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Seeing the Spider: The Jealous Rage of Exchange in *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello*

Abstract

A venerable critical tradition has long flavoured the reception of Shakespeare's plays with psychology. Characters are read as real people, and as a consequence, the plays are analysed from the starting point of an individual character's inward personality. However, this literary reading of the plays fails to take into account not only the performance of character on the Renaissance stage but also the theatrical culture that predetermines forms of characterisation for that audience. The playing of roles within this drama needs to be continually re-investigated, and in the case of *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello*, fully reimagined. The conventional ascription of the plot development entirely to the jealousy of both Leontes and Othello can accordingly be reworked. The modern obsession with psychology obscures a field of semantic forces that goes well beyond the purview of any individual to a social encoding of possible behaviours. This restores multiple potentialities to the plays in performance, freeing them from a narrow insistence that meaning is rooted entirely in the individual. This in turn provides a context for deeper analysis of gender roles and how they intersect with the impetus generated by patriarchal modes of inheritance.

In the second scene of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes gives Hermione his permission to 'seduce' Polixenes. He has been trying and failing to persuade his childhood friend to stay longer in Sicily and he turns to his wife, asking her to accomplish something he cannot. The staging here is very carefully managed, as Hermione woos the King of Bohemia in accordance with her husband's wishes. Leontes stands apart from them, watching their interaction. He says nothing at all after "Well said, Hermione" (1.2.33), for over fifty lines:

LEONTES. Is he won yet?

HERMIONE. He'll stay, my lord.

LEONTES. At my request he would not. (1.2.87–88)¹

It is essential for this immediate response to be delivered as querulous, even petulant, if his subsequent actions are to be consistent; the emphasis should be on

“my request.” The split line, so common in Shakespeare’s late plays, combines with the epigrammatic sentence to suggest something beyond the basic statement itself. To some extent he recovers, following this with “Hermione my dearest, thou never spok’st / To better purpose” (1.2.88–89). In this scenario, the overall effect is unsettling; is the King of Sicily already trying to smooth over a problem of some kind?

Of course, the foregoing analysis is a reasonably standard reading of Leontes’ character, even as it gestures towards performance possibilities, and this essay will pay a great deal of attention to such potentialities, moving well beyond the text to a range of interpretations. Leontes’ well-known explosion of jealousy seems to root the action of the play firmly in his character, indeed his psychology. In his Introduction to the Arden 3 edition, John Pitcher concentrates on exactly this issue. He suggests a possibility that “[...] we are seeing the pathology of an immature male, an unavoidable mental condition” (37). He then goes on very logically indeed to explore the various issues raised by Leontes’ unique definition of the developing situation between Hermione and Polixenes:

To be so aware that his imagination might delude him, and yet still persist in believing what it showed him, makes Leontes wicked, not feeble-minded or mad. He doesn’t have the defence of diminished responsibility that can be made for Othello. From this perspective Leontes is a tragic figure: he chooses to believe he can make truth whatever he says it is, irrespective of what it costs others. (Pitcher 38)

Leaving aside the almost inevitable comparison with Othello for the moment, this passage reads as an excellent piece of psychological character analysis. It places the blame firmly on Leontes’ inward choice, and links that with a momentum toward tragedy. As Pitcher goes on to say, definitively, “This knowledge comes not from observation of the world but from within Leontes’ imagination, freed of reason” (39). The results of all this are well known, with Leontes eventually ranting about a poisonous spider sitting at the bottom of an imaginary drink (2.1.41–45) and turning into a tyrant. But is it all quite this straightforward?

1. When Is a Character Not a Character?

This question was raised some time ago by Alan Sinfield when investigating the peculiar effects created by intense characterisation that simply stops (52–79). His concern is with the “character effect” of initially strong, pivotal roles played by figures such as Lady Macbeth or Desdemona, who then seem reduced in stature when their purpose is no longer required later in their respective plays. For Sinfield, the issue at stake is comprised of two separate, but inter-related, theatrical elements: the seeming sense of individual coherence on the one hand, and the function of

the characters on the other. The first, of course, has an extremely long history, especially in a powerful strand of Shakespearean criticism that defines the meanings generated by the individual plays in terms of fidelity to inward psychological consistency (Hawkes 141–153).² The second, although seemingly similar to the first, can actually pull against it, because it can easily be argued that on Shakespeare's stage function (or role) matters much more than what later cultures fetishize as the primacy of the individual. Following critics such as William B. Worthen, the consequences of this second perspective are profound, indeed startling, because it permits a way into the plays that starts from a position of relative scepticism about the cultural and historical development of individualism that comes after Shakespeare's plays are written and produced.³ There may well be elements of nascent individualism in his plays, but to define them exclusively in those terms may be at best anachronistic, if not indeed utterly ahistorical.

With this in mind, it is well worth revisiting the critical positions of editors of the plays, such as John Pitcher, who seem to take it for granted that the meanings generated by plays like *The Winter's Tale* can easily fit into one particular paradigm. To return to his comparison of Leontes with Othello mentioned previously, it is important to notice what at first sight seems almost like a throwaway line. Or, rather, two lines. The first is a rather peculiar assumption that Othello's actions can somehow be defended on the grounds of diminished responsibility. The phrase is a legal one, to do with the perpetrator being insane or at least functionally incapacitated at the moment of committing a crime. It relies at the most fundamental level on a treatment of Othello that resolutely conceives of him as a fully realised and individuated person; hence the basis for the comparison with Leontes. However, if these two are to be conceptualised as characters on the Renaissance stage and not as real people at all, then definitions of them and their behaviours cannot possibly be predicated on the cultural baggage so familiar from a later period. Sinfield certainly sees the character effect at work in such instances, but it is only an effect, and a partial one at that.

There is a second layer to all of this, and it is absolutely fundamental to modern character criticism of Shakespeare's plays, at least since the days of Coleridge's lectures.⁴ Pitcher refers to it when he defines Leontes in relation to tragedy. As we have all been taught to know, Shakespeare's tragic heroes are brought down by internal flaws, because that is what tragic heroes do. As noble exemplars of great value, their *hamartia* accords with a particular trait that pulls against and then destroys their greatness. However, as has been very cogently argued, Shakespearean critics have simply been getting this wrong, and for a very long time too.⁵ So much so, that it begins very much to look as though the misrepresentation of Aristotle is ideologically motivated, which of course it is. Aristotle does treat of character, but it is strictly secondary in his formulation:

Tragedies are not performed, therefore, in order to represent character, although character is involved for the sake of the action. Thus the incidents and the plot are the end aimed at in tragedy, and as always, the end is everything. Furthermore, there could not be a tragedy without action, but there could be without character. (Dorsch 40)

Classical scholars must think we are all mad to get it so wrong. What truly matters here is that, if Aristotle is right, tragedy cannot possibly be conceived of as resulting from some sort of internal character flaw; inwardness simply does not matter. This in turn raises another set of problems: how can the dominant discourse of character imagination in the cases of both Leontes and Othello be reworked to accord with a theory of tragedy? How can we pay much more attention to those previously occluded elements of the function of tragedy as a fundamentally social form? The role of the personal imagination so carefully delineated by Pitcher, for example, simply seems so right; it is a very powerful definition of what goes wrong in these plays.

2. Playing the Role, Resolving the Play

One way out of this conundrum is to valorize the theatrical at the expense of the text. Or to put it another way, it is about time that we return to the dramatic roots of the plays in a deliberate move to get out from under two hundred years and more of treating them as artefacts to be read. There have been valuable attempts to do just this, but perhaps we need a level of consistency that moves the discussion forward; certainly a great deal of important work has been produced about Shakespeare's elevation to great literature, especially in terms of the underlying discourses of textual editing.⁶ The process should at the very least be laid open to interrogation if only because it represents a partial, closed interpretation – while at the same time often claiming to be universal. There is nothing new in any of this, of course, but the effort still needs to be made if alternative possibilities are to be imagined, especially if they are in historical and cultural terms less prescriptive and more open to the potentialities inherent to Shakespeare's own stage.

In his book on Shakespeare's later plays, Simon Palfrey manages something along these lines when he looks at the figure of Leontes. Rather than simply reading him as some sort of fully rounded human being, he instead tries to put Leontes back on the scaffold:

The most obvious 'character' in Mamillius' tale is Leontes himself, the man who, his crime revealed, 'Dwelt by a Church-yard.' Repeatedly his role is meta-theatricalized, most pertinently when he portrays himself as the contemptible player. (110)

This is an important comment to note, primarily because it opens up a definition of Leontes that does not rely upon some sort of inward character psychology, but

instead moves on from that to a metadramatic awareness of how these figures were personated on their own stage.

And of course it almost goes without saying that this is one play that is especially renowned for its emphasis on the centrality of the theatrical event itself. It is almost impossible to read any critical commentary on *The Winter's Tale* without coming across some attempt to deal with the play's peculiar ending. That word 'peculiar' is very useful because it points both to something strange, as well as something specific, and the resolution to this play is certainly both at the same time. The lack of definition of what happens at the denouement is so familiar that it is easy to forget just how startling it is. Partly this is because of the way it is often explained away as a *coup de theatre*, as if that somehow neatly encapsulates it and explains it adequately,⁷ but in fact it is structural, and in more than one sense. First of all, as Robert Weimann reminds us, this drama is extremely aware of its omnipresent audience and the need constantly to entertain and also provoke them, playing with their pre-existing knowledge of Renaissance dramatic techniques, modes and forms of representation – this is a very highly educated audience in its own terms, and we must never forget that. But secondly, there is a major element lurking underneath the text that needs to be brought back to prominence, and this is the fact that this play has two endings: the expected reconciliation that the audience assumes will complete it, but which is then followed by the famous statue scene.

It is absolutely critical to realise just how much this play manipulates its audience before the statue scene takes place. In this respect the second scene of the final act defers the resolution instead of enacting it. It does so by means of reportage, a description of offstage events by Rogero and Paulina's Steward, very minor characters indeed.⁸ The latter narrates the discovery of Perdita's identity and the death of Antigonus "Like an old tale still" (5.2.60); instead of showing what happens, the play undercuts any audience expectation of a resolution by postponing it. Inevitably, attention is focused on what happens next, and this is where the second main problem raised by the play appears.

John Pitcher emphasises the importance of dramatic form and function at this critical juncture, "Hermione's image in 5.3 is every kind of false idol in one. It is not a statue, but a living person, not a woman but a male actor in drag, not a queen but a lowborn player" (47). This is very promising territory, not least because it seems to move the debate on from Leontes' psychology. However, instead of further developing this insight, Pitcher instead closes down the potentiality of the play on meaning by once again invoking the primacy of Leontes' mind, "The statue is the key to what happened in Leontes' mind. It had always been there, as an image, long before it appeared in the chapel scene. The king had created a simulacrum of Hermione in his imagination, an idol of an unyielding stony lady elevated above him" (47). This represents something of a missed opportunity, since in performance the emphasis is all on the statue and the effect her awakening has

on the King of Sicily. To reduce the theatrical effects to what is going on in his mind alone presupposes a focus on individual identity that simply is not borne out in practice. The psychologised reference to the postmodern simulacrum kind of gives the game away by reinforcing the late modernity of Pitcher's reading.

It is this play's representation of two inexplicable moments, the king's jealousy and the statue's movements, which renders such a reading very suspect, to say the least. Pitcher's analysis seems forced, but it nevertheless raises a serious question about the relationship between these two impossibilities. After all, it would be very strange indeed to focus on the absolute centrality of the king's imagination in a play that insists on theatricality, not to mention metadramatic visual composition. This is in fact the nub of the problem: if one seeks absolute coherence, and then finds that unity in the mind of the stage figure Leontes, then such consistency is inevitably undone at the end of the play. It simply makes no logical sense to 'explain' the play by resorting to inward identity and at the same time acknowledge the impossibility of the ending – which is why Pitcher returns to the mind of the king.

3. Linear Critical Narratives

Simon Palfrey suggests, as previously noted, a metadramatic way out of this critical *impasse*:

Hermione's reappearance already enjoys a meta-dramatic prestige as the ostensible satisfaction and completion of Mamillius' tale of 'sprights, and Goblins': the climax's faithfulness to this tale's multiple narrators suggests the play's continuous disappointment of linear or univocal teleologies. (241)

Unlike John Pitcher, therefore, Palfrey would see any singular explanation of the play as failing to live up to its generative multiplicities of meaning. However, there still remains the problem of Leontes' seemingly unmotivated, random jealousy. As with a properly social theorising of tragedy, his temper tantrum can be shown to have its own social dimension. Jennifer Richards suggests that "Leontes' rage is motivated by a sensitivity not just to the mediacy of language but to its inability to represent adequately distinctions in rank; and from the moment at which he descends into passionate tyranny, the play forces us to confront his unwavering belief that social distinction exists in 'nature'" (76). One could add to this valuable observation, since of course another crucial aspect of social distinction that is often supposedly rooted in nature is gender. Leontes' jealous rage is therefore the mark of a man in power who feels thwarted or threatened, and in this case the situation is complicated by the fact that he was the one who set the process in motion. In a sense, though, it does not matter that he asked Hermione to intercede with Polix-

enes in the first place, so authorising her behaviour. For a woman to show any form of agency whatsoever is fundamentally threatening to the patriarchal structure, what Paul Breitenberg has called “anxious masculinity” in the title of his book, simply because any successful woman constitutes a problem. In other words, there is a fundamentally social dimension to what has routinely been explained as Leontes’ jealousy, as though a personal individuated explanation is somehow adequate to contain the forces unleashed by such a development on the Renaissance stage.

This is where the inevitable return to *Othello* takes place, and not only because it is what editors such as John Pitcher do when looking for comparisons. Lisa Jardine’s well-known work entitled “Why Should He Call Her Whore” on the social ramifications of Othello’s jealousy towards Desdemona locates the consequences of masculine jealousy firmly in the social sphere of Renaissance culture (19–34). Later criticism’s preoccupation with the inwardness of the individual makes it extremely difficult to recover moments like this. What appears at first to be a ‘privately’ generated effect of character instead permits a glimpse of a whole range of socially produced and codified behaviours, a subterranean world of associations that may be dim to later cultures. Jardine historicises these complex issues, “If we fail to sustain that dynamic relationship between history and text, we may mistake the shared textual conventions of a period for an authentic Renaissance subjectivity (because separate subjects share access to matching cultural conventions)” (21). In other words, something that looks suspiciously like a sense of self should be treated with appropriate scepticism, because it may be a textual (or dramatic) symptom of much deeper underlying cultural conditions.

For Jardine, this is very much the case with Othello’s public defamation of his wife. She very carefully delineates the social sphere in the first instance, and then moves from this context to the specifics of Othello’s public behaviour, not just his ‘jealousy’:

If we read *Othello* in this way, locating our analysis at the disciplinary interface between history, culture and text, we (the twentieth-century explorers of the past) begin to see a web of social relations, a mesh of interpersonal tensions, given meaning by the social events which rendered incipient feeling actual and acknowledgeable in the community. (33)

This statement needs to be carefully unpacked, because so much is going on here. First of all, for Jardine’s analysis, the text does not have primacy, and neither do history or culture. All are imbricated in a complex weaving of associations. Secondly, this is something that can be explored by later cultures, producing an awareness of the historical specificity of social relations. And, thirdly, these associations cannot be reduced to the purely personal because they are, in her words from the passage above, “interpersonal [...] social events” which produce meanings that are ultimately communal.

As with Leontes, the supposition of jealousy is based on something insignificant that attains monstrous proportions in the eye (or rather, following Pitcher, the imagination) of the beholder. However, this is not a straightforward reference to the imagination of Leontes, or indeed of Othello – it has an emblematic function that is very common in Renaissance staging. The handkerchief itself is pretty much irrelevant; what matters is what it means, or rather, what it can be made to signify. The stage prop focuses the audience's attention on what the item will come to symbolise, concentrating the gaze on an object and also at the same time concentrating the hearing on what is said about it.

In this context it is important to note the differences between these two plays' complex social treatment of jealousy, since of course Othello does not come up with the idea himself. Instead he is worked on by the super-subtle Italian machiavel figure of Iago. An alert audience will immediately understand the deep irony of Cassio's definition of him: "I never knew / A Florentine more honest" (3.1.40–41). The Florentine Machiavelli is, to an English Renaissance audience, anything but honest, and neither is the stage figure of Iago as he plies his stock in trade of manipulation. His performative undoing of Othello serves a similar function to that of the statue of Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* – an impossibly unrealistic fiction that works so well precisely because it takes place on the stage.

However, unlike Hermione, Desdemona demonstrates agency in and of herself; she is not given permission to do so by a man. Her subsequent retreat into married chastity is not enough to undo this initial disruption, since her actions unleash a whole series of ramifications that cannot be contained, instead leading ineluctably to tragedy. There is a whole logic of patriarchal anxiety here, indeed an aesthetic, that requires the destruction of such a woman regardless of the purity and clarity of her motivations.⁹

Three crucial moments come to mind in the play's treatment of the meanings generated by the figure of Desdemona. The first is her father's well-known parting remark at the end of the Duke's council of war:

Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see:
She has deceived her father, and may thee. (1.2.293–294)

It can seem rather obvious to quote these lines, if not indeed superfluous, but is worth doing so in theatrical terms, as well as purely literary ones. The use of the rhyming couplet at the moment of exiting the stage signifies to the well-tuned ear of the audience that this is something to be remembered. Additionally, the emphasis on eyes and seeing inevitably encodes the senses of apprehension and understanding that are so crucial to the masculine gaze. However, what is perhaps even more important than either of these is the linguistic use of the modal terms, possibilities opened up by Brabantio's "if" and "may."¹⁰ It is in fact rather tempting to change the title of the current essay simply to "May," because it is in the interstices between fact and possibility that the action of *Othello* takes place.

As a specialist in ambiguity, Iago is well able to take advantage of Othello's inability to perceive the difference between reality and fiction. This is not to place the full weight of the action upon their personalities, since of course they are both in some sense stage stereotypes – Iago as machiavel and Othello as protagonist. To take another tack, they both represent radically conflicting world-views, a contradiction in practice that is fully emblematised by their different conceptions of the relationship between words and reality. In this respect it is tempting, if rather obvious, to compare Othello with Lear, another figure who is at least initially incapable of realising that words can lie, although of course these are completely different plays. Iago's manipulation of mere words is the second element that seals Desdemona's doom.

The third, of course, is the handkerchief. Othello's well-known explosion of jealousy is in fact predicated on him forgetting his own words. Iago has already started working upon him, and Othello is having consequent difficulty conversing normally with his wife:

DESDEMONA Why do you speak so faintly?

Are you not well?

OTHELLO

I have a pain upon my forehead, here.

DESDEMONA

Faith, that's worth watching, 'twill away again.

Let me but bind it hard, within this hour

It will be well.

OTHELLO Your napkin is too little.

[*She drops her handkerchief*]

Let it alone. Come, I'll go in with you. (3.3.286–292)

There is no point in rehearsing the tired old discussion of what transpires from this point onwards as Iago picks it up. What is much more important is that not only does Othello explode with 'jealousy', but that he does so precisely because of something he himself says, and then fails to remember. This is the opposite of Leontes.

However, of course, both of them are harping on the same theme, because of the social codes associated with their jealous behaviours in Renaissance culture. The spider and the handkerchief both operate on the level of theatrical emblematics. They signify in extremely condensed form a nexus of very powerful and dangerous anxieties about the agency of women. This goes far beyond any location in the individual imagination, instead activating patriarchal prerogatives regarding the disposition of women.

Iago's obvious initial move is to remind Othello of Brabantio's earlier statement:

She did deceive her father, marrying you,
And when she seemed to shake, and fear your looks,
She loved them most. (3.3.209–211)

Iago plays with the sense of seeming that he himself in fact shares with Desdemona, and then widens the gap to play on Othello's lack of awareness of the social codes that are buried beneath. A standard critical procedure at this point would be to proceed with a discussion of exactly how Iago manages the various stages of his attempt on Othello. However, what this leaves out, valuable as it may be, is the whole layered signification of gendered agency that lurks beneath the surface of patriarchal Venetian culture.

4. A Question of Inheritance

It may seem very strange indeed to shift to issues of inheritance at this point in the analysis. However, this is a very specific area of critical social importance that both plays circulate around obsessively. The outcome of Hermione's pregnancy is a daughter so despised by Leontes that he sends her away to be exposed, which in affect results in the loss of all his heirs, since Prince Mamillius dies offstage. That play's doubled resolution relies on the recovery of the lost girl Perdita so that the patrimony of Sicily can be continued into the next generation, as well as the discovery of the statue Hermione. Heiresses condense patriarchal anxieties to an extraordinary degree, as is shown by the case of Desdemona, as well as countless other Shakespearean heroines. One only has to think of Juliet or Cordelia in tragedy, or even Lady Macbeth, whose issue seems uncertain. There are plenty of other examples from the comedies and mixed-genre plays: Kate and Bianca in *The Taming of the Shrew*, or the uncertain status of Viola in *Twelfth Night*, not to mention the Countess Olivia in the same play – the list seems endless.

In fact, it is very tempting indeed to characterise this extreme harping on daughters as a fundamental faultline in Renaissance patriarchy. For the family line to continue, women are absolutely necessary, even as they must be made to remain powerless. To return to the beginning of this present essay, even an authorised form of female agency can be threatening to such a fraught structure. Women, especially heiresses, are essential items of commodity exchange between father and husband, between masculine generations. A concentrated confluence of great social complexity is created, constantly informing what seems at first sight to be a simple form of personal jealousy. As objects of exchange between men, women automatically activate a patriarchal possessive rage and it really does not

matter whether or not this rage is in any sense justified: it is a symptom of the system. The jealous rage of exchange has its own momentum.

Notes

- 1 All quotations from this play are taken from the Arden 3rd edition. John Pitcher (ed) *The Winter's Tale* (2010).
- 2 Terry Hawkes' essay "Bardbiz" is still arguably the most entertaining debunking of many of the associations produced by traditional criticism.
- 3 See also Pauline Kiernan *Shakespeare's Theory of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).
- 4 See Jonathan Bate (ed) *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin Books, 1997) 128–163.
- 5 I have discussed this recently, picking up on the work of Terry Eagleton and Naomi Liebler in particular. See Naomi Conn Liebler: *Shakespeare's Festive Tragedy: The Ritual Foundations of Genre* (London: Routledge, 1995) 41–4; Terry Eagleton: *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) 1–22; Paul Innes: *Shakespeare's Roman Plays* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), especially 180–181.
- 6 Margreta de Grazia discussed the editorial and textual tradition that underpins the emergence of the Shakespearean individual as a literary artefact in her influential book *Shakespeare Verbatim* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). She continues with elements of the argument in *Hamlet Without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Also see Leah S. Marcus: *Unediting the Renaissance: Shakespeare, Marlowe, Milton* (London: Routledge, 1996).
- 7 The obvious reference here is to the Pygmalion myth, a discussion of which can be found in Carol Thomas Neely's essay "The Winter's Tale: Women and Issue" in Kiernan Ryan (ed) *Shakespeare: The Last Plays* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), 176.
- 8 A discussion of reportage can be found in Paul Innes: "Some of the Most Important Events in Shakespeare do not Happen" in *English* 64. 247 (Winter 2015), 254–267.
- 9 Elisabeth Bronfen's book *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), remains one of the fundamental critical treatments of these issues.
- 10 Quentin Skinner has analysed Brabantio's logic in terms of forensic rhetoric in his book *Forensic Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 275–281.

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