. / Hermione, my dearest, thou never spok’st / To better purpose” (1.2.87). He is very proud of her.

But the queen’s intervention is undertaken at her husband’s behest and in pursuit of his approval. Subtly, Hermione’s preference for Leontes to speak first indicates her desire for him to approve of her speech. Unsubtly, the queen ends up begging the king for praise. Hearing Leontes’s satisfied observation that she has never turned her words towards a better purpose, Hermione immediately asks, “Never?” (1.2.88). And in response to the king’s minimalist reply (“Never, but once.”) (1.2.89), the queen prompts him to go on, explain what you mean: “What? Have I twice said well? When was’t before?” (1.2.90). For as she observes,

One good deed, dying toungeless,
Slaughters a thousand waiting upon that.
Our praises are our wages. You may ride’s
With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs ere
With spur we heat an acre. But to th’ goal:
My last good deed was to entreat his stay.
What was my first? It has an elder sister,
Or I mistake you. O, would her name were Grace!
But once before I spoke to th’ purpose? When?
Nay, let me have’t—I long. (1.2.92-101)

Facetiously, Hermione quips to the company present that if her husband doesn’t praise her for doing a good deed, she will instantly

cease to do thousands more. Characterizing herself as a healthy mare glowing with vitality, galloping through the kingdom's fields, and motivated onwards by a "soft kiss" of the spur, the queen metaphorically connects the image of the thin, biting metal spurs of the horse's rider to Leontes's incisive encomiums (which inspire all of her good deeds). Hermione admits that she feels paid, even overpaid by Leontes's praise. The comic haste with which the queen swears that she will act after hearing the king's commendations emphasizes the Austinian dictate that performative words do something as they are being uttered. To be sure, a brief pause between words uttered and actions taken may exist, but—as Hermione assures Leontes—not much of one. The queen speaks honestly of her responsiveness to her husband's words. Poignantly, Hermione wants to hear from Leontes that she has done well. His words fill her with utmost pleasure.

Wanting his sweet wife to be gratified by his speech, Leontes recalls the first time that the queen spoke to the purpose, "Why, that was when / Three crabbed months had soured themselves to death / Ere I could make thee open thy white hand / And clap thyself my love. Then didst thou utter, 'I am yours for ever'" (1.2.102-4). Smoothly reminding Hermione of her somber vow to him, the king calls attention to the fact that he was actually listening when she mocked Polixenes for making his grave oaths—and that she has obviously made some of her own. In this brief reminiscence, Leontes speaks—really, performs speech—with remarkable style. Recollecting the lovely memory of his tenacious pursuit of the queen (for months, crab-like, he approached her indirectly), Leontes empathetically suggests that he understands his wife as likely suffering from the slight pangs of "l'extimité pain." After all, since she is close to giving birth—and will soon be experiencing a whole other level of pain—Hermione may privately long to be alone with Leontes, even if she doesn't say so directly. Tragically, Hermione's dangerously *excessive* longing to hear Leontes's praise becomes a condemning force against her when he begins to suspect her of committing adultery. Of course, the king's rhetorical technique for injuring the queen is especially upsetting because Hermione feels surfeit with joy upon hearing Leontes's praise. Openly expressing her pleasure, she acknowledges his words and her own good deed by drolly exclaiming, "Why, lo you now, I have spoke to th' purpose twice" (1.2.106).

Believing that things have resolved themselves as they should, Hermione freely "gives her hand to Polixenes," and they walk to another part of the stage. Instantly, Leontes furiously exclaims, "Too hot, too hot! / To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods" (1.2.108-9). Tormented by Othello-esque jealousy, Leontes launches into a series of obsessive diatribes against Hermione's infidelity where his tortured speech communicates its own incommunicability. Stephen Orgel argues that Leontes's "linguistic opacity," which I suggest is frequently triggered by l'extimité pain, underscores the fact that the Early Modern period "often found in incomprehensibility a positive virtue," and thus the audience is challenged to "interpret this obscurity."²⁷ Understanding the king's complexly byzantine syntax as a stylized expression of l'extimité pain, audience members find themselves empathizing with Leontes, whose blustery language showcases his jealous rage and moving expression of "Shakespearean pathos, a sense that one may feel mere sadness enough to fill an empty world."²⁸ After watching Hermione and Polixenes exiting [for what the former perhaps inadvertently refers to as a (per)version of Eden: "If you would seek us, / We are yours i'th' garden" (1.2.176-7)], Leontes spits out, "Inch-thick, knee-deep, o'er head and ears a forked one!" (1.2.185)—and ominously advises Mamillius, "Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays, and I / Play too" (1.2.186-7). I would argue that the extremely high level of verbal abuse in *The Winter's Tale* is intended to briefly affectively traumatize members of the offstage audience that we are supposed to feel the violent shock of Leontes's unkind language as it resonates within our bodies and minds. For example, after Mamillius is forcibly taken from the queen's arms, Leontes will furiously hiss to the gathered lords (and Hermione): "Look on her, mark her well. / . . . 'Tis pity she's not honest, honourable. / She's an adulteress! / . . . I have said / She's an adulteress, I have said with whom. / More, she's a traitor . . . / she's / A bed-swerger, even as bad as those / That vulgars give bold'st titles" (2.1.65, 68, 78, 87-9, 92-4). Derek Traversi argues that as Leontes becomes convinced of Hermione's infidelity, his language displays an "insistence upon the harsh directness of common speech."²⁹ An example of forceful illocutionary speech—and devastating wounding words—Leontes's verbal abuse of Hermione, which is filled with

“a series of disruptions, disturbances and distortions . . . in the smooth progress of the play[’s] language,” displays what Gordon McMullan observes as the “tension and violence of expression” in Shakespeare’s “late style.”³⁰

In the final scene of Act 2, Leontes commands the lords of Sicilia to organize “a just and open trial” (2.3.203) for the queen. But as it turns out nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, Leontes seizes on the public courtroom as a transformative space where all speech act conditions will be met and his words alone will have maximum impact—what Cavell resonantly dubs a “theater of jealousy.”³¹ Arguably, during the trial Hermione is put in the position of a hostage who must defy her hostage-taker (and empathetically attempt to see things from Leontes’s perspective) in order to save her life. However, she evades the trauma of “self-loss” by making several honest arguments of her own (including directly stating her innocence), all of which persuade audiences onstage and off. For obviously all of the accusations made against the good queen are inaccurate and unfair. At the center of this scene, Cleomenes and Dion enter with a letter from the Delphic Oracle. The life-saving report is as follows:

*Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless, Camillo a true subject,
Leontes a jealous tyrant, his innocent babe truly begotten, and
the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not
found.* (3.2.130-131)

Leontes incredulously asks, “Hast thou read truth?” (3.2.134) and when it’s confirmed that the report is accurate, the king simply states: “There is no truth at all i’th’ oracle. / The sessions shall proceed—this is mere falsehood” (3.2.137-8). Of course, Leontes’s blasé denial of the truth is shockingly tragic. Flatly denying the validity of the missive, Leontes “abuses” its message by employing an Austinian “Rho” (r) or “hollow” rhetorical case where “we speak of our infelicitous act as ‘professed’ or ‘hollow’. . . and as not implemented . . . rather than as void or without effect.”³²

To be clear, the oracle’s words are hardly lacking in effect. On the contrary, their veracity will be demonstrated throughout the rest of the play. However, by dismissing those truthful words with a speech act of his own, the king ensures that the oracular report cannot prove the queen’s innocence. Leontes communicates to

Hermione that now he is the only god to whom she must attend. Verily, Shakespeare never wrote a more heartbreaking queen.

After Leontes's shocking abuse of the oracular truth, a messenger reports that the boy-king Mamillius has died from grief at being taken from his mother (who faints and is carried offstage until Act 5). The sorrowful king vows repentance: "So long as nature / Will bear up with this exercise" (3.2.237-8). And after witnessing Leontes's atonement for the wrongs that he has committed against his loved ones, the audience is encouraged to forgive his unbelievable verbal abuse of his wife.

The king's resolution to "bear up" presages a legendary stage direction in the Shakespearean corpus. After Antigonus lays the infant Perdita down on the (fictional) Bohemian seacoast, and flees the hunting tumult, he cries, "I am gone forever!" (3.3.57). Famously, the direction indicates Antigonus's, "Exit, pursued by a bear" (3.3.57). There are remarkable rumors that the rough beast in *The Winter's Tale* was real.³³ However, despite critical speculation, it's highly unlikely that a real bear appeared onstage. The nobleman's pursuer was probably a man in a bear suit, roaring loudly.³⁴ In addition to conjuring up the experience of performative wonder, the indomitable bear's unexpected arrival stimulates audience members to feel as stunned as Hermione was when lambasted by Leontes, whose verbal violence towards her renders him a metaphoric substitute for one of Mamillius's spectral "bugbears."³⁵ Yet, the bear's entrance also heralds Leontes's human/e transition from violence to solitude, to nurture and nurturing. For ultimately the king emerges as a restorative agent, especially at the end of the play when—at long last—he embraces his long-lost (and supposed dead) wife.

The statue scene showcases a performative miracle. Stone is made flesh onstage. The fifth act opens with Leontes's appreciation of Paulina's presence in his life and agreement with her request that he allow her to choose a new queen for him. It has been sixteen long years since Leontes cursed her out of the royal chamber and prepared himself for Hermione's horrific trial. In response to Leontes's commendations, Paulina says that she has only ever attempted to do good and humbly observes of his and Polixenes's visit to her abode: "It is a surplus of your grace which never / My life may last to answer" (5.3.7-8). Paulina's use of the word "grace"

echoes Hermione's persistent questioning of Leontes regarding her first good deed: "What was my first? It has an elder sister, / Or I mistake you. O, would her name were Grace!" (1.2.98-9). As the fifth act movingly reveals, Hermione's metaphoric sister turns out to be Paulina, whose empathetic visitations to both members of the royal couple reflect spiritual and everyday grace. Arriving at her house, Leontes asks to see the statue of his queen, and revealing the sublime object, Paulina announces, "Behold, and say 'tis well" (5.3.20). At this point, the audience hears another echo of Hermione's words—and her longing for Leontes's praise: "What? Have I twice said well?" (1.2.90). In her request, Paulina subtly asks the king to publically praise Hermione (who isn't actually a statue and is attentively listening to the conversation). The duly-acknowledged queen has a moment to prepare herself before Paulina, "Draws a curtain and reveals the figure of Hermione standing like a statue."

Of course, the statue is remarkably life-like because, although unbeknownst to audiences onstage and off, it's living Hermione. Paulina's conjuring ruse is also Shakespeare's. Among the most striking examples of knowledge being occluded from the audience in the corpus, the remarkable secret of Hermione's sixteen year preservation as a living queen becomes, as Anne Barton observes, "a resurrection which is as much a miracle for the theatre audience as for the characters involved."³⁶ The queen's stunning choice to playact a statue *in front of Leontes* recalls her imprisonment and lengthy exile—and emphasizes her freedom and vindication. Furthermore, the scene presents a healing reversal of performative Stockholm Syndrome (where the hostage's voice is silenced by the hostage taker's own)—because now Leontes badly wants to hear from (silent) Hermione. Called upon to valorize the onstage miracle of stone transformed into flesh, the offstage audience's belief in what it witnesses is stimulated.³⁷ In a 2010 Royal Shakespeare Company production of the play, the scene was staged with the purpose of gravely frightening Leontes. The queen held herself motionless until she chose to move—and to badly scare her spouse. I believe that Shakespeare would appreciate this interpretation, which emphasizes the king's gentle come-uppance. Returning to the world and to her place as his wife, Hermione empathetically reverses her earlier questioning of Leontes when he demanded that

Mamillius be taken from her arms. At this moment, the queen not only forgives the king, but gamely prompts Leontes to wonder: “What is this? Sport?” When Hermione steps from her pedestal, Leontes joyfully exclaims, “O, she’s warm! / If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating” (5.3.110) and, finally, embraces his wife.

Crucially, in this last scene Hermione also establishes herself as Perdita’s mother. Assuring the princess, “[I] have preserved / Myself to see the issue” (5.3.127-8), she psychologically reverses Leontes’s earlier dismissal of his daughter: “No, I’ll not rear / Another’s issue” (2.3.190). Because Hermione has returned, she clarifies her investment in raising Perdita—the fact that it’s hardly an issue for her. Literally, Hermione’s *last word* in the play is “issue.” Intuiting that Leontes used the word pejoratively to refer to infant Perdita, the queen negates the king’s prior usage by emphasizing that she has waited for years to be in her daughter’s life. There are no issues now. Speedily appropriating Hermione’s questioning of Perdita as a *modus operandi* for engaging with others, the king tells everyone that each person in the drama which he has co-opted can “demand and answer to his part” (5.3.153) and asks Paulina to lead them away for further conversation. And Leontes commands that all this be done with haste, *as he can’t wait to be with her again*—and this time, hopefully forever. Hermione and Leontes’s empathy for each other makes their reunion possible. And they demonstrate the truth of what we might call the *human/e oracle*: knowing what is true in our hearts and communicating this reality accordingly. Indubitably, Hermione and Leontes’s great love abides at the core of *The Winter’s Tale*.

Notes

For the same person for sixteen years and his mother, Rob and Deborah.

1. All Shakespeare quotations are from William Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, ed. John Pitcher (London and New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2010).

2. Lynn Enterline, “‘You speak a language that I understand nor’: The Rhetoric of Animation in *The Winter’s Tale*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.1 (Spring 1997): 41.

3. Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (1987; repr., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 205.

4. Ellen MacKay, "Against Plausibility," in *Theater Historiography: Critical Interventions*, eds. Henry Bial and Scott Magelssen (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 26.

5. J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, eds. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa, 2nd ed. (1962; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 12.

6. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 6-7.

7. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003), 5.

8. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 8.

9. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 109.

10. Fritz Breithaupt, *Cultures of Empathy*, working paper, The Poynter Center for the Study of Ethics and American Institutions, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN. (2009), 34.

11. Breithaupt, *Cultures of Empathy*, 35.

12. Breithaupt, *Cultures of Empathy*, 38.

13. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989; repr., London and New York: Verso, 2008), 147.

14. Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 144.

15. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 110.

16. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 110-11.

17. Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 111.

18. Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare and the Arts of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 191.

19. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 6, 12.

20. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 198.

21. As Marjorie Garber observes of its genre, "The 'winter's tale' of this play's title is both literal and proverbial. The phrase meant something like 'fairy tale,' or a diverting entertainment, largely for the amusement of women, children, and the old." Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All* (2004; repr., New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 830.

22. Linda Charnes, "Extraordinary Renditions: Towards an Agency of Place," in *Shakespeare After 9/11: How a Social Trauma Reshapes Interpretation*, eds. Douglas A. Brooks, Matthew Biberman, Julia Reinhard Lupton (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 75.

23. Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (1996; repr. London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 83.

24. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 72.

25. Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 104-105.

26. Bradin Cormack, "Shakespeare's Other Sovereignty: On Particularity and Violence in *The Winter's Tale* and the Sonnets," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.4 (Winter 2011): 493, 509.

27. Stephen Orgel, "The Poetics of Incomprehensibility" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.4 (Winter 1991): 434, 436.

28. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 203.

29. Derek Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Last Phase* (1955; repr., Stanford: Stanford UP: 1965), 116.

30. Gordon McMullan, *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing: Authorship in the Proximity of Death* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 111, 115.

31. Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, 196.

32. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 16.

33. For example, Elizabeth Davis argues, “It’s not impossible that a real bear was used at the premiere. The Globe Theatre was, after all, not far from the city’s bear-baiting pits.” Elizabeth Davis, “‘Exit, pursued by a bear’: How do you approach Shakespeare’s famous stage direction?” *Royal Opera House News* (April 2014), <https://www.roh.org/news/exit-pursued-by-a-bear-how-do-you-approach-shakespeares-famous-stage-direction>.

34. As John Pitcher observes, “The role of pursuing Antigonus offstage would have been played in early performances by an actor in a bear costume, possibly a white one.” John Pitcher, Introduction to *The Winter’s Tale* by William Shakespeare, ed. John Pitcher (London and New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2010), 143.

35. Consequently, Michael Bristol is surely correct to argue that, “It is appropriate to consider this bear as a Candlemas bear since Candlemas is the *time* of boundaries and transformations.” Michael Bristol, “In Search of the Bear: Spatiotemporal Form and the Heterogeneity of Economies in *The Winter’s Tale*,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.2 (Summer 1991): 161.

36. Anne Barton, *Leontes and the Spider: Language and Speaker in Shakespeare’s Last Plays*, ed. and intro. Kiernan Ryan, (1999; repr., London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 40.

37. As Janet Adelman observes, “Shakespeare’s is a participatory theater, in which the awakening of our faith is required.” Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, Hamlet to The Tempest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 235.