

## “Away With That Audacious Lady”: Paulina’s Rhetoric In *The Winter’s Tale*

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**L** first read *The Winter’s Tale* in an undergraduate Shakespeare course at Northwestern University over thirty years ago. At that time, Hermione the young, well-spoken vulnerable wife was the character to whom I was drawn. Fast forward thirty-three years. Upon rereading *The Winter’s Tale*, I find Paulina, the outspoken older woman, now draws my attention. I admire the way Paulina takes on Leontes, boldly telling him precisely what she thinks—which is precisely what he does not want to hear. The verbal struggle between Leontes and Paulina illustrates an important energizing principle of language, particularly the tension Mikhail Bakhtin identifies between “authoritative discourse” and “internally persuasive discourse.” While not addressing gender, Bakhtin explains the dialogic movement away from “authoritative discourse” toward “internally persuasive discourse” in ways that help illuminate the central conflict in this play. King Leontes speaks the language of authority, and Paulina calls into question his authoritarian control. In his later years Shakespeare created a number of capable women, especially in the problem comedies, including Isabella in *Measure for Measure* and Portia in *Merchant of Venice*; these women revise the systems they engage with. Among older women like Paulina, however, Margaret Mead has identified a trait peculiar to the post-menopausal period: zest. In this stage, unencumbered by childbearing and child rearing, women often move beyond restrictive cultural scripts and speak out against prevailing norms. Paulina illustrates well this postmenopausal zest or PMZ, and I and some of my peers can particularly relate to this audacious lady whom Harley Granville-Barker calls “Plucky Paulina.”<sup>1</sup> She reminds me of several women I have admired, including a colleague affectionately known as “Hurricane Hilda,” who often unsettled the male leadership of the college where I teach, boldly exercising her voice for worthy causes. Like Hilda and other PMZers, Paulina employs bold discourse that includes transgressive, artful, and medicinal words. Her audacious words are the major force that

moves events in *The Winter's Tale* from tragic disaster to healing recovery.

Paulina's transgressive words are spoken in response to the courtly rhetoric that Leontes has used to silence Hermione. Leontes' official language, what Bakhtin would term "authoritative discourse," imposes its dogmatic version of truth and the law. In *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin writes:

The authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it. . . . It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers. Its authority was already *acknowledged* in the past. It is therefore not a question of choosing it from among other possible discourses that are its equal.<sup>2</sup>

Bakhtin describes this as a "magisterial" language that "demands our unconditional allegiance."<sup>3</sup> Lynn Enterline comments that Leontes "speaks as if his voice alone should be heard."<sup>4</sup> Of course he *is* the king, surrounded by his company of courtiers, who dare not counter his pronouncements. When his advisors try to make some defense of Hermione, Leontes orders them to hold their peace since "We need no more of your advice" (2.1.168).<sup>5</sup> Bakhtin explains how such authoritarian discourse "retards and freezes thought";<sup>6</sup>

Leontes sees himself alone as competent to judge. Unjustly accused, Hermione tries to defend tactfully her faithfulness in language that has a powerful emotional effect:

For Polixenes

(With whom I am accus'd), I do confess  
I lov'd him as in honor he requir'd;  
With such a kind of love that might become  
A lady like me; with a love even such,  
So, and no other, as yourself commanded;  
Which not to have done I think had been in me  
Both disobedience and ingratitude  
To you and toward your friend, (3.2.61-69)

but she is silenced during her trial. Enterline argues that Leontes' jealousy is caused by Hermione's power of rhetoric: "Outdone in rhetorical power by his wife, Leontes . . . moves to reassert control over her language."<sup>7</sup> Hermione has successfully persuaded Polixenes to stay when Leontes could not. Leontes asserts his authority through the official language of the indictment:

Hermione, queen to the worthy Leontes, King of Sicilia,  
thou art here accused and arraigned of high treason, in

committing adultery with Polixenes, King of Bohemia, and conspiring with Camillo to take away the life of our sovereign lord the King, thy royal husband: the pretense whereof being by circumstances partly laid open, thou, Hermione, contrary to the faith and allegiance of a true subject, didst counsel and aid them, for their better safety, to fly away by night (3.2.11-21).

In her trial Hermione says to Leontes: "You speak a language that I understand not" (3.2.80). This couple clearly is speaking different languages. Leontes' authoritative discourse silences Hermione's more persuasive discourse, which comes from her heart and powerfully appeals to everyone who is roused by Leontes' harsh accusation.

After the tragic events of the first act, Paulina makes her entrance and promptly plagues Leontes with her "audacious" voice. Hermione's tragedy awakens Paulina's anger and her rhetoric so that she breaks free from Leontes' courtly authority, openly expressing her contrarian response. Bakhtin explains this dialogic movement/pattern:

Consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one's own and another's discourse, between one's own and another's thought, is activated rather late in development. When thought begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse. . . . In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half-ours and half-someone else's. Its creativity and productiveness consist precisely in the fact that such a word awakens new and independent words, that it organizes masses of our words from within.<sup>8</sup>

Her independence awakened, Paulina proclaims, "If I prove honey-mouth'd let my tongue blister," establishing herself as the voice contrary to the "honey-mouth'd" courtiers (2.2.31). She explains to Leontes and the court:

- Paulina:* Do come with words as medicinal as true,  
Honest as either, to purge him of that humor.  
That presses him from sleep.
- Leontes:* {What} noise there, ho?
- Paulina:* No noise, my lord, but needful conference  
About some gossips for your Highness.
- Leontes:* How?
- Away with that audacious lady! (2.3.37-42)

These two have begun their verbal sparring—his word provokes her counter word. Paulina uses her “boundless tongue” (2.3.92) to be Hermione’s advocate since Hermione is unjustly silenced. Not mincing words, Paulina accuses Leontes of slandering his wife and children: “Whose sting is sharper than the sword’s, and will not/. . . once remove/ The root of his opinion, which is rotten/ As ever oak or stone was sound” (2.3.87-91).

Stuart Kurland comments that Paulina “makes a habit of telling Leontes exactly what he doesn’t want to hear.”<sup>9</sup> Her manner of speech reflects a lively, emotionally vivid language, not part of lofty official discourse. Feeling baited, Leontes tries to put her down with the old jab about women “of boundless tongue” who beat their husbands. When Leontes taunts Antigonus about his out-of-control “lewd-tongued wife” and even threatens hanging because he won’t stop Paulina’s speech, Antigonus retorts,

Hang all husbands  
That cannot do that feat, you’ll leave yourself  
Hardly one subject. (2.3.110-112)

The wit demonstrated by this well-matched couple, Paulina and Antigonus, suggests their resistance to Leontes’ authoritarian dogmatism and their ability to see the absurdity of his hysterical accusation. Such clever retorts indirectly call into question established authority.

When threatened with burning, Paulina goes on to tell Leontes:

I’ll not call you a tyrant;  
But this most cruel usage of your queen  
(Not able to produce more accusation  
Than your own weak hing’d fancy) something savors  
Of tyranny and will ignoble make you. (2.3.116-120)

Plaguing Leontes like an irritating gadfly, Paulina is the only one bold enough to confront the king about his idiotic belief in Hermione’s adultery and witchery.

Building on Bakhtin’s dialogic pattern, Julia Kristeva explains the tendency of women, who are often outside the language system, to transgress that system. This transgression is a significant part of the dialogic interaction between authority, which she terms the “symbolic,” and the challenge to authority, which she terms the “semiotic.” Her emphasis is on transgression—not stopping with definitive claims to truth, but teasing out the unconscious, “semiotic” outside-of-language meaning and thereby unsettling the “symbolic” law of the father. Kristeva writes that, “[t]he moment of transgression is the key moment in practice; we can speak of practice wherever there is transgression of systemacity.”<sup>10</sup>

Since official language systems often do not reflect women's perspectives (recall Hermione's plea: "You speak a language that I understand not"), women like Paulina are sometimes forced to transgress the accepted speech in order to avoid complicity with the status quo, which can lead to moral atrophy. Paulina helps guard against the excesses of Leontes' dogmatism. We see ethical paralysis in the courtiers who Paulina claims "are thus so tender o'er his follies,/ Will never do him good, not one of you" (2.3.128-129). Visiting Hermione in prison, Paulina tells the attendants that she will tell Leontes about his daughter's birth since "The office/ Becomes a woman best. I'll take't upon me" (2.2.29-30). It is a woman's job not to be "honey tongued."

Paulina is not just baiting or irritating Leontes; she clearly is empowered by moral authority; she proclaims to Hermione's attendants in prison:

I'll use the tongue I have. If wit flow from't  
As boldness from my bosom, let't not be doubted  
I shall do good. (2.2.50-52)

Ruth Vanita comments that Paulina is one of those "completely fearless women, so empowered by her moral authority that the ruler submits to her judgment."<sup>11</sup> She sees Paulina as participating in a "kind of female lineage, transmitting a moral power that contrasts with and is ultimately perceived as greater than the male lineage of economic and political power."<sup>12</sup> Vanita includes in this lineage Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist. Not merely a mouthy woman, Paulina uses her transgressive words to do good.

Such powerful outspoken women have been vulnerable through the centuries to the accusation of witchcraft—and Paulina is no exception. She wonders "What studied torments" Leontes has in mind; "What wheels? Racks? Fires? What flaying? Boiling/ In leads or oils? What old or newer torture?" (3.2.175-177). Such means have been used through the ages to silence those who stray outside the official system. Contrary to Hermione and the courtiers, Paulina refuses to be silenced. When Leontes threatens to burn Paulina for heresy, she turns the tables on him and his accusation: "It is an heretic that makes the fire,/ Not she which burns in in't" (2.3.115-116). Her transgressive words undercut Leontes' authoritarian manner. Being responsible means that Paulina exercises her ability to respond. She speaks boldly, countering the official rhetoric, by creating a productive dialogue with Leontes, a dialogue that carries moral authority.

In speaking transgressive words, Paulina uses artful words; her skillful tongue employs various artistic deceptions to reveal the truth and bring about a satisfying resolution. Appropriately, she creates an old wives' tale, a fiction, using the art of the tale to do her work. The sixteen year lapse when Leontes is wifeless and heirless seems unreasonable to the courtiers (particularly Cleomines and Dion, who argue in logical fashion for remarriage) though it fits well in a tale. Paulina is aware that the plot she is creating would be "hoot'd at/ Like an old tale," which does not carry much credibility (5.3.116-117). She nonetheless continues to spin her tale, as Kurland explains, defying "ordinary expectations to make a winter's tale believable by calling attention to the artificiality of its own contrivances and its presentation of the implausible as plausible."<sup>13</sup> Paulina's inventive use of the language of story helps break the bonds of the absolute authority of Leontes' language as it explores new imaginative possibilities.

Paulina's tale spinning begins when Hermione is accused of high treason and adultery. Hermione appeals to the authority of Apollo's oracle. Responding to the Delphic oracle's clear announcement of her innocence, immediately followed by the sudden death of her son, Hermione swoons and is carried off. Paulina immediately starts to weave her plot, accusing Leontes of all that has gone wrong, before she drops her bomb:

The sweet'st dear'st creature's dead, and vengeance for't  
Not dropp'd down yet. Lord—the higher pow'rs forbid!  
She's dead. I'll swear it. (3.2.201-203)

Paulina persists in this untruth for years until Leontes is ready for the truth. Enterline comments that Paulina's lies point to the truth beyond falsehood:

Between Hermione's vain though truthful swearing of innocence and Paulina's successful yet false swearing of death, *The Winter's Tale* uses the female voice to point beyond truth or falsehood, beyond a conception of language as transparent description. Instead it asks us to consider the effects of language.<sup>14</sup>

Such effects of language include the moral purpose of Paulina's words discussed earlier which make her deception a kind of *moral* lie—that is, a fiction with a moral purpose.

More than tale spinning, Paulina's artful, calculated words are able to change Leontes, from his Act I view that women will say anything, to his reversal in Act III, when he says to Paulina, "thou canst not speak too much" (3.2.215). As Paulina works her verbal

magic on Leontes, she asks his forgiveness in a way that playfully suggests the opposite:

I am sorry for't.  
All faults I make, when I shall come to know them,  
I do repent. Alas I have show'd too much  
The rashness of a woman; he is touch'd  
To th' noble heart. What's gone and what's past help  
Should be past grief. Do not receive affliction  
At my petition; I beseech you, rather  
Let me be punish'd, that have minded you  
Of what you should forget. Now my good liege,  
Sir, royal sir, forgive a foolish woman.

The tone of this "confession" and "apology" invites us to think with irony "Methinks the lady doth protest too much." Paulina continues to rub it in:

The love I bore your queen—lo, fool again!—  
I'll speak of her no more, nor of your children;  
I'll not remember you of my own lord,  
Who is lost too. Take your patience with you,  
And I'll say nothing. (3.2.218-232)

When Paulina "repents," Leontes is softened and ready for her reminder of his foolish errors. Her use of humor and irony are rhetorically designed to work on Leontes who responds, "Thou didst speak but well/ When most the truth," (3.2.332-33) expressing his belief in her words. Although Paulina apparently testifies to a lie that Hermione is dead, she justifies her lie. When she presents Hermione's daughter to Leontes, she insists she is "no less honest/ Than you are mad" (2.3.71-72). Leontes' blind madness requires something more than the simple truth.

Paulina's transgressive and artful words are the hard medicine that brings about the healing needed in Leontes' kingdom. Soon after her audacious interruption of the complacency of the court, Paulina speaks of her words as "medicinal:"

I do come with words as medicinal as true,  
Honest as either, to purge him of that humor  
That presses him from sleep. (2.3.37-39)

Her words become the remedy that heals Leontes of his sudden disease of insane jealousy. Paulina goes on to describe herself to Leontes:

And I beseech you hear me, who professes  
Myself your most loyal servant, your physician,  
Your most obedient counselor; yet that dares  
Less appear so, in comforting your evils  
Than such as most seem yours. (2.3.54-55)

As a physician, Paulina serves as a kind of midwife officiating at the rebirth of Leontes. After sixteen years of penance, as befits an old wives' tale, Paulina cures Leontes, healing him from the "infection" (1.2.145) of his irrational judgment as she preserves the memory of Hermione. In Act V Paulina gently persuades Leontes to let her choose a queen:

Yet if my Lord will marry—if you will, Sir,  
No remedy but you will—give me the office  
To choose you a queen. She shall not be so young. (5.1.76-78)

Her rhetorical style becomes more gracious and kind. Commenting on her approach late in the play, Granville-Barker writes that Paulina "relaxes from her high-toned scolding to an almost motherly fussiness."<sup>15</sup> The hard edge of the surgeon's knife has given way to the soft touch of the mother's healing hand.

Paulina sees herself as the agent that brings divine healing and recovery; she claims nothing less than the authority and larger justice of Apollo's oracle: "the gods/ Will have fulfill'd their secret purposes" (5.1.35-36). She clings to the enigmatic part of the oracle's message: "King Leontes shall not have an heir/ Till his lost child be found," (5.1.39-40) and holds on to her intuitive hope that "the crown will find an heir" (5.1.47); she also holds on to the old religion that Vanita claims "empowered the powerless, especially women."<sup>16</sup> As she coaxes Leontes to let her choose a queen for him, Camillo, though unaware of what he is doing, is arranging in Bohemia for Leontes' long lost daughter, Perdita, to return to Sicilia. Winter is turning to spring. Divinity is controlling matters here; the gods are fulfilling their purposes. Sicilia is no longer a rigid, authoritarian environment, but one where renewal is possible; Paulina's rhetoric has done its healing work. Her acknowledgment of the divine elevates her strategies beyond clever words and plots to healing agency.

Not only does Paulina employ several rhetorical strategies to achieve the happy ending, she also creates a final, powerful rhetorical event in the living statue of Hermione; this part of her artistry requires a response from Leontes. As Paulina stage manages the climactic unveiling of the statue of Hermione, she instructs Leontes: "It is requir'd/ You do awake your faith" (5.3.94-95). The "magic" of this miracle requires more than words. Walter Lim discusses the Reformation emphasis on the "indispensability of faith to salvation" newly influential in Shakespeare's time.<sup>17</sup> He explains that faith in "miraculous possibility" must be present, although doubt and uncertainty are also present.<sup>18</sup> As Paulina guides



Leontes with her careful, healing words, his faith does awake—as does that of the audience as well; and wonder of all wonders, Hermione returns to life.

Paulina's final words to the restored couple give her blessing:

Go together  
You precious winners all; your exaltation  
Partake to every one. I, an old turtle,  
Will wing me to some wither'd bough, and there  
My mate (that's never to be found again)  
Lament till I am lost. (5.3.130-134)

Paulina's words have brought tragic events to the satisfying resolution of comedy. Her job is done; Hermione and Perdita can carry on the necessary productive dialogue with Leontes. But Paulina is also a winner here because she and Camillo, a worthy match, will join in the wedded bliss. Shakespeare, still caught in the pairing off convention at the end of his romantic comedies, cannot be content to leave Paulina alone in her PMZ power. The relative chaos she releases with her "unbridled tongue" may be contained to some extent as she is married to Camillo.

Nonetheless, Paulina's audacious words bring about a promising new era for the kingdom of Sicilia. Although this late play of Shakespeare still demonstrates the conventions of romance, *The Winter's Tale* also grapples with the larger issues of gender and power relations we have seen reflected in the struggle between authoritative and internally persuasive discourse. This dialogic struggle has brought about a stronger kingdom. The male social order of Sicilia has faced a series of challenges—provoked by the persuasive speech of Hermione and carried on by the audacious speech of Paulina. This kingdom will now presumably function on a healthier basis as more voices are heard in a more balanced dialogic interaction in both the familial and the political arenas. Bakhtin would applaud. Behind this transformation lies Paulina, an inspiring woman whose PMZ has emboldened her tongue for a worthy cause. Paulina's persuasive challenge to Leontes' authoritative discourse has been a productive struggle which has helped bring healing to this kingdom. Hermione and Perdita, who we see in Act IV has inherited her mother's verbal skills, will now speak their minds to a listening Leontes. We can presume that the well-spoken Hermione will carry on Paulina's important work now that she too has entered her PMZ period. Paulina's audacious words help establish this new era.

## Notes

1. Harley Granville-Baker, *More Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1974), 23.
2. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: U of TX Press, 1981), 342.
3. *Ibid.*, 343.
4. Lynn Enterline, "'You Speak a Language that I Understand Not': The Rhetoric of Animation in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48.1 (1997): 27.
5. All act, scene, and line references to *The Winter's Tale* are to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).
6. M.M. Bakhtin, *The Bakhtin Reader*, ed. Pam Morris (London: Arnold, 1994), 17.
7. Enterline, 18.
8. Bakhtin, 345.
9. Stuart M. Kurland, "'We need no more of your advice': Political Realism in *The Winter's Tale*," *Studies in English Literature* 31.2 (1991), 377.
10. Julia Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: Columbia UP, 1986), 29.
11. Ruth Vanita, "Mariological Memory in *The Winter's Tale* and *Henry VIII*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 40.2 (2000), 315.
12. *Ibid.*, 312.
13. Kurland, 379.
14. Enterline, 33.
15. Granville-Baker, 20.
16. Vanita, 311.
17. Walter S.H. Lim, "Knowledge and Belief in *The Winter's Tale*," *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 41.2 (2001), 319. *Literature 1500-1900*. 41.2 (2001): 317-334.
18. *Ibid.*, 321.