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BEYOND MYTH: THE MEMORY OF QUEEN ELIZABETH IN SHAKESPEARE'S *THE WINTER'S TALE*

In 1606 King James I had the body of Queen Elizabeth exhumed from its original resting place beneath the altar in the Henry VII Chapel in Westminster Abbey,² and moved to its present isolated location in the north aisle of the chapel together with her rival Catholic half-sister Mary Tudor.³ James, then, reserved the Queen's "place of priority" for himself: just as he was asserting his dynastic legitimacy by way of his own distant descent from Henry VII, the King confined to marginality his glorious predecessor who had ruled over England for forty-five years. Although the issue of James's foreignness had been raised long before his coronation, his wish to place Elizabeth in a new tomb was much more than a mere attempt at inscribing himself within the ranks of truly English monarchs. It was in fact "a stupendously effective act of political and historical revisionism" (Walker 1996, 511) whereby fifty years of female rule were metaphorically wiped out. There is, however, stark disparity between the royal revision of Elizabeth's position within the English monarchy and "the populist celebrations of her reign evinced in the memorials in parish churches within the City of London" (Walker 1998, 253). Whereas in Westminster Abbey Elizabeth's centrality was dislodged, the erection of commemorative monuments to the Virgin Queen from 1607⁴ (Walker 1998, 257) bears in fact unmistakable evidence to the uncontrollable resurgence of Elizabeth's memory in the hearts of her people.

1. Elizabeth, James, and the Politics of Memory

The antithesis just addressed is not an isolated inconsistency. It is instead highly symptomatic of the perpetual struggle James had to fight against the unremitting allure exerted by Elizabeth's ghost: the first Stuart king was forced to compete with the powerful memory of the Virgin Queen from the very moment he ascended the English throne. It therefore comes as no surprise that he would choose to partly detach himself from the legacy of such an unequalled sovereign. The contrast between Elizabeth's removal from Henry VII's Chapel and her pervasive, popular memorialization shows that the revival of the cult of Elizabeth – which gained momentum after her death in 1603 – was also a means to express the mounting discontent with James's rule in Parliament and among the people a few years after his enthronement. When James Stuart ascended the throne of England after more than two decades of enervating anxieties about royal succession, he was initially welcomed with great favor and high expectations. James was, after all, a male Protestant king, an experienced ruler⁵ who had already been blessed with three healthy sons. Nevertheless, this "mood of thanksgiving" (Levin 168) only lasted a few years, and as Carol Levin notes, his "Scottishness, his favorites, his extravagancies, his policies, especially peace with Spain, all led to dissatisfaction" (168). Discontent grew, especially, in Parliament – as witnessed by a number of plots against the King's life in the

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² Elizabeth Tudor – born on September 7, 1533, and ascended to the English throne on November 17, 1558, at the age of twenty-five – died at Richmond on March 24, 1603. She was initially buried in the crypt beneath the altar in the Chapel of her grandfather, Henry VII, in the same spot where her father, Henry VIII, had originally planned his own tomb.

³ Mary Tudor, the only surviving child of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, was born on February 18, 1516, and ascended the English throne in 1553. She died at St. James's Palace on November 17, 1558, and was buried in Westminster on December 14.

⁴ In referring to the memorials erected to Elizabeth between 1607 and 1631, Walker draws from John Stow, "The Survey of London," "begunne first (...) by John Stow in the yeere 1598. Afterwards enlarged by (...) A.M. (Antony Munday) in the yeere 1618. And now completely finished by A.M. H.D. (Henry Dyson) and others, this present yeere 1633." Stow's survey lists ninety-seven churches within the city of London in 1633, thirty-two with memorials to Elizabeth.

⁵ When he was crowned at the age of thirty-seven, James was one of the most experienced kings since William the Conqueror: he had, in fact, been appointed nominal ruler of Scotland when he was a child and had been on the Scottish throne since 1587, after the execution of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots.



first two years of his reign.⁶ James's unpopularity among his people also increased. As reported by the Venetian ambassador to England in 1607:

He does not caress the people nor make them that good cheer the late Queen did, whereby she won their loves: for the English adore their Sovereigns, and if the King passed through the same street a hundred times a day the people would still run to see him; they like their King to show pleasure at their devotion, as the late Queen knew well how to do; but this King manifests no taste for them but rather contempt and dislike. The result is he is despised and almost hated. In fact his Majesty is more inclined to live retired with eight or ten of his favorites than openly as is the custom of the country and the desire of the people. (Ashton 8)

Queen Elizabeth's willed celibacy had long exposed England to the risk of new civil wars. However, as soon as it became clear that James would fail to meet the high expectations initially raised on him, people began to look back on the Elizabethan Golden Age with a nostalgic gaze. Comparisons were inevitably made, and the cult of the Virgin Queen took up nuances of political dissent: mythical representations of Elizabeth were revived in popular recollections, while all the controversial aspects of her reign were largely brushed aside. Elizabeth Tudor was thereafter remembered as the victorious Protestant warrior Queen who had defeated the Spanish Armada,⁷ the national heroine who had fostered the foundation of the British Empire, the handmaid of God who had devoted her whole life to the loving care of her reign. The 1600s saw "a historical personage becoming a literary trope" (Hageman and Conway 27), since the myth of the Virgin Queen – reaching its height during the reign of the first Stuart monarch – became increasingly more mythical and removed from history (Doran and Freeman 19).

Hence, it is not surprising that church memorials in London should primarily depict Elizabeth as an Amazon. What people needed to remember was no longer a queen, no longer a woman: it was a set of symbols, an icon, a transcendent paragon of devotion.

Far from being monolithic, such memorial practices were, however, multifaceted: along with hagiographic mainstream recollections,⁸ new approaches to the Queen's memory were also surfacing where idolatry was partly replaced with a greater emphasis on the ambiguities of Elizabeth's own myth.

It should be reminded in fact that the myth itself – a powerful self-construct – was not shaped around a single, stable image. It was instead "a collective corpus of images, tropes and other verbal and iconic resources that provided a growing and changing matrix for the varied and sharply contested process of royal representation" (Montrose 4). The complex imagery of Elizabeth was the result of a skillful orchestration that masterfully crafted a number of competing personae for the Queen in order to compensate for her irreparable shortcomings. And yet, no matter how functional to the legitimization of Elizabeth's authority throughout her long reign, the Queen's contradictory representations – virgin spouse to her reign and mother to her people, androgynous warrior queen and devout woman, earthly substitute for the Virgin Mary and living goddess of the pagan tradition – had been disconcerting. Her choice not to marry had, after all, left

⁶ As reported by Mark Kishlansky, "one significant and two minor plots against (James's) life were uncovered in the first two years of the reign" (68). The former one, the famous Gunpowder Plot, in particular, was hatched by a group of Catholic conspirators in order to assassinate the King between the winter and spring of 1604-1605, and is still remembered as a clear symptom of the political and religious tensions undermining the stability of Jacobean England.

⁷ Susan Frye (98) maintains that one of the episodes most frequently recalled with semi-mythical accents, and widely responsible for following heroic representations of Elizabeth as a warrior queen is, in fact, her appearance at Tilbury before the English troops who were just about to face the Spanish Armada in 1588. On that occasion, the Queen, wearing an armor on a white horse, gave a rousing speech in which she famously said: "I know I have the bodie, but of a weak and feeble woman, but I have the heart and Stomach of a king, and of a King of England too" (98).

⁸ The same kind of mythical investment applies to most of the literary works openly praising Elizabeth in the first decade of James's reign: epitomizing chastity and national glory, the warrior queen stands out in them as an imperishable model of authority. Although he was one of the few English writers who did not feel compelled to write a tribute to Elizabeth at her death (Strong 15), Shakespeare was – of course – sensitive to this surge of Elizabethan hagiography. As the filter, interpreter and shaper of Early Modern culture, the Bard could hardly have failed to detect the cultural and political issues of such an overwhelming appeal.



England with no legitimate heir, and the paradoxes of her femininity had often undermined the stability of what had until then appeared as a permanent patriarchal system. In short, the myth incorporated a subversive potential. It was such potential that was retrieved and promoted in the new marginal memorial practices revived in the early phases of James's reign. Elizabeth's inconsistencies were recast as the sap of her everlasting fame.

2. *The Winter's Tale* or Paradoxes Revived

While monuments to the memory of Elizabeth were erected all over London, the statue of a lost queen took center stage in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.⁹ The plot of the romance Shakespeare wrote in 1611, at the end of his career, is full of momentous and hardly credible incidents, of pastoral interludes and miraculous rebirths: fantasy and realism, mythology and history blend into a pattern whose very features resemble the composite myth of the Virgin Queen. Set in Sicilia, where King Leontes, married to pregnant Hermione, is entertaining his friend Polixenes, the King of Bohemia, the story soon confronts us with Leontes's insane outburst of male jealousy. Virtuous Hermione is so good at convincing Polixenes to stay on, that her husband suspects they have been having an affair, and that the child her wife is pregnant of is a bastard. The King's fury is such as not to be softened even by the sight of the newly born baby whom he orders to abandon in a desolate place. And such is the stubbornness of his jealousy that he does not only ignore his wife's protestations of innocence, but also the Oracle's response on Hermione's faithfulness. Defeated by her husband's insanity, Hermione, who falls into a swoon, disappears from sight, carried away by her loyal attendant and friend Paulina, who will soon after report the Queen's death to repentant Leontes. In the pastoral subplot that the play deploys to cover a sixteen year interval, the premises for regeneration and reconciliation are laid: young Perdita, the abandoned heiress, who miraculously survives deadly incidents, falls in love with and is betrothed to Prince Florizel, the son of King Polixenes. After winning over obstacles and Polixenes's opposition through the aid of shepherds and courtiers alike, the young couple gets back to Leontes in Sicilia, where reconciliation is celebrated between kingly friends, as well as father and daughter. But the *coup de théâtre* comes when Paulina leads the royal party into her house in order to show a statue of Hermione, that to everybody's amazement magically comes to life. Such miracle – the crowning touch of Shakespeare's romance – comes as the most striking emblem of the charismatic regenerative power bestowed on women, and in particular on a woman whose traits come to mirror the Virgin Queen's in so many respects. It is in fact the onlookers' belief in the living truth of the statue, i.e. in the living memory of the dead Queen, that seems to reanimate Hermione.

The scene crucially shows the relevance of Shakespeare's engagement with Elizabeth's myth in the whole play. No matter how subdued to patriarchy, all women here are in fact endowed with Hermione's, and Elizabeth's, charismatic power. *The Winter's Tale*, however, intercepts the new approaches to the Queen's memory that partly stripped her representations of their idolatrous patina, thus promoting the ambiguities of her self-construct as the gist of the glorious Elizabethan Age. As it dramatizes the whole range of Elizabeth's nuanced representations, the play powerfully enhances the sheer complexity and contradictoriness of her mythical construct. This is not surprising if we consider that Shakespeare's reshaping of femininity in romances is always poised between conformity to patriarchal order and subversion. And, although women "constitute a subversive group, a threat to the social and political order" (Orgel 58) on account of their abrupt rejection of the traditional roles patriarchy allotted to them, they never completely defy the expectations of their contemporaries, as they also conform to the very paradigms they set out to challenge. What we see in *The Winter's Tale* are female roles combining feminine and masculine qualities into new configurations that invariably recall the cunningly balanced self-definitions of the late queen, who used to talk of herself as "lord and ladie, (...) kinge and quene" (Levin 121).

The textual shadows of Elizabeth inscribed in *The Winter's Tale* come to the fore in the patent contradictions which riddle the femininity of its heroines', and which are largely shaped on the unique representational model of the old Queen. As we shall see, the complex characterization of Hermione, Perdita, and Paulina comes, on one hand, from a skillful re-articulation of gender that in the play is "always prone to be manipulated (...), split – anatomized, mutable, diffused" (Palfrey 196), and that draws directly on the

⁹ *The Winter's Tale* was composed in 1610-1611, and first performed in 1611.



successful and appealing pattern of “Elizabeth Rex.”¹⁰ On the other hand, such characterization exploits to the full the potential offered by a new concept of virginity: a hybrid reformulation that mingles features belonging to the Christian and to the classical/pagan traditions.

A relevant case in point is Perdita. A sixteen-year-old princess, unexpectedly “unafraid of sensual fulsomeness, her body alive with nascent sexuality” (Palfrey 222), the royal couple’s daughter gives proof of self-confidence and individuality (Dash 148) even as she fits into the conventional mold of filial submission and passive yielding to a male orchestrations of events.

But the same kind of compromise also applies to Paulina, whose role the play eventually empowers to an extent that is initially unpredictable. The challenge her abusive words pose at the outset, when she faces the King in order to save the life of newly born Perdita, is such as to deserve her the label of a “mankind witch” (2.3.68).¹¹ Only by the end of the play – when Hermione is long supposed to be dead, and heirless Leontes is left alone – will Paulina’s position at court be restored. More importantly, her subservient role will be ultimately reversed into that of a “master of revels,” a feminine “deus ex machina” of the plot mechanics.¹² Hermione herself, the victimized queen, dithers between the image of “a model woman, wife and mother, (...) comfortable, committed to her role” (Dash 133), and that of a looming threat to patriarchy. When, charged with adultery, she vigorously confronts her husband’s authority in court, her outspokenness seems refrained as if she were to contain her otherwise overflowing potential for subversion. That is why, when she masterfully takes control over the events at court at the beginning of the play, Hermione deploys Queen Elizabeth’s rhetoric of reverence and meekness.

Like Perdita and Paulina, Hermione too perfectly instantiates Shakespeare’s characteristic “double enunciation,” – a rhetorical strategy whereby his plays “give with one hand what they take away with the other” (Locatelli 80), In this play too female unruliness is conveniently punished and, at least from a narrative point of view, the status quo is apparently re-established. And yet, even if only men are entitled to hold power, female subjugation is emphatically counterpoised by the emphasis on women’s voices, especially when they take center stage. As a matter of fact, the hidden, but significant power this play bestows on women mostly relies on the subtlety of rhetorical strategies that are reminiscent of the Virgin Queen’s matchless eloquence.

As it evolves from silence and fear to control, ultimate supremacy over men, and eventually to the source of truth and regeneration, the language of the play’s women effectively retrieves the powerful rhetoric of a Queen who had been forced to learn how to legitimate her voice – the voice of an unmarried woman on the throne of England – in front of a Parliament which was by definition open exclusively to men.

Hermione is an explanatory instance of such rhetorical power. Although her role is brutally shattered and even if she is made to disappear for more than half of the play – she is arguably the true protagonist, not on account of what she *does*, but of what she *says*. Hermione is, in fact, mainly signified by her words. It is especially so in the early stages of the romance, when her eloquence is used by Leontes to persuade Polixenes to stay on at court: “Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you” (1.2.27).

Nor is this the only space where Hermione’s voice is heard: just as she exposes the hollowness of Polixenes’s words by means of anaphors and iterations, she also uses the potency of her female language to claim her rights in issues of state politics (“A lady’s ‘verily’s / As potent as a lord’s” (1.2.51-52)). When she does speak, her exertion of authority over a man turns, in fact, *her* into the king and completely overshadows the presence of the true King of Sicilia on stage.¹³

And yet, even if Hermione’s voice and masculine authoritativeness irresistibly resonate with Queen Elizabeth’s, there is a world of difference between the outcome of these two queens’ “mannish behavior.” For it must be said that Elizabeth’s self-ascription of masculine qualities could be tolerated for the sake of the

¹⁰ In order not to let her sex impair her authority, Queen Elizabeth often demanded that she should be perceived and referred to as a “king” or “prince.”

¹¹ All Shakespeare quotations are from *The Norton Shakespeare* (1997).

¹² Paulina, we will discover, has in fact magically “preserved” the memory and the living body of Hermione in a secret place.

¹³ “HERMIONE. Force me to keep you as a prisoner, / Not like a guest: so you shall pay your fees / When you depart, and save your thanks. How say you? / My prisoner? or my guest? By your dread ‘verily’, / One of them you shall be. / POLIXENES. Your guest, then, madam” (1.2.53-57).



kingdom. Since, in choosing to stay heirless, she herself had “robbed” her country of a king, she knew she had to compensate by learning how to speak – indeed how to perform – like a king.

Hermione, on the other hand, can only temporarily play the role of a king. Leontes is in fact so pervasively present that he immediately and unsurprisingly feels the urge to restrict the challenge of his wife’s linguistic power by labelling it as “adultery.” The Queen’s fate therefore can only rest with Leontes’s self-proclaimed superiority in language, which has Hermione sentenced and imprisoned. Silenced and abused by her husband’s jealousy, Hermione finally fades away, together with the disturbing potential of her unrestrained “masculinity.”

The patriarchal defeat of the women’s subversive language, however, is counterbalanced by the spiritual victory of their blessing voices. Here again, another influential dimension of the Virgin Queen’s legacy comes into play, namely her virginal imagery which had been syncretically fashioned for the express purpose of turning her choice to remain unwed into an advantageous political statement. Elizabeth’s vow of celibacy had in fact been translated into the self-sacrifice of a loving queen, who was devoting her own life to her country and people – her metaphorical husband and children.¹⁴

What is new in Shakespeare’s romance is the foregrounding of Elizabeth’s intrinsically paradoxical conflation of the motives of virginity and fertility which straddle Christian and Pagan traditions.

The frequent references to Hermione’s sanctity throughout the five acts – “most sacred lady” (1.2.78), “our most gracious mistress” (1.2.235), “in pure white robes, / Like very sanctity” (3.3.21-22), “her sainted spirit” (5.1.57) – indicate the extent to which the memory of Elizabeth’s representations as an earthly substitute for the Virgin Mary underlie *The Winter’s Tale*. The Queen’s association to the Holy Virgin mostly owed to the paradox that inhered the life of Mary: what people praised was the condition of being chaste *and* a mother together, which is exactly one of the most rewarding features of Elizabeth’s alluring self-construct in terms of legitimization and preservation of royal authority.

The ambiguity of the femininity Shakespeare dramatizes in *The Winter’s Tale* also relates to the mythological framework in which such Christian echoes are inscribed. This pagan context is best conjured up by the parallel between the couples Hermione-Perdita and Ceres-Proserpina¹⁵ that conflates many of the meanings attached to the representation of Elizabeth as a virgin goddess.¹⁶ Although *The Winter’s Tale* dramatizes an inverted version of the myth of Ceres and Proserpina,¹⁷ Hermione’s association to Ceres, maternal goddess of fertility, adds to the composite picture of halos of Elizabeth engaged so far: in addition to being an emblem of chastity and profane sanctity, Hermione is, in fact, – first and foremost – a mother. This gives prominence to the strategic image of Elizabeth as the virgin mother of the English people throughout her long reign.

In Shakespeare’s romance the multilayered femininity of Hermione, Paulina, and Perdita is not to be tamed¹⁸: it is, on the contrary, empowered to the point that it is mostly through female intervention that the

¹⁴ In a speech held in front of the House of Commons in 1559, Queen Elizabeth said: “I am already bound unto a husband, which is the Kingdome of England. (...) And reproch mee so no more, that I have no children: for every one of you, and as many are English, are my Children” (King 33).

¹⁵ According to the myth – whose source is, among others, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (Bk. V, ll. 341-571) – Proserpina’s presence/absence from the world determines the renewal of nature and the blossoming of spring. It analogically discloses timely connections with the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, which is at the core both of Shakespeare’s romance and – more importantly – of the nostalgic revival of the memory of Queen Elizabeth Tudor in the early Jacobean age. Through the implications of Proserpina’s myth, national prosperity is indirectly connected to the (meta)physical presence of the Virgin Queen.

¹⁶ As synthesized by Allison Heisch, “the depiction of Elizabeth in scores of paintings and woodcuts, even occasionally in sculpture, fixed her visually as a goddess. She is, variously, Deborah, Astraea, Judith, Cynthia, Ceres, and Vestal Virgin” (46).

¹⁷ Contrary to the myth, – where Proserpina is abducted by Pluto, and Ceres frantically looks for her – in Shakespeare’s play it is, in fact, the mother who disappears for sixteen years, and the daughter is the one who eventually searches for her.

¹⁸ In order to better qualify the innovation of Shakespeare’s treatment of women’s transgression in *The Winter’s Tale*, it may be useful to briefly refer to earlier comic and tragic inscriptions of the Queen’s anomalous gender construct. In the case of such comedies as *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *As You Like It*, gender promiscuity is eventually contained: it is, in fact, only by means of conventional marriages, where female unruly voices are completely silenced, that Shakespeare’s comic heroines resist total annihilation. In some of Shakespeare’s greatest tragedies – namely *Othello*, *King Lear*,



dramatic events revolve towards a positive future. Along with Hermione's rebirth, the case of Paulina is, once again, extremely relevant: instead of being silenced, "the audacious lady" (2.3.42) is eventually glorified as the emissary of truth and power. She is also allowed to orchestrate the events as the real *deus ex machina* of the whole plot.

The same crucial role is bestowed upon Perdita, whose recovery and betrothal to Florizel are the true turning point of the play. Although reconciliatory marriage between two young lovers is a very frequent narrative topos in the Shakespearean canon, here the motif is given new prominence. Emphasis is no longer strictly on the male part, but falls on the "gracious" (5.1.133) and "fair couple" (5.1.189), on the harmonic union of masculinity and femininity. In a reversal of the conventional power dynamics for Renaissance couples, the focus shifts to Perdita, described as Florizel's "mistress from the whom (...) / There's no disjunction to be made" (4.4.516-17).

3. The Statue Scene

The multifarious echoes of the imagery of Elizabeth that we have been exploring so far show how deeply the Queen's representations seeped into Shakespeare's romance. As mentioned above, their relevance in the context of our discussion, however, is definitely highlighted in the so called statue scene at the end of the play. As in the case of Elizabeth's memorial monuments, Hermione's statue, in fact, certainly serves the purpose of celebrating her queenly greatness and invoking her metaphorical return. Yet, the dramatization of a queen's statue being miraculously animated also becomes a repository of all the meanings attached to Elizabeth's odd femininity.

Sculpted by the Italian master Giulio Romano, the statue of Hermione Paulina promises to show comes as a delayed disclosure, which sharpens Leontes's yearning to see:

LEONTES. O Paulina,
We honour you with trouble. But we came
To see the statue of our queen. Your gallery
Have we passed through, not without much content
In many singularities; but we saw not
That which my daughter came to look upon,
The statue of her mother. (5.3.8-14)

As soon as Hermione's figure comes into sight, all the bystanders are immediately overwhelmed by the striking resemblance between the statue and the Queen. Such is their amazement as to keep their bewildered gazes absolutely riveted onto the wonder they are beholding:

PAULINA. As she lived peerless,
So her dead likeness I do well believe
Excels what ever yet you looked upon,
Or hand of man hath done.
(...)
I like your silence; it the more shows off
Your wonder. (...)
LEONTES. Her natural posture.
Chide me, dear stone, that I may say indeed
Thou art Hermione (...). (5.3.14-17, 21-25)

Macbeth, and *Antony and Cleopatra* – the threat posed by the women's monstrous deviations from codified gender patterns is unconceivable, and results in "the demonization of women who subvert the meaning of femininity" (Belsey 185). The condition for the peaceful future perspectives envisaged at the end of the plays becomes the utter extirpation of female presence.



What puzzles Paulina's onstage audience is the uncanny verisimilitude of Hermione's statue – a seemingly breathing artifact. After having demanded an act of faith from her guests, Paulina performs a miraculous resuscitation of Hermione – who is now unveiled as the living body of the Queen:

PAULINA. Either forbear,
Quit presently the chapel, or resolve you
For more amazement. If you can behold it,
I'll make the statue move indeed, descend,
And take you by the hand.
(...)
LEONTES. What you can make her do,
I am content to look on; what to speak,
I am content to hear (...). (5.3.85-89, 91-93)

The miracle comes true. And although the queen's resurrection does not seem to serve any dramatic function, – since by now all the discords have been settled – when Hermione does move and speak, we cannot help sensing the far reaching effects of a momentous turn. We perceive in fact that what is being restored is not so much the life of a single woman as a specific kind of femininity made up with the most complex dimensions of Elizabeth's oxymoronic self-construct.¹⁹

It is worth reminding that the triumph of femininity dramatized in the statue scene can actually be attained only through female intervention, and only when all the female roles and voices are recovered and legitimized. It is not coincidental that Hermione should only speak to her daughter:

HERMIONE. You gods, look down,
And from your sacred vials pour your graces
Upon my daughter's head. – *Tell me*, mine own,
Where hast thou been preserved? Where lived? How found
Thy father's court? For *thou shalt hear* that I,
Knowing by Paulina that the oracle
Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserved
Myself to see the issue. (5.3.122-29, my emphasis)

Nor is it a matter of chance that the Queen should be reborn due to Paulina's performative words: "Tis time. Descend. Be stone no more. Approach. / Strike all that look upon with marvel" (5.3.99-100). "Resurrected" by Paulina's *words*, Hermione no longer needs to *do* anything: she only wants Perdita to *tell* her about the years when she was missing. Her daughter can therefore *hear* that the only reason why Hermione has preserved herself is that she *heard* from Paulina that Perdita might have been alive. Such empowered feminine continuum becomes the gist of the peaceful future envisioned at the end of the play. It is a future powerful enough to completely overshadow the presence of two kings and a prince on stage.

The amazement and awe of the unprepared onlookers are the first clues into the significant Marian iconography which – disguised underneath the veneer of a pagan setting – is extensively retraceable in the ending of *The Winter's Tale*. While addressing the statue of her mother, Perdita retrieves such traditionally Catholic devotional practices as kneeling and kissing statues:

PERDITA. And do not say 'tis superstition, that
I kneel and then implore her blessing. Lady,
Dear Queen, that ended when I but began,

¹⁹ It is particularly significant in this respect that in *The Winter's Tale* rebirth only applies to women: Prince Mamillius – Leontes and Hermione's eldest son – dies young for reasons that remain undisclosed, and Antigonus – Paulina's husband – never gets back from his journey to Bohemia, where he is anonymously killed by a bear.



Give me that hand of yours to kiss.
(...)
PAULINA. Please you to interpose, fair madam. Kneel
And pray your mother's blessing. (5.3.43-46, 120-21)

Perdita's mention of "superstition" is particularly charged for the word "used to connote Catholic attachment to images, relics, and cults" (Vanita 321). Echoes of Marian devotion are also detectable in Leontes's overwhelming shame, and in his yearning for redemption as a response to the visual impact of Hermione's stone-like effigy:

LEONTES. As now she might have done,
So much to my good comfort as it is
Now piercing to my soul. O, thus she stood,
Even with such life of majesty – warm life,
As now it coldly stands – when first I wooed her.
I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me
For being more stone than it? O royal piece!
There's magic in thy majesty, which has
My evils conjured to remembrance, and
From thy admiring daughter took the spirits,
Standing like stone with thee.
(...)
PAULINA. Indeed, my lord,
If I had thought the sight of my poor image
Would thus have wrought you – for the stone is mine –
I'd not have showed it.
LEONTES. Do not draw the curtain. (5.3.32-42, 56-59)

If we compare it with the completely different ending in the original version of the plot,²⁰ the collapse of Leontes's boasted virility and male authority in relation to powerful femininity put to the forefront in the statue scene refracts all the expectations raised and immediately thwarted by James's arrival on the English throne: Shakespeare, in fact, deprives Leontes of Pandosto's stoic death and central role in the action. Leontes is thus reduced to nothing more than a marginal presence at the close of the play, when the undaunted courage heralded by his leonine name is finally debunked.

The closing scene of *The Winter's Tale* is unique in Shakespeare for, although his canon is strewn with defiant female voices that completely overshadow their male counterparts' until they are suppressed, there is no other play in which such restorative power is bestowed on silence as in the statue scene.

The silent contemplation of Hermione's marble image in Paulina's chapel is due to more than mere surprise and bewilderment: it is a mute admiration that implies devotion and prayers. It is the kind of reverential and sacred silent that people reserve to saints. Hermione, however, is not an unreachable dead female saint: she is a living woman. Paulina's guests are worshipping an object – Hermione's statue – which is also a person; they are adoring something seemingly eternal and immutable, and yet made of flesh. The awe-inspiring

²⁰ Shakespeare's main source for *The Winter's Tale* is a prose romance written in 1588 by Robert Greene (1558-1592), *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*. Pandosto, King of Bohemia, accuses his wife Bellaria of having committed adultery with his childhood friend, the King of Sicilia. Blinded by a furious jealousy, Pandosto sends his infant daughter out to sea to die, and causes the death of his son and wife. His daughter lands in Sicilia and is saved and raised by a shepherd. Unaware that she is a princess, Dorastus, the Prince of Sicilia, falls in love with Fawnia, and they run away to get married. The young lovers land in Bohemia, where Pandosto falls in love with his own daughter Fawnia, and, at the end, – after Fawnia's true identity is revealed – Pandosto commits suicide.



female power glorified with Hermione's rebirth – by all means the most striking Shakespearean addition to *The Winter's Tale*²¹ – no longer belongs to a religious figure, but to a secular figure of devotion.

Hermione's syncretism between sacred and profane voices the transposition of the cult of the Virgin Mary from a holy to a laic dimension following the English Reformation: when images, feasts, and prayers for the Holy Virgin were removed or defaced in churches and declared unlawful, new female figures for worship were needed. Queen Elizabeth was one of them. The cult of the Virgin Queen was an encompassing blend of sanctity and secularity – a paradox on which Elizabeth's most successful virginal paradigm relied upon.

The same applies to Hermione, living saint and breathing statue. The Queen's double condition is in every sense oxymoronic: praised for being an epitome of virtue and purity, she is also known to be a woman who openly defied the codes of gender. And the King's worshipping gaze that now is amazed by Hermione's statue belongs to the same person who sentenced her sixteen years earlier.

The paradoxes of Hermione's duplicity actually enhance the wondrous effect of Paulina's enchantment, of the beholders' amazement, and of Leontes's sudden repentance. Through the mediation of the myth of Queen Elizabeth, in fact, duplicity and contradictions get newly promoted as an invaluable source of greatness. And improbability becomes the core of a representation of gender which was to remain powerful for the centuries to come.

A play not specifically written with eulogistic aims, *The Winter's Tale* celebrates the new femininity embodied by Hermione as the ultimate emblem of Elizabeth's lost, long-lamented sovereignty. Shakespeare's words may have harbored no clear political intentions, but his play seems invariably to suggest that, in order to compensate for his shortcomings, James would be well-advised to look at the memory of his illustrious predecessor.

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²¹ Shakespeare's choice for Hermione's name itself is underwritten with some significance. The possible etymologies of the name link the Queen to the Greek god Hermes, conductor of the dead, and intermediary between the upper and lower worlds. "Hermione" is also connected to Hermaphroditus, the classical divinity who emblemizes the contemporary presence of the two sexes in a single body.



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