

IMAGINED REBELLION: WHAT DOESN'T HAPPEN IN *THE
WINTER'S TALE*

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Abstract: Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* features a pattern of violent rebellion that only just fails to happen. Such moments of near-rebellion, best interpreted through the play's master trope of the moving statue, constitute an exploration of the causes of political rebellion and how best to avert it. Thanks to the close integration of its romance aesthetics and political realism, *The Winter's Tale* can be read as a "Mirror for Kings".

Keywords: counsel, ekphrasis, rebellion, statue, tyranny

Introduction

Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* is full of threats that fail to materialize. Hermione, falsely accused of adultery by her husband Leontes, king of Sicily, is not executed for high treason. Their infant daughter Perdita is not thrown into a furnace. Nor is Paulina, the lady-in-waiting, burned at the stake. Nor is the old Shepherd, Perdita's foster-father, hanged. Nor is his son, the clown, flayed alive, covered with honey, and exposed to the sun and

bees, as threatened by the rogue Autolycus in courtier's garb. These averted threats are all consistent with the romance genre, with its defining economy of close shaves, reverses of fortune, and ultimate happy endings. In this paper, I propose to discuss a threat that never speaks its name: political rebellion. I hope to show that the play presents several incidents in which rebellion, and possibly even deposition and regicide, are narrowly averted. I will then suggest that these moments are part of a coherent political discourse, thanks in part to Shakespeare's use of the moving statue as a master trope.

Supporting the Royal Prerogative

The Winter's Tale is a play about a king, Leontes of Sicily, who becomes a tyrant when he suddenly becomes convinced – wrongly – that his wife is having an affair and that her unborn child is not his. Jealousy leads to tyranny when the king refuses to hear counsel, attempts to poison his rival, imprisons his wife, casts away his child, rigs his wife's trial, and flouts religion, but he is eventually restored to his senses by the death of his son and the apparent death of his wife.

Critics have shown interest in the political topicality of the play. In the high-handed Leontes they see a reflection of King James I, who though not known for domestic jealousy was certainly known for promoting an absolutist view of kingship and for insisting that Parliament should leave the running of the country to him (see for instance Orgel 2008:12-16). Leontes' rejection of his councillors' advice does indeed seem to echo some of James' speeches and writings. Leontes' statement that "[He] need[s] no more of [their] advice" (2.1.368) appears to reflect James' view that the Commons should have virtually no say in the running of the kingdom. In 1609, James

startled Parliament by stating that the Commons should not interfere with government, which was the king's prerogative:

First, that you does not meddle with the maine points of Giuernment; that is my craft: tractent fabrilia fabri; to meddle with that, were to lessen me: I am now an old King; (...) I must not be taught my office. (James I 1609:315)

This came after his statement that “[k]ings are iustly called Gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of Diuine power vpon earth” (*ibid.* 307). These statements flew in the face of a long-standing constitutional tradition. In the Elizabethan period, the main voice of this tradition was John Hooker's. In his *The order and usage how to keepe a parliament in England in these daies* (1587) Hooker emphasized the role of the Commons in the process of making the law, and the principle of the king being under the law. In James' own time, Sir Edward Coke, following the 13th century jurist Henry Bracton, firmly stated the king's subordination to the common law.

The apparent similarity between Leontes' and James' positions on the royal prerogative raises the question of whether the play should be read as a critique of James' absolutist position. The problem with this theory, as Stephen Orgel points out, is that King James saw and apparently liked the play:

What, then, would King James have thought of *The Winter's Tale*, a play about a monarch whose dogged adherence to James' deepest convictions about the independence, indeed the sanctity, of royal judgement brings him to the edge of tragedy? It could not have offended him; he paid his players to perform it repeatedly at court for his entertainment. Perhaps he allowed the title to guide his response, and considered it no more than a tragicomic fable. But perhaps too he

saw in it a confirmation of an equally basic tenet of his political philosophy, most forcefully argued in *The True Law of Free Monarchies*: that however bad a king may be, he is still the King (Orgel 2008:15).

Orgel is here referring to James' insistence that rebellion is never permissible, since he stated, in the tradition of the Elizabethan *Homily against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion*, that a subject's only resort, when plagued with an evil tyrant as a ruler, is to "obey [him]" and "heartily pray for his welfare". (James VI 1598:67)

Yan Brailowsky concurs with Orgel's analysis, adducing as "proof of the play's defence of royal prerogative" the fact that "[d]espite Leontes' tyranny, no character calls to arms to remove the king or ruler from the throne, as in *Richard II* or *Julius Caesar*" (Brailowsky 2010:59).

The Winter's Tale is indeed a play in which rebellion, resistance, disobedience, deposition and regicide simply do not happen. From near the beginning, when Leontes orders his councillor, Camillo, to kill his fellow king Polixenes, regicide is established as the province of the madman. As for the Sicilian king's suspicions that there is a plot against his life, it is relegated to the realm of mad fantasy by association with his equally fantastical delusions about his wife's infidelity. The point is driven home when Camillo reminds himself, and possibly the off-stage audience, that nothing good ever came of killing a king. Later on, when Leontes finally acknowledges the harm he has done his wife, and by extension his state, he humbly accepts rebuke from Paulina:

Go on, go on

Thou canst not speak to much; I have deserved

All tongues to talk their bitterest. (3.2.212-214)

Clearly, verbal chastisement is the only kind that can be admitted, or even envisaged. Rebellion is established as more or less unthinkable. And yet, in this play, the unthinkable has a way of becoming possible.

The Possibility of Rebellion

Further exploration of James' writings on rebellion and tyrannicide reveals a more nuanced attitude than that expounded in his speeches to Parliament and the *True Law*. In the *Basilikon Doron*, his open letter to his son Henry, James' disapproval of rebellion is qualified by an awareness that a tyrant naturally arouses rebellious impulses in his subjects:

[A] Tyrannes miserable and infamous life, armeth in end his owne Subjects to become his burreaux [executioners] and although that rebellion be euer vnlawfull on their part, yet is the world so wearied of him, that his fall is little meaned by the rest of his Subjects, and but smiled at by his neighbours. And besides the infamous memorie he leaueth behind him here, and the endlesse paine hee sustaineth hereafter, it oft falleth out, that the committers not onely escape vnpunished, but farther, the fact will remaine as allowed by the Law in divers ages thereafter (James VI 1599:19)

Similarly, the play offsets its supposed endorsement of absolutism by raising the spectre of disobedience, rebellion, and even regicide. There are several occasions in the plot on which violence against a king, or at least some form of rebellion, seems to have been closely averted. One rather benign instance involves not Leontes himself but Polixenes, king of Bohemia, who starts behaving like a tyrant after he finds out that his son has been courting a low-born shepherdess, who will later turn out to be the lost princess Perdita. After violently upbraiding and threatening the young girl,

Polixenes stalks off in a rage. Though she endures his onslaught with an appearance of stoic forbearance, Perdita's words to Florizel after the king has left show that she was in fact quite close to exploding:

I was not much afeared, for once or twice
I was about to speak and tell him plainly
The selfsame sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage, but
Looks on alike. (4.4.439-443)

Constance Jordan discusses Perdita's metaphor, identifying its probable source in the scriptures (Matthew 5) and its history as popular metaphor. She also identifies a possible political source for Perdita's sun imagery in John Hayward's *Treatise*, where, speaking in favour of the Union of England and Scotland under a common law, he writes: "the Sunne riseth and shineth to all alike so the law should comprehend all in one equal and impartial equitie" (quoted in Jordan 1997:139) Although Hayward is not arguing for social equality between king and subject, Perdita's unspoken protest has a strong levelling ring to it. Even so, the contemplated rebellion remains relatively benign, being placed in the mouth of a sixteen-year-old girl, and operating on a purely verbal and theoretical plane.

Another example, however, involves a more serious threat of violence. It occurs in the first half of the play, when Perdita is still a baby. Before an assembly of Lords and Councillors, an irate Leontes has given orders for the child, whom he believes to be a bastard, to be thrown into the fire. The Lords are aghast, and plead with him to spare the child. Here are their words:

Beseech you highness, give us better credit.
We have always truly served you, and beseech
So to esteem of us. And on our knees we beg,
As recompense of our dear services
Past and to come, that you do change this purpose,
Which being so horrible, so bloody, must
Lead on to some foul issue. We all kneel. (2.3.152).

The rhetoric is a milder version of the source material, Greene's *Pandosto*, in which nobles remind an infanticidal king that "causeless cruelty nor innocent blood never scapes without revenge" (Orgel 2008:243). In Shakespeare's version, "revenge" has been toned down to "some foul issue". And yet the threat is no less present for being stated in vaguer terms. The phrase "past and to come", which Stuart Kurland reminds us was standard formulation in letters of patent (Kurland 1991:374), here implies that future loyalty on their part is dependent on whether the "recompense", meaning sparing the child, is forthcoming. As far as the off-stage audience is concerned, another intertextual connection emphasizes the threat implied in the Lords' behaviour. The scene may recall to the Jacobean playgoer another play in which a group of noblemen kneel around a powerful but increasingly erratic leader, pleading with him to show mercy to a condemned man.

Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* had been performed at the Globe in September 1599, not quite twelve years before *The Winter's Tale* opened at the same venue. According to John Ripley, there is no record of the Roman play being revived before the winter of 1612-1613, when, along with *The Winter's Tale*, it formed part of the marriage festivities held on the occasion of Princess Elizabeth's wedding. However, Paulina Kewes believes, based on contemporary references, that the Roman play was performed on occasions throughout the early years of James' reign (Kewes 2002:155).

However this may be, comparisons between James and Julius Caesar were commonplace and formed part of James' own self-representation (see Kewes 2002:160-169). The audience of *The Winter's Tale*, then, would have been very much aware of what follows the moment in the Senate when the conspirators plead for the cancelling of Metellus Cimber's banishment: Caesar refuses, and is promptly and bloodily murdered by the spurned suitors (though not as a direct consequence of his refusal). In *The Winter's Tale*, the possibility of such an outcome hovers in the background, and Leontes seems to acknowledge this, since he backs off from the envisaged killing of the child and reduces the penalty to exposure, which at least leaves the baby a fighting chance.

What is Shakespeare's purpose in staging these (and other) moments of near-rebellion? I believe, along with Stewart Kurland and Constance Jordan, that the play derives much of its political meaning from its status as romance. In particular, the element of the marvellous present in the final figure of the moving statue proves a valuable hermeneutic tool for the episodes I have been discussing. Thanks to the trope of the moving statue, Shakespeare turns these episodes into an exploration of the dynamics of rebellion and control.

The Moving Statue and the Mechanics of Rebellion

The most dramatic moment in the play involves a statue coming to life, or rather a woman, Hermione, pretending to be the statue of her own long-dead self, starting to move, and then speaking. That such a thing should happen has been established as "unthinkable" earlier in the play, when the opinionated lady-in-waiting, Paulina, claimed that it would be "monstrous to our human reason" (5.1.41) for her bear-devoured husband to

return from the dead. The passages of near-rebellion discussed above similarly involve a contemplated shift from statuesque immobility to monstrous action. The potential for violence in the inanimate is in fact hinted at in one of the very first scenes of the play by the image of Leontes as a child, whose dagger is “muzzled/ Lest it should bite its master” (1.2.155-156). Thanks to the aesthetics of the moving statue, Shakespeare expresses political rebellion as a sudden change of state, as an ontological shift from mineral quiescence to organic action. Interest is focused on the tipping-point, the moment when the boundary of the unthinkable is crossed. Because in this play the boundary is not, in fact, crossed, the moment is frozen in time and held up to contemplation, encouraging an exploration of causes, both political and psychological.

An exploration of the causes of rebellion in *The Winter's Tale* yields ambiguous results. If we consider the scene of the kneeling lords, for example, it may seem that what pushes them to the brink is the prospect of the baby's gruesome murder. Yet there is also room for another interpretation. Most sixteenth and seventeenth-century political theorists defined a tyrant first and foremost as one who unlawfully seized his subjects' property. Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince* that:

The cheefe thinges as I sayde that ingender the peoples hatred, is the losse of their wealth, and the ravishinge of their woemen, for they accompte themselves verie well dealt with all soe longe as their goodes be spared, and their credittes not impayred [...] (Machiavelli 1944 [1532]:78).

It is perhaps significant that the threat of violence against Leontes comes into play immediately after he has threatened to seize Antigonus' property, as well as his life: “I'll seize thy life / with what thou else call'st

thine” (2.3.136-7). This threat may have revived memories of the Tudors’ reviled policy of Forfeiture and Attainder, by which a man guilty of treason forfeited his right to pass on property and titles, as well as his life. In 1611, the tension between King and Commons was likewise related to property, as James attempted to secure a permanent income which would effectively have allowed him to circumvent Parliament.

The scene of the kneeling lords involves not just a near-crossing of boundaries, but a *drawing* of boundaries akin to the writing of a law. In signalling to Leontes just how far he can go without incurring rebellion, yet without the open threat that would in itself constitute rebellion, the nobles are engaged in a law-making process, of the kind constitutionalist writers thought essential to keeping a fallible king in check. By acknowledging and bowing to this process, the king keeps himself safe from rebellion. The half-acknowledged negotiation that takes place between the Lords and Leontes in the scene can be seen as a dramatic enactment of the kind of balance constitutionalist thinkers believed needed to prevail in the commonwealth.

This reading of the play dovetails with that of Constance Jordan, who, referring explicitly to the episode I have been discussing, considers Leontes’ major failing to be a flouting of all forms of law: “Nothing speaks more directly to Leontes’ madness and its expression in tyranny”, she writes, “than his impious rejection of all forms of law - positive law which requires an examination of evidence; natural law which prohibits abuse of dependants, especially children (...) and divine law” (Jordan 1997:117). The importance of the law is stated clearly in the play, in particular through the authoritative voice of the obviously innocent Hermione, who makes the constitutionalist point that condemnation without proof is “rigour and not law” (3.2.112). The possible consequences of flouting the law are hinted at a

few lines later when the queen evokes the memory of her father:

The Emperor of Russia was my father.
O that he were alive, and here beholding
His daughter's trial! That he did but see
The flatness of my misery, yet with eyes
Of pity, not revenge! (3.2.121)

Once again, the spectre of violent redress, this time in the shape of foreign intervention, hovers behind the façade of subservient or compassionate quiescence. Hermione's remarks are a reminder of another source of danger to the tyrant: that rebels may enlist help from abroad. This is a danger Machiavelli believed a prince should be aware of:

The prince that hath once woon to himself reputacion and accompte emonge his subjectes, neede not feare neither the conspiracies or coniurations of his subjectes att home nor thee assaultes or invasions of his Enemyes abroade; (Machiavelli 1944[1532]:79).

Rebellion, then, may come from both inside and outside the realm. The problem, the play suggests, is how to make the king aware of the threat of rebellion, without using the language of rebellion.

Speaking to a King

The problem that appears in these episodes is how to make an impression on a king, how to warn him of the danger he is in, without committing treason. Rebecca Lemon and Karen Cunningham have shown that in England in the second half of the sixteenth century, treason increasingly came to be associated with words, rather than actions, and even

with thoughts. The 1352 statute making it a treasonable offence to “encompass or imagine the death of kings” was revived and extended in the sixteenth century. The issue of how to send the king a vigorous, yet respectful message is explored heuristically in these scenes, thanks in part to the trope of the moving statue.

Another way in which the statue scene helps to interpret these episodes of near-rebellion is its foregrounding of silent or indirect communication. As many critics have noted (see for example Enterline 1997:18), Hermione does not speak to the king in the statue scene. Her eloquence is what caused trouble for her in the first place, and now, it seems, she is cautious about using words. As a living statue, Hermione presents herself as a sign to be deciphered, a process here enacted through the device of ekphrasis.

Ekphrasis is the description of a work of art in a work of fiction. Often, ekphrasis also involves the viewer putting words into the mouth of a painted or sculpted figure, as when, in the *Rape of Lucrece*, the ravished heroine lends her voice to an embroidered Hecuba (l. 1443-1582) as an outlet for her own grief. In the statue scene, Leontes describes what he thinks is the statue of his wife and reads a rebuke on her still features: “does not the stone rebuke me/ For being more stone than it?” (5.3.47-48). A metaphorical form of ekphrasis can also be read in Perdita’s speech quoted above, in the sense that she is putting words in the mouth of the silent statue-like figure she had been a few seconds before. Thanks to ekphrasis, images are presented as requiring interpretation, as meaningful signs, and spectacle becomes language.

It is a commonplace of Tudor and Stuart scholarship that much of the communication that took place between subject and monarch involved

spectacle. The common people honoured their monarchs with pageants to promote their glory, and poets paid homage to their royal patrons by writing and directing masques celebrating their persons and accomplishments. Recent studies have discussed the Jacobean court masque as an eminently political genre, whose main practitioner, Ben Jonson, saw himself as something of a counsellor, if not a court jester. Hugh Craig sees a “lèse-majesté” dimension to Jonson’s anti-masques, calling them “reminders of the unruly forces even the King had to acknowledge” (Craig 1998:186). Craig reads in Jonson’s development of the form of the masque a struggle with the question of how to speak unpalatable truths to a king: “How was Jonson, as a court poet, to flatter the monarch and at the same time offer him counsel [...]?” (*ibid.*)

Finding a form of eloquence suited to addressing the king was a fraught question in Renaissance Europe. Machiavelli suggested pessimistically that there was no way to counsel a king who was not ready to be counselled: “a prince that is not wise of him self, cann never take good counsell of any other (...)” (Machiavelli 1944[1532]:107). Castiglione, however, encouraged the courtier to find ways

“to drive into his Princes head what honour and profit shall ensue to him and to his by his justice, liberallitie, valiantness of courage, meeknesse and by the other virtues that belong to a good Prince and contrairiewise what slander, and damage, cometh of the vices contrairie to them” (Castiglione 1944[1528]:.265) .

Castiglione’s phrase “to drive into his Princes head” implies that stating the facts is not enough, and that a special kind of speech must be found. This special speech, it turns out, is based on images and statues. Castiglione advises the courtier to teach the prince virtue by the use of

anecdotes featuring brave captains and leaders, a strategy he likens to that of showing people statues of great men in order to encourage emulation:

“enflame [the prince] to [virtues] with examples of manye famous captaines, and of other notable personages, unto whome they of olde time used to make images of mettall and marble, and sometimes of golde, and to set them up in common haunted places, as well for the honour of them, as for an encouraging of others, that with honest envie they might also endeavour themselves to reach unto that glorie (*ibid.*).

The play similarly, and meta-dramatically, makes the case for a language of images as the most effective form of communication between subject and monarch. In the contrast between the kneeling, “beseeching” lords and the Roman butchery hovering in the background, there is something of the contrast between the masque and anti-masque of Jonsonian entertainment. Even Perdita, who is tempted to speak “plainly (4.4.440)” to the king of Bohemia, segues into a statement involving the kind of allegorical sun-imagery used in pageants and courtly masques. On the farcical and parodic level, which is also the level of anti-masque, the clown tells Autolycus how to deal with a bully of the kind that has just attacked him: “Not more a cowardly rogue in all Bohemia – if you had but looked big and spit at him, he’d have run.” (4.3.103-104). Whether or not this is the play’s stance on how to deal with a *royal* bully, the episode is another example of the effectiveness of non-verbal communication in deflecting violence.

This emphasis on persuading through images is consistent with developments in theories of the mind that were appearing at the time. Most famously, Francis Bacon, in both *The Advancement of Learning* and its

Latin adaptation *De Augmentis*, argued for a new rhetoric, one that would give the ideas wrought by reason the immediacy needed to appeal to the imagination. “[T]he duty and office of Rhetoric [...]”, he wrote, “is no other than to apply and recommend the dictates of reason to the imagination” (quoted in Cogan 1981:218).

Conclusion

Several critics, among them Stuart Kurland and Constance Jordan, have seen in *The Winter's Tale* a play stressing the need for counsel and the rule of law to keep the king's power in check and protect his subjects against the abuse of power that is so often an adjunct of absolute power, as James himself acknowledged. More than that, though, the moments of near-rebellion I have been discussing stress that the law protects not just his subjects, but the King himself. In making this point, Shakespeare drew upon the aesthetics of the moving statue to image political rebellion as the actualization of the unthinkable, to draw attention to counsel and the law as safeguards against such rebellion, and to explore the importance of image and symbol in the language of counsel. In so doing, he is of course meta-dramatically identifying his own play as a kind of “Mirror for Kings”, in the spirit of the *Mirror for Magistrates*. The need for such voices of caution was to be demonstrated thirty-eight years later, when what does not happen in *The Winter's Tale* did in fact happen in England, for reasons that are beyond the scope of this paper.

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