

I speak as my understanding instructs me: Information Mobility, Withdrawal and the Echo Chamber of *The Winter's Tale*

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The greatest advance that we have witnessed in the 20th and early 21st century cannot be subsumed under a single invention such as the combustion engine, the plane, or the internet. But together, these inventions give people access to unprecedented mobility, and mobility is what defines our time. It seems impossible for us to imagine a world where we do not have access to planes, trains and automobiles. However, mobility of people is only one facet of the globalized world, as there are other mobilities with a far greater impact than we have hitherto realized, with one in particular, mobility of information, being a source of crisis. Mobility of information is inseparable from the mobility of people, as Peter Adey writes in *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities*: “Whilst people are mobile, the equally differentiated mobilities of information, capital, goods and services that are essential for contemporary life are a sustained feature of mobilities research.”¹ While today’s discussions of mobility relate primarily to the movement of people, it is crucial to remember that the mobility – or circulation - of information and knowledge plays a crucial role in the globalized world. In fact, sharing information, news and knowledge is a cornerstone of our society. As Flavio Soares writes, “Information structures and personal information structures have been pre-requisites for the construction of our society.”² The result of the hyper-increase in the circulation of information is twofold. On the one hand, access to knowledge is unprecedentedly easy, but in the age of the internet, social networks, instant messaging and mass media, we are also overwhelmed by a constant flow of information, and the ability to process this body of data proves to be a challenge and a weakness that can be exploited by

¹Peter Adey, et al., eds. *The Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014) 267.

² Flavio Soares, et al., *Information Flow and Knowledge Sharing* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2008) 17.

those who manipulate information to their will; a fact that is now becoming painfully clear. Soares notes that information in a digitalized and global world is “the means to approach reality”³, but this reality can be easily distorted. Recently, a new dangerous phenomenon has arisen: “With the digital age and the rise of social media phenomena such as filter bubbles, echo chambers, and algorithms have emerged.”⁴ These algorithmically generated echo chambers make individuals withdraw from the circulation of new information and create cut-off social circles where pre-existing anxieties are validated and multiplied, while at the same time making objective discussion impossible, thus making echo chambers into a breeding ground for misinformation. Interestingly, the theme of withdrawal from the circulation of information and its negative effects finds its reflection in one of William Shakespeare’s plays.

Circulating, sharing or withholding information: all these play a crucial role in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*; a play defined by mobility of individuals, but also of the information about them – from the very first scene, when we are told of the visit of Polixenes to Sicilia, to the penultimate scene of the play when the climactic moments are being relayed to us. Particularly act I, scene II, describing Leontes’ quick turn from friend to tyrant serves as a warning about what happens when the circulation of knowledge is distorted, or when an individual actively avoids objective discussion. This scene inevitably results in crises that define the destinies of individual characters, but also the entire nation of Sicilia, and it is only when the free flow of information and people are restored in Sicilia that the play can come to a peaceful conclusion. In this paper, we will examine the importance of the circulation of information in the play, show the disruption of the flow of information in act I scene II and reveal its effects on the rest of the text. Finally, we will mirror the themes in the contemporary

³ Soares, 17.

⁴ Vincent D. Guffy, ed. *Digital Human Modeling and Applications in Health, Safety, Ergonomics and Risk Management* (New York: Springer, 2019) 442.

crises. However, first we must briefly explore mobility of information in *The Winter's Tale* as a whole.

Mobility in all its forms plays an important role in *The Winter's Tale*. Each act is bookended by acts of mobility, from Polixenes' arrival to his escape, from Perdita's banishment all the way to her return in the final act. However, these acts are always preceded or followed by information spreading through the world of the play. The necessity to relate and mediate information is established at the very start. The introductory scene merges the themes of physical mobility and the circulation of information as Archidamus and Camillo discuss the relationship of their respective rulers and, while doing so, they relate the information not only to each other, but to the audience as well:

CAMILLO

Sicilia cannot show himself over-kind to Bohemia. They were trained together in their childhoods; and there rooted betwixt them then such an affection, which cannot choose but branch now. Since their more mature dignities and royal necessities made separation of their society, their encounters, though not personal, have been royally attorneyed with interchange of gifts, letters, loving embassies; that they have seemed to be together, though absent, shook hands, as over a vast, and embraced, as it were, from the ends of opposed winds. The heavens continue their loves!⁵

Most importantly for us, this information precedes the physical appearance of the characters and serves as an integral part in the creation of their image. While we never learn to what extent the stories about the young princes and their supposed friendship are real, they are the only pieces of information we have and are therefore essential in our view of the following scene and the rest of the play. This effect of judging people based on the circulation of information about them extends from the audience to the characters on stage, as they too rely on the stories. When Archidamus says: "I think there is not in the world either malice or

⁵ *The Winter's Tale*, I, i, 21-32.

matter to alter it.”⁶ – he bases his assumptions on the stories; they are enough for Archidamus to judge the reality of the friendship between Leontes and Polixenes. Indeed, the construction of reality based on circulation of information and the following subversion of that reality are apparent throughout the play. In an article “‘But It Appears She Lives’: Iteration in *The Winter’s Tale*”, James Edward Siemon says: “Life as it is depicted in the play is a thing of wonder, constantly betraying the neat theories of men.”⁷ However, what Siemon calls theories in his work are not just scientific theories, he encompasses the way individuals create theories of the world around them, thus constructing their reality. And nowhere is this construction more apparent than in act I, scene II.

This famous scene shows the king of Bohemia as he prepares to leave Sicilia. Despite pleas from his lifelong friend Leontes, Polixenes remains unshaken in his resolve to return to his home and tend to royal matters there, as he is spurred on by his lack of information about his home country:

POLIXENES
 Sir, that’s to-morrow.
 I am question’d by my fears, of what may chance
 Or breed upon our absence; that may blow
 No sneaping winds at home, to make us say
 ‘This is put forth too truly:’ besides, I have stay’d
 To tire your royalty.⁸

This brief quote again shows the importance of information on the mindset of characters. It is the lack of information that pushes Polixenes to leave. Nonetheless, once queen Hermione speaks to Polixenes but for a moment, his views change. He is suddenly willing to stay, a fact that is not lost on Leontes. In an instant, Leontes steps away from the conversation and reverts

⁶ *The Winter’s Tale*, I, i, 34.

⁷ James Edward Siemon, “‘But It Appears She Lives’: Iteration in *The Winter’s Tale*”, *PMLA*, Vol. 89, No. 1 (1974): 11. *JSTOR*, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/461662> 23 Jun 2019.

⁸ *The Winter’s Tale*, I, ii, 10-14.

into his thoughts. He begins talking to himself and reaches the conclusion that Polixenes' willingness to listen to Hermione is not a mere coincidence. He begins to contemplate the possibility that Hermione and Polixenes have been in an ongoing romantic relationship, going so far as to assume that Polixenes is the father of Leontes' children. Leontes eventually convinces himself that these assumptions are reality and once Hermione and Polixenes leave the scene, Leontes begins to plot Polixenes' assassination and Hermione's imprisonment.

Leontes's quick turn from a brotherly friend to a mortal enemy of Polixenes, and from a loving husband to a blind tyrant to Hermione, is famous for its incongruous nature and chaotic delivery. It encapsulates the mental processes of a person overtaken by jealousy and the phantoms of their own imagination. Leontes jumps from one argument to another, he hastens from conclusion to conclusion. At moments, he seems willing to believe that his train of thought is only a flight of fancy:

LEONTES

I' fecks!

Why, that's my bawcock. What, hast smutch'd thy nose?

They say it is a copy out of mine.⁹

But he then dismisses these thoughts as folly and goes on pursuing his hunch about Hermione's infidelity. Finally, he says:

Affection! thy intention stabs the centre:

Thou dost make possible things not so held,

Communicatest with dreams; – how can this be? –

With what's unreal thou coactive art,

And fellow'st nothing: then 'tis very credent

Thou mayst co-join with something; and thou dost,

And that beyond commission, and I find it,

And that to the infection of my brains

And hardening of my brows.¹⁰

⁹ *The Winter's Tale*, I, ii, 120-122.

¹⁰ *The Winter's Tale*, I, ii, 138-146.

Only after he is fully convinced that Polixenes and Hermione are in a romantic relationship, Leontes turns back to them and resumes the conversation. The thing that defines this scene, other than Leontes' chaotic speech, is the cut that occurs when Leontes gets the first hints of suspicion. What had been up to that point going on as a conversation where the three involved freely exchanged stories of days past, suddenly turns into two separate conversations, one of which involves Leontes reverting into himself and completely cutting himself off from Hermione and Polixenes. As Siemon notes, this is emblematic of *The Winter's Tale*, as "The ritual action of the play takes the form of a withdrawal from the world followed by a return to it."¹¹

Leontes withdraws himself from the reality surrounding him and begins constructing a reality of his own. His own past, his marriage, his son, even the stories about his own life – so important to the reality constructed by the dramatic fiction – no longer apply once Leontes withdraws from the world. He is no longer willing to listen to his wife and friend, who are literally meters away. Once the flow of information is broken, Leontes enters a downward spiral which is driven, as he says himself, by "affection". And affection does not require objectivity or facts to construct truth, it makes "possible things not so held, communicates with dreams" and is coactive "with what's unreal". It would be possible to prevent the entire conflict if Leontes were willing to turn back to Hermione and Polixenes and ask them to clarify the situation in an open discussion, but that does not happen. Instead of listening to facts and information, Leontes weaves his own out of thin air. What is more, from this point onwards, Leontes is unshakable in his opinion that the conspiracy he fabricated is more real than anything anyone else can say:

¹¹ Siemon, 10.

LEONTES

How blest am I

In my just censure, in my true opinion!

Alack, for lesser knowledge! how accursed

In being so blest!¹²

Although he is certain that his version of events is the definitive truth, Leontes also feels the need for confirmation from a higher source, believing that it will cement his beliefs in the eyes of the public and convict both Hermione and Polixenes:

Though I am satisfied, and need no more
Than what I know, yet shall the oracle
Give rest to th' minds of others, such as he
Whose ignorant credulity will not
Come up to th' truth.¹³

To do so, Leontes commands his lords, Cleomenes and Dion to travel to Delphi and seek the oracle, who should provide the divine and unquestionable truth, one that Leontes believes is correspondent to his own. This plan, however, does not work since the message from the oracle reads:

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.¹⁴

The oracle, whose visions are eventually fulfilled, is understood as the bearer of definitive truth, and therefore a source of objective information. However, once Leontes undergoes his change objective reasoning and the search for truth loses all meaning to him. He can no longer relate to truth and, when faced with the prophecy, he dismisses it: "There is no truth at all i' the oracle: The sessions shall proceed: this is mere falsehood."¹⁵ Since even divine truth no longer has any power in the reality Leontes has constructed, he freely proceeds to take action

¹² *The Winter's Tale*, II, i, 38-41.

¹³ *The Winter's Tale*, II, ii, 189-193.

¹⁴ *The Winter's Tale*, III, ii, 131-134.

¹⁵ *The Winter's Tale*, III, ii, 139-140.

that ruins the lives of everyone involved and changes the face of Sicilia for more than a decade.

The actions Leontes takes reverberate throughout the play and lead to further crises of mobility. Stephen Greenblatt echoes Siemon's point about the ritual withdrawal and return when he mentions that Leontes' withdrawal forces Hermione to do the same: "*The Winter's Tale* then at once rehearses and reverses the ritual pattern [...] the tainting of the female, her exclusion from the social contracts and her ultimate reintegration into a renewed community."¹⁶ By making Leontes' withdrawal from the circulation of information the cause of all further trouble, *The Winter's Tale* critiques action that is not based on well-drawn reasoning and discussion. Siemon brings back his notion of theories when he says that by showing us Leontes' falsehood, the play "calls into question his easy conviction that simple theory can be directly translated into simple action"¹⁷ Furthermore, it berates the severing of oneself from the circulation of information. Siemon says: "what [*The Winter's Tale*] condemns is any attempt to act upon those theories without regard to the ambiguities of appearance and the complexities of reality"¹⁸

Luckily for the inhabitants of Sicilia, there are still those willing to listen to the objective truth the oracle represents. As Virginia Lee Strain writes, "Paulina and Camillo, safeguard the oracle's relationship to the royal family and its relevance to the political reality by enabling the return of mother and daughter: Paulina obstructs plans to have Leontes produce a new heir and secretly shelters Hermione, and Camillo directs Perdita and Florizel to run away to Sicily. The oracle's supernatural powers of truth-finding are thus directly related

¹⁶ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010) 132-133.

¹⁷ Siemon, 11.

¹⁸ Siemon, 11.

to the success of the human advisors in the play.”¹⁹ It is exactly those that Leontes refused to listen to, the advisors, who are the bearers of truth. This gives further significance to the necessity of discussion, of listening to advice, in guiding action and constructing realities, a trait that Leontes has lost by withdrawing from the flow of information around him. And precisely these issues prove crucial in today’s world.

As we said at the very beginning, the advances in mobility are perhaps the greatest steps that humanity has taken in the last century. No wonder then, that the anxieties we can see in *The Winter’s Tale* are exponentially multiplied and reflected in today’s events. Information and its circulation are instantaneous thanks to the internet, and while this has brought immeasurable boons to mankind, especially in recent years the incredibly large amount of information proves to be a threat to more than one aspect of liberty and democracy, particularly since the social circulation of information has shifted from public discussion onto social media. Recently, the social media phenomenon known as filter bubbles has emerged and is described as: “digital communities of like-minded individuals that are created through algorithmic filtering”²⁰ which “tailor online content to users’ political beliefs, partisanship, and opinions.”²¹ Social filter bubbles slowly enclose individuals with other individuals who echo their own opinions leading to the greatest danger of social media: echo chambers. These are an outcome of filter bubbles, where “one’s opinions, attitudes and even prejudices are magnified and stoked through skewed information [...] and could lead to misconceptions about the actual state of the world.”²² What echo chambers represent, is a complete withdrawal from the circulation of information into a sphere where all one hears are the

¹⁹ Virginia Lee Strain, “*The Winter’s Tale* and the Oracle of the Law”, *Legal Reform in English Renaissance Literature*, by Virginia Lee Strain, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2018, p. 177. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctv7n0997 23 Jun 2019

²⁰ Ilan Manor, *The Digitalization of Public Diplomacy* (New York: Springer, 2019) 137.

²¹ Manor, 137.

²² Manor, 137-138.

echoes of their previous beliefs, thus perpetuating a disconnection from reality and the construction of a new one. This is exactly the case with Leontes, whose fears only developed because he detaches himself from the outside reality and proceeds to creating his own version of the truth based on his own beliefs and a great dose of self-invention perpetuated by pre-existing insecurities. But whereas this is only an individual's personal turn, in the era of echo chambers the construction of a false reality is a mass issue. Social media of all kinds gradually enclose individuals into impenetrable bubbles that hinder objective discussion. As we see in Leontes' example, this kind of enclosure can lead to destructive effects.

What is more, such withdrawal allows for the creation of issues essentially from thin air. Affection is coactive with what is unreal and makes the unreal possible, as says Leontes. No wonder then that misinformation is very common in echo chambers. Worst of all, this fact can be essentially weaponized by those so inclined. Left enclosed within themselves and detached from the outside world, these modern Leonteses of the social media will eventually construct their own reality and embolden one another in their beliefs, but the direction of their construction can be easily manipulated. As we have seen in cases such as those of Cambridge Analytica, it is frighteningly easy to target specific groups with information that then spreads and steers the internal discussions of said groups. Leontes' drastic shift of opinion and subsequent cruelties were caused only by his own fancies but imagine a situation in which an invisible character, a "virtual Iago" whispers to Leontes and spurs him on in his transformation. That is a blueprint for catastrophe. Sadly, the virtual Iagos and Leonteses are an everyday reality of our globalized world, wherein information can be twisted or completely constructed to fit nefarious goals without the knowledge of the recipients. However, while Shakespeare's play serves as a warning of the negative effects of enclosing oneself and refusing to listen to outside sources, it also shows the potential solutions to the problem.

Naturally, the resolution of *The Winter's Tale* requires Leontes to open to the bearers of truth, to objective discussion. Only then can Sicilia open its borders and allow mobility to return to the island nation, both in terms of the mobility of people, but also of objective information. After all, it is only open discussion with people and sources previously rejected that allows the play to reach a positive conclusion.

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