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# Choosing Not to Believe: Realistic Unrealism in The Winter's Tale

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Dr. Burton

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Choosing Not to Believe: Realistic Unrealism in *The Winter's Tale*

“If you had to choose between romances and tragedies, which would you say is the genre most true to life?” I asked. Well, first we’d have to decide what we mean by romances. Instead of the kind involving romantic love, we’d be discussing the genre of William Shakespeare’s *The Winter's Tale*. But even after we discuss romance as a mixture of tragedy and comedy, we still have a tendency as a society to answer firmly, “Tragedy,” as to what is true to life. It is easier to believe that the worst is going to happen, and that positive thinking is wishful thinking.

Although Shakespeare's romance *The Winter's Tale* has been accepted and enjoyed by the masses, the romantic elements of mixing genres and the influence of the supernatural within it have led to the critics' rejection of the play on an intellectual level. Leontes' interaction with the oracle in the play thus becomes a metaphor for this rejection of the romance, as it is a rejection seemingly based on a desire for “realism.” In reality, this rejection of the romance of *The Winter's Tale* is predicated on an inability to recognize that the romantic elements of the play—its mixture of genres and supernatural elements—are in fact what makes it realistic, a belief that is essential to understanding and appreciating the message of the play.

Shakespeare’s decision to write a romance, or a “tragicomed[y],” does seem to have produced a play with a mishmash of literary genres—tragedy and comedy, suggesting that he forfeited fidelity in a genre to appeal to audiences (Wells). Romances involve separation and wandering, characteristic of tragedies, but end in reunion and reconciliation, like the ending of a

comedy (Wells). Leontes' main flaw, his jealousy, is reflective of the main flaw of the heroes in tragedies. King Polixenes personifies Leontes' weakness: "This jealousy / Is for a precious creature; as she's rare / Must it be great; and, as his person's mighty, / Must it be violent" (I.ii.452-5). Suddenly, Leontes' jealousy is a destructive animal which Polixenes correctly foretells will lead to great violence. A tragic hero would respond without restraint to a situation with a course of action that seems clear to them (Morreall).

The play's shift from tragedy to comedy is abrupt and clearly identifiable. The shepherd repeats, "Heavy matters, heavy matters!" (Shakespeare III.iii.111). In a repeated phrase, he has summed up the tragedy of the last three acts. This shift is complete as he exclaims—in preparation for his own good fortune, and for Leontes' eventual happiness—"Tis a lucky day . . . and we'll do good deeds on 't" (III.iii.137-8). Shakespeare's decision to end Leontes' unhappy years with happiness and marriage is characteristic of comedy, as Dr. Burton points out. "Tragicomedy" suits Shakespeare's mishmash of tragedy and comedy, not decisively fitting into one category or the other.

The mishmash of genres has resulted in critics' contempt. This contemptuous attitude is reflected even within the play, in Paulina's words about her friend's, Hermione's, statue coming alive: "That she is living, / Were it but told you, should be hooted at / Like an old tale; but it appears she lives" (V.iii.115-117). Paulina's choice of the word "hooted" accurately describes others' reactions to the supposed miracle of Hermione's reawakening. It also reflects the common attitude towards the believability of the plot of *The Winter's Tale*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines "hooting" as "call[ing] or shout[ing scornfully or abusively] at or after anyone," which is what critics did during and after Shakespeare's day. In the 1600s, Ben Jonson expressed his dissatisfaction with Shakespeare's apparently loose touch with reality. Jonson

considered Shakespeare's seeming disregard for accurate "geography, [his] only partly explained sixteen-year concealment of Hermione, or [his] depiction of Leontes' unprovoked jealousy" as the result of laziness and manipulation, not artistic judgment (Wells). Just as Leontes ignored the oracle's words, critics ignored Shakespeare's play because they expected truth, not crudely conceived entertainment, from a successful playwright.

It is because the oracle in *The Winter's Tale* adds a supernatural element to the play and because his prophecy is met with contempt that the oracle actually serves as a metaphor for the play. The assumed supernatural interference in people's lives is evident as Leontes expects to hear the truth from the oracle because he or she is "the mouthpiece of the gods" (*OED*). In ancient Greece or Rome, an oracle was a priest or priestess "through which the gods were supposed to speak or prophesy." Leontes is reassured that his comrades who have gone to the temple of Apollo will "bring all" "from the oracle" (Shakespeare II.i.185-6). The synecdoche apparent in Leontes' words—"all" to mean truth—reveals his trust in this supernatural power. The oracle is capable of finding out "all" from the gods, meaning the gods are an integral part of these Sicilians' lives, just as supernatural elements are an integral part of romances. Romance has "the character or quality that makes something appeal strongly to the imagination . . . an air, feeling, or sense of wonder [or] mystery" ("romance" *OED*). This sense of wonder comes from an other-worldliness, a connection with the world of the gods. As Dr. Young, professor of English at Brigham Young University, explains, "Both the coincidences and the supernatural are expressions of an overarching power—the gods, the powers—that acts through time, through nature, to accomplish ends that humans don't entirely understand." The gods are intimately involved in the lives of the characters who depend on the oracles to learn the truths the gods already know.

Leontes, like critics, wants to hear from the oracle not because he believes the oracle will acquit his wife of the charges against her, but because he believes the oracle will validate his jealousy. He claims that his excitement to hear the words of the oracle is that he wants the truth: “The great Apollo suddenly will have / The truth of this appear. Prepare you, lords, / Summon a session . . . [Our lady shall] have / A just an open trial” (II.iii.198-203). But his choice of words to describe Hermione in this same speech, before he has heard from the oracle, reveals that Leontes is not as impartial as he would like to appear, and that his trial for Hermione will not be either. Leontes calls Hermione “disloyal” (II.iii.201). He has already passed judgment on her actions, negated any thought that she is true to him. Bruce Young, a professor of English at Brigham Young University, explains that Leontes’ jealousy is a sort of fear fulfillment: “At root, Leontes’s jealousy is an expression of insecurity. This insecurity manifests itself in his difficulty believing that Hermione actually loves him . . . [and] in his not believing her to be as good and gracious as she seems. [He is] blinded by these failures of belief.” Instead of being motivated by a search for justice, Leontes is blinded into thinking he will be happiest when Hermione is proven guilty.

When the oracle does come, Leontes cannot believe that he is telling the truth because the answer Leontes has been given is not the answer he expected. The officer reads the oracle’s words: “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” (III.ii.130-33). In this moment, Hermione is expunged from all blame and Leontes’ friend Polixenes has been proven his true friend once again. But Leontes does not join in with the actors who play the spectators here, who are prompted to cheer for the oracle multiple times (Tatspaugh). His reaction to Hermione’s supposed innocence is incredulity, not relief.

“Hast thou read the truth?” he asks of the officer who speaks the oracle’s words (Shakespeare III.ii.134). His emphatic repetition of his distrust of the oracle reinforces Leontes’s loss of judgment: “There is no truth at all i’ th’ oracle. / The sessions shall proceed; this is mere falsehood” (III.ii.137-8). Because the source he looked to and trusted in has not validated his jealousy, he regards that source as duplicitous. It is his distrust of the oracle that proves his own judgment cannot be trusted.

*The Winter’s Tale* actually faces unavoidable resistance to being taken seriously because it is easy to dismiss the happy ending created by romantic elements. Just as Leontes dismisses the oracle’s words as having nothing of truth in them, the play is sometimes accused of being impossible. But these impossibilities are more than Shakespeare’s faulty knowledge of geography; among these “impossibilities” is the idea that tragedy can end in happiness. Such negative reactions to the play reveal that, as Dr. Young explains, “[T]he play uncovers and responds to our deep suspicion of happy endings . . . Both [Leontes’ jealousy] and [our suspicions] are expressions of what might be called ‘fear fulfillment.’” Leontes cannot believe that what would make him happiest is true, that his wife really is faithful to him. After her experience of reading *The Winter’s Tale* in class, a student of Dr. Young’s wrote: “I like happy endings even though our class seemed to think that happy endings are unrealistic. . . . I guess that many times the ‘Happy Ending’ we’re looking for doesn’t always come.” Leontes, like the members of Dr. Young’s class, does not want to trust in happy endings. In speaking of his own feelings of jealousy, Leontes muses that “[a]ffection . . . dost make possible things not so held . . . . dost . . . infect . . . my brains” (I.ii.138-146). But his recognition of his own lack of reason does not stop Leontes from being controlled by his unreasonable suspicions.

This happy ending, though doubted, is only possible because the supernatural intercedes in the lives of the characters in the play and in our own. While skeptics have approached the scene of Hermione's resurrection from the grave as a "low contrivance," a crowd-pleasing technique, Bruce Young points out that "We all know that coincidences are part of real life, however much we may be put off by them in fiction, and many of us believe in, or have even experienced, the supernatural" (Wells, Young). What is a very real part of many people's lives—the supernatural—is the only way there can be a happy ending in *The Winter's Tale*. Antigonus' dream of Hermione appearing to him after her supposed death is evidence that her death occurred; in other Shakespearean plays, it is only after a character has died that the character can appear in a dream to another (Siemon). If this is so, then the supernatural is needed to intervene where sixteen years of time have not been able to heal a repentant Leontes' wounds: "Whilst I remember / Her and her virtues, I cannot forget / My blemishes in them" (V.i.6-8). Perhaps a hyperbolic amount of grieving, the sixteen years Leontes experiences after losing his wife reveals that this now-changed man can find deserved happiness in no other way than to have his dead wife with him again. As Paulina explains, Hermione's statue must bequeath her "death to numbness," must do something that requires supernatural intervention (Shakespeare V.iii.102). It isn't until after this intervention that Leontes can forgive himself and enjoy the results of his repentance.

Even with this happy ending, most of the losses in the play reveal that romances mix comedy *and* tragedy; this happy ending, while happy, is *not* an easy-out. Although there is ultimately happiness for Leontes' and Polixenes' families, the suffering in the play, like in life, is not invalidated by this happiness. The losses Leontes experiences are real. As Bruce Young explains, "Despite its sometimes festive and even awe-inspiring spirit, the play does face the

hard facts of life: evil, death, the potential for human misery. There are real and permanent losses: Leontes's son, Mamillius, dies, Antigonus dies, so do others; and sixteen years have been lost. This is not a play with an easy fairy-tale ending.” These losses reveal that “the dominance of good at the end of the play is neither complete nor absolute: the devastation wrought by Leontes’ jealousy cannot be forgotten” (10). *The Winter’s Tale* is not a story of hushed-up sadness and obliviousness to grief; it is a story of happiness despite still-existing grief.

The play does, however, have its failures, but Shakespeare’s decision to make the play self-conscious of these failures reminds us that even the seemingly unrealistic elements of the play don’t invalidate the play’s truly reflecting life. Because the inaccurate geography is blatant and does not try to disguise itself, its existence and other mishaps in the play present make those mishaps less important in determining the play’s validity. As a gentleman explains after hearing of the reunion of Perdita and Leontes, “This news, which is called true, is so like an old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion” (V.ii.29-31). By putting into words the suspicion the audience might feel in hearing this fantastic tale, Shakespeare reminds the audience that he understands their suspicions, their reluctance to admit the reality of a tale with a happy ending, as happy endings have been done so many times before. As Meek explains in his essay on ekphrasis in *The Winter’s Tale*, “Shakespeare . . . often uses such representations to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of his own poetic and dramatic art” (389). But the play’s self-consciousness reminds the audience that they should move past this feeling and embrace the truth of this tale. Although the gentleman has heard the tale before, this doesn’t truly diminish the tale’s legitimacy, as Perdita really is returned to her father after a sixteen-year separation. Despite the gentleman’s unwillingness to believe, that happy ending *has* taken place.

What is required to overcome this skepticism of truth is a willingness to, as Paulina explains, “awake [one’s] faith” (Shakespeare V.iii.95). Paulina, who serves almost as a stage director in this final scene, gathering everyone to see the statue of Hermione, deciding on the timing of her reveal, and bringing Hermione to life, acknowledges that for something real and good to happen, skepticism must be overcome. The self-conscious element of the play displays itself as she asks those “that think it is unlawful business . . . let them depart” (V.iii.96-7). The parallelism of her description of her lawful spell after awakening Hermione is a reminder that she recognizes the strangeness of the event but will stand by her own words of its validity. It is only after Leontes commits to belief that Hermione is able to bring his wife back to life. This truth is what audiences have recognized while watching performances of *The Winter’s Tale* that critics have missed. As Patricia Tatzpaugh explains in her book about different performances of the play, “Performances . . . testify to [the play’s] . . . potent effect on audiences, especially when the statue of Hermione comes to life . . . ‘Only the hardest-hearted will be able to sit through its magnificently moving conclusion without blinking back the tears’” (1-2). Such a powerful reaction to the play, when audiences have allowed their defenses to slip during the performance, is evidence that under the skepticism is an understanding of the truth of the consequences of our actions conveyed through fantastical elements. It is this active decision to awake our faith that enables one to fully appreciate the powerful truth of *The Winter’s Tale*, and thus to understand the play.

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