"Teaching Ambiguity in Shakespeare"

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Bachelor of Arts in English & French Studies, Brigham Young University, 2016

A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty
of the University of Virginia in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Department of English

University of Virginia
April 2024

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"If there be truth in sight…"

"If there be truth in sight," characters repeat at the end of *As You Like It* (5.4.116-117). The conditional phrase serves as a dénouement of the play's comedy of concealed identity as Rosalind, who has been cross-dressed as Ganymede, appears undisguised to her father, her beloved Orlando, and Phoebe, who states a similar conditional, "If sight and shape be true" (118). The truth is at last revealed to the denizens of the Forest of Arden, almost none of whom was theretofore privy to Ganymede's true identity, and their correct identifications of Rosalind suggest that their accompanying conditions of sight as a vehicle of truth is likewise accurate. Nevertheless, the language that the Duke and Orlando employ to establish their now-certain recognition of Rosalind rests uneasily on this implicit conclusion that their sight is now infallible whereas, throughout the play, Rosalind's cross-dressing has revealed sight as an unstable, imperfect means of accessing truth. If anything, *As You Like It* demonstrates that there is no truth in sight.

This instability of sight is a crucial part of theater, which relies on the appearance of absolute mimesis inherent to performance. Drama's untruthfulness, a core component of the Western antitheatrical tradition, found new importance in the early modern period with Protestant Reformers' condemnations of the theatricality of Catholic ritual. Shakespeare and his contemporary playwrights saw in this anxiety over truth, representation, and performance considerable dramatic potential. Bed tricks, manipulative Machiavels, preternatural apparitions, and crossdressers all occupy a stage built on the foundation of the unreliable nature of sight and of mimetic representation.

Because this instability of sight is such a central element of drama, both with regard to the act of theatrical performance and the plots that playwrights create to magnify this inherent

nature, the plays' narrative and thematic developments often offer their audiences open possibilities, disparate avenues of interpretation which can confuse audiences who are new to the plays and dizzy unfamiliar students who are attempting to navigate their complexities. While part of the richness of these texts, these ambiguities exacerbate their difficulty for students and, in doing so, can pose challenges for instructors who are trying to encourage students to engage with them.

It is, perhaps, easier to identify ambiguities than to define them, but Empson's definition serves well: ambiguity is "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language" (Empson 1). Empson finds it useful to delineate and categorize different types of ambiguity, but for the present purposes of considering classroom discussions of early modern drama, two types suffice. The first, as Empson says, is the "verbal nuance" students find in a play's "language," the words in the text. The second is the ambiguities inherent to texts that were written to be performed.

For most students studying Shakespeare in an English class (my primary focus is on undergraduate students, but many of the same principles apply in high school or other educational settings), the repeated remark at the end of *As You Like It*, "If there be truth in sight," loses a significant aspect of its meaning before students even arrive to the page on which it appears; when the Lord Chamberlain's Men performed *As You Like It* in Elizabethan England, the audience did see Rosalind, both as herself and when she presented as Ganymede—and, of course, the audience recognized that it was a younger male actor playing the crossdressing female character. The audience is directly involved in the questions of sight. For students who read the play, however, this significant aspect of the early modern perspective is lost. They do not see Rosalind, and the changing of clothes that allows her to pass from female-presenting to

male-presenting is only imagined in the reader's mind's eye, brought on by Rosalind's verbal acknowledgement of her masculine clothing: she is quick to reference her "man's apparel" and "doublet and hose" when she first appears cross-dressed (*AYL* 2.4.4-6). For readers, there is no immediately recognized visual separation of Rosalind as herself and Rosalind as Ganymede to accompany her description of her cross-dressing. The anticipation that builds between Rosalind's declaration in 1.3 that she will dress as a man in Arden and her next appearance, cross-dressed, in 2.4 (itself a delay mandated, in part, by the time it takes for the actor to change costumes) does not deliver the visual payoff of the character's transformation when the play is being read. The transformation is not as real, and, correspondingly, it is not as immediately accessible to readers, especially those who are less attentive and may overlook how Arden's dwellers respond to Ganymede's apparel by socially interacting with Rosalind as though she were a man.

When students read these texts, they feel the distance between themselves and the works' intended method of representation, whether they are able to identify this distance or not. It is one of the reasons why many of them "don't get it" when reading Shakespeare; comic moments in particular risk being lost on students. This distance is part of why many students prefer to watch productions of the plays rather than to read them. (There are other reasons, of course; for some students, it is easier to grapple with the plays' language aurally, and our ever-increasing saturation with digital media can make a filmed production feel more familiar territory to many students, rendering the play more accessible.) However, choosing solely to watch a play deprives a student of the crucial resource that is a critically edited text; the ideal is to combine these mediums to incorporate multiple dimensions in students' learning.

Paradoxically, the potential for performance is expansive, allowing for new interpretative possibilities, but the act of performance is often reductive, condensing the play into a single

interpretation by choosing to present the language (and accompanying elements such as body language) in a single way. Correspondingly, these ambiguities are foregrounded when the texts are being read as effectively undramatized works of literature, which is too often the case in English classrooms. As Andrew James Hartley notes, the "grudging pluralism" that divergent avenues of performative possibilities bring "may water down the absolutism that readers and audiences may crave" (Hartley 125). In detailing a performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* put on by his undergraduate "Performing Shakespeare" class in 2014, Hartley notes how the play can be performed in diametrically opposite ways: "the happy blind-eye-turning romantic version or that which exposes the play's brutal misogyny" (124). "Either approach," he warns, "would have risked codifying the production's approach in the minds of our students as not merely valid, but somehow *right*," the definitive, unambiguous version of the piece. "Crucial though the slippage between the play and any particular version of the play in production is, it's a distinction many students and general audience members don't make. Typically, for them, the play is either one thing or another" (125). Solutions, then, can be to show clips of a single scene in multiple performances or to perform a scene multiple times in different ways to demonstrate to students that multiple possible interpretations, even competing ones, exist alongside each other. Hartley's students followed this latter route in their production, *The Shrew Project*, in which they "performed each of six different takes on a portion of the play… in each case segueing into the next approach with a brief reflection on what went before and a teasing question about what would come next" (126).

This method may feel overly formulaic and incohesive for production with its lack of continuity and sense of separation from the play as a work composing many more scenes; however, in the classroom, variations upon performance create the space for interpretations that

are conflicting yet complementary, and each performance can highlight the nuances of the others. The classroom is a highly intimate venue for performance. Furthermore, assessing how students would present a given moment or scene in a play affords them an opportunity to exercise their analytical skills by considering alternative directorial options' implications for the play as a work of literature as well as their close reading skills as they carefully take note of each line of the scene, the nuances of Shakespeare's language, and textual elements that students may not recognize on a first reading such as internal, spoken stage directions; it also encourages them to consider the actions and unspoken responses of characters who are on stage but not speaking at any given moment.

In addition to the possibilities of variable performable interpretations, the foreignness of the Early Modern English in Shakespeare contributes to the challenge of reading the plays, even for many undergraduates who choose to study English. The rigor of engaging with Early Modern English (which students who are uninitiated in the history of the English language often erroneously consider to be Old English with nothing "modern" about it, at times to the instructor's exasperation) can easily disengage students who begin the course uninterested, a problem exacerbated by the teaching methods that students encounter before their undergraduate study, where teaching objectives are too frequently oriented toward standardized testing rather than students' personal growth and enrichment. This has repercussions on students' practices as well. Far too often, a student's goal is to find a single answer rather than the pluralism that Hartley identifies; even in the humanities, students often believe that a text or other work of art has a single, predetermined meaning, the one that they must regurgitate for an exam's essay question. When the literature or its languages becomes "hard to understand," students are more likely to try to identify the one-dimensional "takeaway" that they believe the text to possess (and

these "takeaways" are more readily accessible on Wikipedia or study sites than in the texts themselves, discouraging the reading from ever taking place). Actively embracing and calling attention to the ambiguities in early modern drama can engage students, demonstrate to them the value of the texts, and spur them to think more deeply about the plays' significances and complexities.

While I speak to early modern drama, I focus on Shakespeare's plays for the simple reason that for students of English literature, the first exposure to early modern literature (or, for that matter, any pre-nineteenth-century literature) is all but invariably with the work of Shakespeare. My purpose is not to relegate the numerous other significant early modern writers to obscurity but to discuss teaching early modern drama in terrain that reaches across educational levels. Because students have different levels of familiarity with Shakespeare even at the undergraduate level, I have chosen to discuss both plays that are popular, those that are probable candidates for high school reading but have a general level of cultural exposure even among those who have not read them, and ones that are less likely to be familiar to students. This allows for space to consider how to approach teaching students with various degrees of knowledge of Shakespearean drama. It is easier, for example, to find a high school student who has read *Romeo and Juliet* than a graduate student in English who has read *Cymbeline*; accordingly, students will enter with more preconceived notions about the former play than the latter, which shapes how they may perceive ambiguities in the text. If a high school English teacher told a student that Hamlet has gone mad, for instance, that student may be resistant to the possibility that Hamlet only feigns madness and unwilling to consider that there is any degree of ambiguity to the question.

"Some one has truly said that Shakespeare's dramas are of a two-fold nature—the visible drama or that which appears on the surface, and the invisible, which we can only perceive when we study for ourselves the characters and attempt to appreciate their motives." This remark was made in 1881 by Hannah Wilson, a student at Hollins Institute, a private college in Virginia for girls from the Southern United States now called Hollins University, in response to a question on a prize examination on *Hamlet* for the New Shakspere Society given by her English professor, William Taylor Thom (Thom 59). Professor Thom adapted for his exam questions that had been written by Horace Howard Furness and previously used at Logan Female College in Kentucky (14-15). Thom had two students at Hollins Institute who took the 1881 prize examination on *Hamlet*: Emma A. Mertins and Hannah Wilson. He published their responses multiple times, including in an 1883 book that also contained a letter from Frederick James Furnivall, founder of the New Shakspere Society, complimenting the submissions; Thom's (non-prize) 1881 exam on *Hamlet*; an 1882 prize examination on *Macbeth* taken by student N. B. Bowman; an essay on *Hamlet*'s Gertrude by Bowman; a poem, "Cordelia," that Thom wrote for Mertins (whom he married); and Thom's thoughts on teaching Shakespeare.

Wilson's statement was in response to the final question on the exam, one of five that Thom added to Furness's, which asked about "Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia" (43). She presents a reasoned and compelling argument that Hamlet did love Ophelia despite his declaration otherwise, invoking the pressures on Hamlet up to that moment of the play and his later remarks. This observation that she shares about the "two-fold nature" of Shakespeare's plays speaks to the prevalence and depth of the ambiguities that the author presents and to students' abilities to recognize the plays' complexities.

At times, the act of reading a performance is the source of such ambiguities by creating an uncertainty that the reader cannot readily answer from the play's dialogue and limited stage directions. If students were watching the play, the director would make certain decisions to frame the piece one way or another, shifting how the audience perceives the events that it portrays. This does not mean that a performance eliminates the ambiguity of a dramatic work in its entirety; a single production can still deliver a performance that leaves the audience with questions and uncertainties about the play. At times, performance can even add to an ambiguity's complexity; when Edgar insists to Gloucester that they are climbing to the heights of the Cliffs of Dover, his father's reply, "Methinks the ground is even," is visibly accurate if the performers stand on a (presumably flat) stage (*King Lear* 4.6.3). A viewer is initially left uncertain whether Gloucester's line is a metatheatrical joke referencing the stage or whether he and Edgar traverse flat ground without ascending the hill to the cliffs at all—both, of course, are the case. A reader may miss the possibility of the metatheatrical joke in the professed ascent to the cliffs' heights and be as misled as Gloucester, whose perception of the truth that he is on flat ground despite his blindness reinforces his rationality that Edgar tests in the scene while also setting up the possible contrast when Lear enters, "mad" as some editions indicate (80). On the whole, however, watching a play introduces fewer ambiguities than reading one does. In a student-reader's theater of the mind, the director and the audience unite as one, leaving a single student with a single interpretation that may differ from classmates', whose varied readings do not even occur to one another as possible interpretations until classmates voice them.

Characters' language is often the source of these ambiguities, and they often put such questions directly to the audience. "Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand?" Macbeth asks in soliloquy (*Macbeth* 2.1.33-34). Macbeth as a character is unsure of

the reality or unreality of the blade. He can "see" it but not "clutch" it; his senses are at odds with one another, and he cannot determine whether it is "sensible / To feeling as to sight" (34-37). He ponders whether the "fatal vision" is "A dagger of the mind, a false creation" brought about by his addled, "heat-oppressed brain" (36, 38-39).

In performance, if no dagger appears before Macbeth but the one that he draws himself, the play suggests to the audience that Macbeth is hallucinating, that his mind is truly growing disturbed and that, though he retains his command of reason, his grip on reality is weakening. It distances Macbeth from the audience. In contrast, if a dagger does appear, it presents different possibilities. The dagger could be real, floating in the air in front of Macbeth (for example, hanging from a string that the audience can't see) with such capriciousness that he is unable to grasp it. This would suggest that Macbeth's sanity remains intact but that the occult forces at work in the play perhaps toy with him. The dagger could also be an illusion, an intangible trick by said forces, with a similar impact. Moreover, the dagger could be a complete phantasm but one shared by Macbeth and the audience, both of whom see the blade (possibly by employing mirrors for the stagecraft). Whereas staging the scene so that there is no dagger for spectators to see distances Macbeth's madness from the audience, a shared hallucination unites the audience and Macbeth in madness, seeing things that cannot be real. Other directorial decisions, such as whether the spectral dagger and the one Macbeth produces are identical or unalike, can further shape the scene. A similar scene follows later in the play where Macbeth is the only character at the banquet who can see Banquo's ghost, and the director must decide what the ghastly Banquo looks like or if the audience sees him at all. When a student is reading the play, however, the student must develop an individual interpretation, and as any instructor of Shakespeare's play has

experienced, students who read a play and then watch a production of it report that there were moments that made them think of such possibilities differently.

Professor Thom asks his students about a similar moment in *Hamlet* in one of the questions he takes from Furness: "64. Are the flowers which Ophelia distributes to the King, Queen and others, real or imaginary?" (Thom 42). Mertins answers in full, "I do not see how it is possible to decide whether the flowers Ophelia distributed were real or imaginary. There is no internal evidence to decide" (46). Wilson has more to say on the subject. "I think it is more entirely in consonance with the representation of Ophelia's madness to suppose that the flowers are real," she writes (56). She gives support to the idea that Ophelia "seems to have lapsed into the past… [her] childish days" when she would have picked flowers and notes that Gertrude "speaks of her as having 'fantastic garlands' of flowers" when reporting her death.

If instructors anticipate such questions as the existence of Macbeth's dagger and Ophelia's flowers (and those who are versed in the plays' performance histories will probably be thinking about the dynamic possibilities of these scenes), they can prepare their students to respond to these questions, perhaps even without the students realizing it themselves. Instructors can (and often do) use filmed productions to teach the plays, extricating the directorial responsibility from the student audience. However, showing a single production affords students only one interpretation of the text from a range of possibilities, and showing multiple productions of a single scene detaches that scene from the context of how the directorial decisions in each production affect the performance as a whole. An alternative approach could be to have students quickly list what props *Hamlet* requires. Several will be needed: swords, a cup, a tapestry to hide Polonius, and a skull are all explicit in the text. Students may add other commonsense props, such as a shovel for the gravedigger. Then, ask the students how many of

them listed the flowers. Do they consider the flowers as essential props or even as meaningful

ones? Students can then watch two clips, one with Ophelia's flowers and one with imaginary

flowers or some other object instead. This can lead to a discussion of the flowers' significance

and how their existence or absence affects the audience's perception of Ophelia's mental state

and its broader implications for the play. As students participate in these exercises, they will

begin to form their own thoughts about the play's exploration of madness and will have more to

draw on for a richer class discussion.

Henry VI, Part 1 offers a central ambiguity that divides its own characters into opposing

camps—camps of soldiers, in this case. It is one of Shakespeare's less popular plays, but

teaching a work with which students are unfamiliar alongside more canonical plays allows them

the experience of considering the text's ambiguities without having already learned a set

interpretation that affects their assessments. The English and French parties contest whether Joan

of Arc, called Joan "la Pucelle" in the play, is a saintlike virgin or a whorish witch. The French

introduce Joan as "A holy maid" dispatched with "a vision sent to her from heaven" (*1H6* 1.2.51-

52). She is "Ordained" by "heaven," and she has "The spirit of deep prophecy," a divinely

imparted clairvoyance that allows her to identify the true dauphin Charles among his court (52-

53, 55). All of this, Orleans affirms, is "certain and unfallible" (59). Nevertheless, a modicum of

suspicion remains, particularly with Alençon, who remarks that "women are shrewd tempters

with their tongues" (123).

When a messenger (whose nationality is not explicitly stated though he reports to the

English commanders) announces that "one Joan la Pucelle,"[1] "A holy prophetess," has joined the

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[1] In editing the third Arden edition of *King Henry VI, Part 1*, Edward Burns notes in his introduction, "The first
choice an editor has to make with regard to la Pucelle is how to give her name" (24). Burns opts to call her "Joan de
Puzel" and defends his editorial choice, "I have decided not to use, as other editions have, 'Pucelle' and 'Dauphin'…
my reason for adopting Puzel and Dolphin is that they draw attention to the play as a satirical distortion of history,

dauphin Charles to liberate Orleans from the English, Talbot, the English commander, calls into question this assertion of Joan's righteousness and divine charge, declaring that it is nothing to him whether Joan is "Pucelle or pussel," virgin or prostitute (1.4.100-101, 106). His indifference subsides quickly once Joan overpowers and pursues the English forces. "Devil, or devil's dam, I'll conjure thee," Talbot cries, "thou art a witch" (1.5.5-6). These lines expand the paradigm of Joan's uncertain identity: the question is no longer merely whether Joan is holy or evil but whether she is a witch or a devil disguised as a mortal woman. Talbot again in this scene calls Joan a "witch" and an agent of "hell" (9, 21). When the French reenter, victorious, Charles calls her "Divinest creature" and proclaims her "France's saint" (43, 68).

Just one act into the play, students will recognize the partisan divide questioning Joan's sanctity. The innuendos with which the French court and Joan herself undermine the notion of her virginity—for instance, "warlike mate" (1.2.92), "he shrives this woman to her smock" (119), and "I was employed in passing to and fro" (2.1.69)—may be lost on students without a critical edition that highlights them, and the complexities of Elizabethan theories of witchcraft and demonology are challenging quagmires for the uninitiated to navigate. Likewise, students without an understanding of the Reformation's impact on English religious culture, particularly the discontinued veneration of saints and the rejection of post-biblical miracles, may be blind to the text's indications why a Protestant audience should condemn Joan. Nevertheless, the national biases upon which the opposing views of Joan are built are readily transparent: to the French, for whom she fights, she is a savior; to the English, whom she slays, she is evil.

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particularly in relation to the French" (287). The general editors of the Arden third series register their reservations about replacing "Pucel" and its variant spellings with "Puzel." "Rejection of the conventional modernization 'Pucelle' has two inconveniences: it deprives the French characters of an intelligible French epithet for their saviour, Joan 'the Maid'; and it further imposes on them the necessity of adopting a derogatory English alternative" (294-295). I have chosen to emend the text in my citations with "Pucelle" rather than "puzel" and "dauphin" rather than "dolphin."

Students reading *1 Henry VI* for the first time may, then, be surprised by Joan's summoning fiends in the last act. Students familiar with the historical Jeanne d'Arc will have varying preconceived beliefs about the peasant girl—a prodigious military tactician restrained by fifteenth-century patriarchy, a schizophrenic girl used as propaganda by the monarchy, a genuine miracle worker canonized by the Catholic church—but a sincere opinion that Jeanne actually conjured fiends to combat the English would be a rarity. The scene's revelation that Joan is a witch can feel jarring; to the modern reader, it can easily seem one thing for Prospero to conjure spirits on a fictional island but quite another for a character to do so in a history play. (Elsewhere in the first tetralogy, *2 Henry VI* does not equally portray its occult practitioners as definitively able to conjure preternatural beings.) *Macbeth* and *1 Henry VI* both focus on historical (if somewhat legendary) people and feature witches and paranormal beings (ghosts, fiends); a crucial distinction between the two plays, however, is that Macbeth is primarily known to us as a Shakespeare character, Joan of Arc as a historical person. Students meet Macbeth in English class; they meet Joan in history class. When Joan crosses the threshold into English class, the boundaries that she traverses are our own anachronistic ones, not the boundaries of Shakespeare or his audience, and their disruption calls into question what it means for Shakespeare or any author to be writing history as literature.

Because students may not anticipate the late revelation of Joan's witchcraft, it can be worthwhile to have students discuss their thoughts concerning the accusations before they read the last act. Doing so provides them with an opportunity to examine the play's rhetorical arguments and its underlying social biases. One way to accomplish this is to divide the class into two groups (either assigned or self-selected): one that identifies the support for the French characters' position that Joan is virtuous, one that does the same for the English characters' view

that she is demonic. This preparatory identification can be done outside of class, perhaps concurrently with an assigned reading of acts III and IV. Students then come to class prepared to debate the questions surrounding Joan's character with textual evidence in hand, setting up a partisan divide which reflects the one in the play.

Some instructors may be hesitant to stage a class debate where one group will ultimately be found to be in the right—the one advocating the English opinion that Joan is, in fact, a witch—and the other, correspondingly, to be wrong. As Edward Burns, editor of the Arden Third Series edition of the play, explains in his introduction, "The appearance of the demons (5.2.28.1) when Joan Puzel summons and interrogates them at the point of her defeat can seem disappointing to a modern audience in its apparent reductiveness, by suggesting that Talbot was right all along" (*1H6* 33). Furthermore, defending a position that the text later disproves can feel self-defeating, and there is a risk that students who advocate the pro-French side of the debate may feel slighted. However, if an instructor allows these feelings to have a place in the classroom, they can become generative. If, in debating the English and French narratives, students have pointed out instances where the English accusations against Joan are rooted in early modern sexism, then, when the text positions those accusations as accurate and valid, the students can more clearly see how the text is built on and perpetuates this sexism. If they have heard classmates argue that the rhetoric against Joan grows out of a nationalistic bias and serves as a propagandistic tool to advocate for British territorial conquest, then the demonization of Joan and the French can invite a wider discussion of the literatures of cultural and militaristic conflict. The frustrations that students can feel with the play's biases against Joan can help them to understand what it means for the work to be a cultural product of Elizabethan England.

Some students may be unwilling to take the demonic conjuration at face value—or, even, to take it seriously. Burns identifies a certain "embarrassment at the play's presentation of Joan," particularly the reality of her preternatural powers, asking, "what is magic doing in this and other Elizabethan history plays anyway?" (*1H6* 35). Students may have the same question, especially if the play is being taught in a course covering others of Shakespeare's history plays, which, though frequently historically inaccurate, still depict human beings as the only hellish creatures. Burns rightly presents the play as a literary representation rather than a historical account, one in which "history, legend and magic were not so strictly defined in opposition to each other" (36). Nevertheless, the sixteenth-century history books from which Shakespeare drew in writing the play—*Holinshed's Chronicles* and *Hall's Chronicle*—both explicitly affirm that Jeanne d'Arc was a witch. Witch trials were ongoing in Europe, and the high-profile North Berwick witch trails probably occurred shortly before *1 Henry VI*'s composition. Whether Shakespeare himself actually believed in witches is largely immaterial; a significant portion of his audience unquestionably did. Magic was part of the early modern worldview, albeit complexly.

Burns asserts that Joan "disrupts the whole idea of historical representation at a very basic level, so that the issue is not that of the particular truth to history but the larger question of what historical truth is, and who has power to determine it" (*1H6* 36). This is an incredibly important issue in the play, one that students can access through debating its conflicting narratives that the English and French characters espouse. Students can then build on their classroom back-and-forth to approach generic discussion of what it means for *1 Henry VI* to be a "history play." Running into this central ambiguity head-on before it seemingly comes to an unquestionable resolution makes space for students to have generative discussions in the classroom.

The fiends that Joan summons in *1 Henry VI* may largely eliminate the ambiguity in that play, but this is rarely the role of the supernatural in Shakespeare. When it is not fiends but ghosts that appear on stage (and ghosts appear much more frequently), they offer dubious information, and their very existence is questionable, building ambiguities rather than dismissing them.

The ghost of Hamlet's father tells the prince of his murder by Claudius's hand, but Hamlet is not wholly convinced by the apparition. The purpose of the performance he engineers, *The Mousetrap*, is to catch Claudius by his guilty reaction and thereby verify the ghost's account, and testing Claudius's guilt is a moral imperative for the prince because he remains unsure about the ghost's true status. As Hamlet worries, "The spirit that I have seen / May be a de'il," for "the de'il hath power / T'assume a pleasing shape," and if the supposed ghost is a devil, it may be trying to damn Hamlet's soul by tricking him into murdering an innocent man (*Hamlet* 2.2.533-535). Hamlet also opens the door to an ambiguous possibility that it is his own "weakness" and "melancholy" that may make him susceptible to devilish influence—or that may be indications that his sanity is beginning to fail him (536). Horatio fears that the ghost may "tempt [Hamlet] toward the flood" or "the dreadful summit of the cliff" to kill himself, which would condemn him to hell (1.4.69-70). The repeated references to Hamlet's schooling in Wittenberg call to mind two other figures who have intertextual influence on the play. By way of Luther, it evokes Protestantism, which for some in Elizabethan England meant a rejection of the existence of purgatory, the "sulf'rous and tormenting flames" to which the ghost must soon go (1.5.3). Faustus, whom theater-going Londoners may have readily associated with theatrical apparitions thanks to Marlowe, also brings the reminder that, according to Christian thinkers back to Augustine (and as represented in Marlowe's play), occult practitioners can only summon the

likenesses of the dead, not their actual beings—"such spirits as can lively resemble," as Faustus

describes them (Marlowe 4.1.1086). The anxieties over the ghost's status have deep roots in

European history of demonology and Christian theology that had already been dramatized on the

Elizabethan stage.

Although students may be ignorant of much of this history, especially as *Hamlet* is a

popular play that they are likely to encounter earlier in their studies, they will possibly take note

of a major difference in how the play represents the apparition across its acts. In the opening

scene, before Hamlet even takes the stage, Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo all see the ghost,

who has also appeared before, and Barnardo observes that it has "the same figure like the King

that's dead" (*Hamlet* 1.1.40). Students will understand this scene to mean that the ghost is more

than a figment of Hamlet's madness, corroborated by his friends, among them Horatio, who is

perhaps the most mentally stable character in the play. When the ghost reappears in Act III,

however, Gertrude is unable to see it, which calls into question whether at this point in the play

the ghost is the same preternatural manifestation that Hamlet encountered in Act I but

imperceptible to Gertrude or a fabrication of Hamlet's disturbed mind, a projection which

indicates that the prince has lost the faculty to distinguish what is real from what is not. Students

may identify earlier moments in the play, such as Hamlet's murder of Polonius, as what pushes

him beyond the brink to where he is now hallucinating.

In contrast to Joan's decided status as a witch by the end of *1 Henry VI*, *Hamlet* ends

without an unequivocal explanation as to the ghost's identity, leaving open the possibilities that it

is the bona fide spirit of the dead king, a devil come to damn young Hamlet, a manifestation of

Hamlet's mental deterioration (perhaps subsequent to a form of collective hallucination), or a

personification or projection of Hamlet's deep anger (or jealousy?) at Claudius's marriage to

Gertrude. Students may have a vague idea that the play is "psychoanalytical" thanks to Freud's prevalence in mainstream culture and his commentary on the play, but few will have anything concrete to make of this idea besides that it may be "all in Hamlet's head." The possibility that Ophelia's genuine madness acts as a foil to Hamlet's feigned madness also offers itself to students, and the results of the intertwined questions of madness and ghastly apparitions can become dizzying for students trying to take a stance on the play (and for instructors trying to make sense of them). The questions of Hamlet's and Ophelia's possible madness resonate with those of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's. As students read multiple plays—and *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* will almost certainly feature on a syllabus covering Shakespeare's tragedies (or even his plays generally)—they begin to see the intertextual strands that bind Shakespeare's artistic explorations together across his plays.

Today's students and instructors of Shakespeare alike may be surprised by the questions that Thom asked his students (and that other professors did as well, given that he borrowed most of the questions). Thom's extensive prize examination in *Hamlet* contained sixty-seven questions grouped into four categories. "Historical and Bibliographical" contained sixteen; "Grammatical," thirteen; "Philological," a walloping twenty-eight; and "Aesthetic," only ten. The prize examination in *Macbeth* the following year had fewer sections but roughly similar proportions: "Textual," in which the questions resemble those from the first three groups of the previous exam, contained forty-six; "Aesthetic" contained eleven, bringing the total to fifty-seven. The questions reveal that Thom was primarily concerned with ensuring that his students understood the language that Shakespeare used. To a certain extent, this is familiar to current instructors of Shakespeare; students often struggle to understand on a basic level the events of the plays and what Shakespeare's characters are even saying. Thom was not merely interested in a basic level

of comprehension, however. He begins the *Hamlet* examination with questions about Saxo

Grammaticus, Belleforest, and differences between the quarto and folio editions. He proceeds to

such questions as "What is Marsh's rule about the use by Elizabethan writers of *sith* and *since*?

Does the rule hold uniformly good in Shakspere?" and "What is the meaning of, 'The clown

shall make those laugh, whose lungs are *tickle o' the sere'* ?" (Thom 22, 31). Mertins and Wilson

prove themselves more learned Shakespeareans than the present writer with regards to these

questions, and they showcase considerable knowledge of topics from falconry to philology,

detailing birds' flight patterns when chased by hunting dogs and linguistic influences on Early

Modern English from German, French, and Spanish.

Impressive as these responses are, the students encounter more difficulties with the

"Aesthetic" section, the only one that poses questions that require interpretation in addition to

memorization. Thom first asks his students to explain four critics' views of Prince Hamlet. He

then asks, "What is your own [view]?" which is one of his own questions added to Furness's.

Mertins engages with Goethe's and Coleridge's critical opinions, but when asked what she thinks

of the prince, she responds, in total, "In giving the views of the above writers, I have in general

expressed my own" (45). She writes this despite acknowledging in her previous responses that

the four critics she was asked to discuss contradict one another. For instance, "Mr. Hudson thinks

that Hamlet was not lacking in capacity for acting," she writes, despite describing this as the crux

of Coleridge's interpretation (44). She is completely unable to engage with the question of her

own reading of the play. To her credit, Wilson navigates the question better; she throws her lot in

with Hudson's interpretation though not without qualifications.

It was these questions of student interpretation that particularly impressed Frederick

James Furnivall, founder of the New Shakspere Society. After reviewing the two examinations,

he wrote to Thom to express his "satisfaction" in Thom's "belief that [his] pupils had minds as well as memories, and could form an opinion of their own on the chief characters of the play" as evidenced by Thom asking them to do so for the prize examination (60). He further conveyed his "pleasure at the general goodness of the answers" and their "judgment and independence," even if they did not share his reading of the play. To Furnivall, there was something unusual—and praiseworthy—about the questions and answers that Thom sent him; indeed, he found "the answers so good on the whole" that he had the Society send both students facsimile editions of the first and second quartos of *Hamlet*.

The other *Hamlet* examination in the 1883 publication was also given to Thom's senior literature class in 1881 (of which Mertins and Wilson were presumably part), in January. As such, the differences between the two exams indicate the disparity between Thom's view of a standard student and that of an exceptional student, one who would pass a prize examination. The general exam consists of three multi-part questions; Thom first asks for the textual history and Goethe's critical opinion, then for philological explanations of twenty-six passages (several of which also appear on the prize examination), and finally for thirty-four grammatical explanations (115-116). It foregoes any questions of interpretation, those that Thom would consider "aesthetic" and that Furnivall admired.

This demonstrates a curious reversal of the norms of current Shakespeare pedagogy. Today's Shakespeare professors expect their students to first be able to express an analysis of the play. Comprehension of bibliographical history and philology is generally expected of more advanced students, such as those engaged in graduate study.

Nevertheless, Thom's classroom priorities were consistent with his recorded teaching rationale, which reflects nineteenth-century attitudes toward education. In his "Class-room Study

of Shakespeare," Thom asserted, "To understand Shakespeare, we must understand his medium

of thought, his language, as thoroughly as possible" (120). To Thom, this meant prioritizing

teaching (and assessing) grammar and philology as they relate to the plays. "For the class-room,

then, a non-aesthetic, preliminary study is best." University literature professors today do not

generally share this opinion, and they prioritize teaching critical thinking skills to train students

to effectively read and analyze works of literature. Thom does make a valid point that "The

English of Shakespeare deceives pupils just as French deceives the beginners in that language.

The words look so much like our words nowadays, and yet are so astonishingly unlike them in

meaning," and any instructor of Shakespeare can recount students' difficulties with the centuries-

old language, from which we are now half-again as chronologically removed as Thom was in the

1880's (124).

Thom's opinion that "the most effectual and rapid and profitable method of studying

Shakespeare is for [students] to learn one play as thoroughly as their teacher can make them do

it" will meet resistance from instructors who feel pressured to cover a breadth of plays in a

dedicated "Shakespeare" course, those who want to include a more diverse range of less

canonical authors alongside the bard, and those who wish to take a comparativist approach to the

plays (125). It also provides a narrow context for understanding the plays by isolating them from

the greater literary, dramatic, cultural, and historical trends of Elizabethan England that

influenced other texts from the period. To better understand the role of the occult in *Macbeth*, for

instance, one would want to read Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and King James's *Daemonologie*.

There is a clear upside to Thom's method: his pupils had highly detailed knowledge of minute

details in the text, which they read closely. However, sacrificing breadth for depth risks

imparting to students a limited range of engagement and a lack of understanding of early modern culture.

"If this be magic…"

Having heretofore discussed the challenges of teaching ambiguity in Shakespeare and possible avenues of approaching the issue generally, and having touched upon various plays as they pertained to the issues at hand, I now turn to considering a play at length, not, as Thom would endorse, to teach one play with all its minutiae as thoroughly as possible but because the play in question is exceptionally rich in its ambiguities, which makes consideration of its intricacies artistically rewarding but which can make the play a challenge for students.

Most students who encounter *The Winter's Tale* do so as undergraduates; seldom do they ever read or see the play earlier. At the undergraduate level, it frequently appears in Shakespeare survey courses that attempt to give a chronological overview of the plays, where it supplements *The Tempest* as a second late romance, the grouping of plays that Shakespeare wrote toward the end of his career, turning away from the heart-wrenching endings of *Hamlet* or *King Lear* and embracing tragicomedy.

The Winter's Tale is especially involved in demanding that its audience constantly assess what is being represented on stage to parse competing interpretations built on ambiguities that the audience is not always fully equipped to consider and in engaging its audience in reevaluations of one's individual perspective and the factors that influence it. While the third act brings a seemingly definitive confirmation of Hermione's fidelity, the audience navigates the invalidity of Leontes' accusation against the queen much earlier—arguably, even, by the play's second scene. When the last act presents an unbelievable scenario of miraculous resurrection via an ostensibly lifeless statue, the audience must assess what on stage is "actually" occurring

within the mimetic frame of the play, what is a deception, and what is a wonder that approaches an ineffability that nevertheless unfolds onstage.

This proves a challenge for the audience, however, because, in the words of Leonard Barkan, "not a single thing that happens in the play is in any way plausible. There is nothing in it that remotely resembles real life" (Barkan 110). The play's characters repeatedly draw attention to its absurdity. "This news which is called true is so like an old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion," Rogero (the second gentleman) says of the oracle's fulfillment (*WT* 5.2.27-29). Paulina declares that it is "monstrous to our human reason" that Perdita should return to Sicily roughly forty lines before a gentleman announces her arrival (5.1.41). Florizel laments, "The stars, I see, will kiss the valley" before he and Perdita wed (205). "I have heard, but not believed," Antigonus reflects as he reports seeing Hermione's ghost and contemplates the possibility of such an experience (3.3.15). His death shortly after can feel as though Shakespeare were preempting a Monty Python sketch employing the fabulous Australian drop bear and relocating it to the unlocatable Bohemian seacoast.

The play establishes its disassociation from real life, or from a *vraisemblable* artistic imitation of reality, from the first act. Leontes' lines in his first scene, "we have been / Deceived in thy integrity, deceived / In that which seems so," highlight that what the play's characters think that they have seen and will see may not be so (1.2.237-239). Even the ambiguity of Leontes' language undermines any possibility of a stable verbal reconstruction of reality: when he says "we," does the word signify himself alone, using a royal pronoun; himself and Camillo, to whom he speaks; or himself and the audience, whom he inducts into the theater's world of unreliable sight? When, in the next scene, he declares, "I have drunk, and seen the spider," he further reveals language and sight to be unstable prisms of reality (2.1.45). The spider is

metaphorical; it does not exist, yet Leontes' insistence that he has seen it constructs sight as a

means not of observing reality but, like language, of embellishing it with one's beliefs, even as

he reinforces sight as furnishing inescapable knowledge. When, in debating with himself whether

Mamillius is a bastard, Leontes says of his son's nose, "They say it is a copy out of mine," the

inability of language to shape reality emerges yet again (1.2.122). The court's expressed view

holds that Leontes did sire Mamillius, but report cannot make it so; it can only advocate belief,

not ascertain truth. For Leontes, evidence itself becomes no evidence at all when everything is

put into doubt.

By repeatedly presenting competing narratives that explicitly rely on not only the

characters' but the audience's perceptions and beliefs, *The Winter's Tale*'s heteroglossia compels

viewers and readers to draw their own conclusions. Students will predominantly agree that

Hermione has been faithful to Leontes, but they may differ in their readings of the pivotal last

scene of the play, interpreting Hermione's return as an astonishing miracle, a calculated ruse, or

something yet more complex. This complication presents a simultaneous opportunity to help

students to read and analyze such an ambiguous text for themselves; some may struggle with the

idea that there may not be a single correct reading of the play, but this is an important intellectual

awakening.

The play's central concern with questions of belief invites competing interpretations,

especially considering its "insistent separation of interpretation and belief from knowledge"

(Orgel 58). In the play's first half, these questions revolve around the instability and unreliability

of language and perception. In the last act, as the statue and supposed resurrection take center

stage, the questions shift to an acceptance or rejection of a magical worldview. The question of

the supernatural remains prime territory for textual ambiguity in *The Winter's Tale*, just as it is in

1 Henry VI, *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and more. Even the rather clear-cut oracle, the least ambiguous of the play's supernatural elements, ends with an open possibility: "if that which is lost be not found" (*WT* 3.2.133). Leontes's immediate response is one of disbelief and rejection—"There is no truth at all i'th' oracle"—though he quickly recants following Mamillius's death (137). The statue scene is incredibly complex for both Jacobean and contemporary viewers; as Sara Saylor says, it "places enchanted and disenchanted interpretations in conflict" (Saylor 163). The initially presented scenario, that Paulina invokes some form of occult power to animate the statue of Hermione and bequeath it life, is only acceptable to a viewer whose "faith," as Paulina says, is "awake[ned]" (*WT* 5.3.95). It demands a magical worldview, an acceptance of the play as a mythopoetic world wherein Leontes must awaken his faith to see his wife return.

In contrast, the generally accepted reading, that Hermione has been in hiding at Paulina's remote house for sixteen years, requires improbabilities of such sheer magnitude that it is as dubious as the possibility of her miraculous return. Without the acceptance of the magical or the mythic—or a suspension of disbelief within the context of the theater's magic of performance—Hermione must have survived; however, such a survival requires unbelievable absurdities. After Hermione swoons (which itself may be a trick), Paulina carries her out only to return a speech later and rail against Leontes, declaring Hermione dead. She is incredibly insistent:

> I say she's dead – I'll swear't. If word nor oath
> Prevail not, go and see. If you can bring
> Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye,
> Heat outwardly or breath within, I'll serve you
> As I would do the gods. (3.2.200-204)

Leontes does resolve to "go and see." "Bring me / To the dead bodies of my queen and son," he commands, "One grave shall be for both" (3.2.231-232). Evidently, the bodies seem dead when Leontes observes them off-stage. It is possible that Paulina drugs Hermione after she swoons to

make her appear dead, but nowhere does the play suggest that Paulina possesses the pharmaceutical learning to do so (she calls herself a "physician" only metaphorically at 2.2.53). Leontes implies that he will witness the burial, so Paulina must not secrete away Hermione's drugged body until afterward, digging up the bodies and reburying Mamillius without causing Leontes' suspicion the next day when he visits the grave.

Sixteen years later, Paulina's steward (the third gentleman) reports, "The princess, hearing of her mother's statue, which is in the keeping of Paulina, a piece many years in doing and now newly performed by that rare Italian master Giulio Romano… Thither with all greediness of affection are they gone" (5.3.92-95, 100). If Romano is a pretense for the creation of the "statue" that is really Hermione, it seems to be one planned years in advance, but Paulina had no foreknowledge of Perdita's return, which she calls equally impossible as for "Antigonus to break his grave," and she asserts that he "Did perish with the infant," ambiguously suggesting her belief that Perdita has died as well; Hermione's speech in the final scene and its lines that she knew "by Paulina that the oracle / Gave hope [Perdita] wast in being" nevertheless complicate Paulina's claim (5.1.42, 44; 5.3.126-127). The steward's lines that Romano "so near to Hermione hath done Hermione that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope of answer" are cryptic; "they" lacks a clear antecedent (5.2.98-99). It suggests, however, that word of Romano's work for Paulina—and specifically of his statue of Hermione—has gotten around prior to Perdita's return, and *The Winter's Tale* is repeatedly concerned with the public circulation of news (e.g. 1.2.207, 3.1.15, 3.2.99-100). Paulina could not have circulated a false report so quickly. The pretexts for her supposed ruse do not add up.

Students are correspondingly left to make one of two competing readings, neither of which has the weight of unambiguous textual evidence to support it. The play demands an

answer to the question of what happened to Hermione without fully providing the tools to determine the answer. Students engaging with the play have no choice but to confront the ambiguity.

A major reason why *The Winter's Tale* has such pronounced ambiguity even compared to other Shakespearean drama is that it breaks with a convention of how the characters speak to the audience. Iago fools Othello, but he does not fool viewers; instead, he brings them into the knowledge of his scheme. The audience listens in as Don John and Borachio plan the bed trick to defame Hero in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Joan summons her fiends onto the stage for the audience to see, even if somewhat belatedly. Shakespeare's villains routinely let the audience in on their plots. Secrets from the audience are few and far between.

If Leontes is a villain in *The Winter's Tale*—and Hermione insists at one point that he is not (2.1.80-81)—then he follows the same pattern. In the first act, he gives voice to his suspicions about Hermione in asides and to Mamillius, and he instructs Camillo to poison Polixenes. Leontes then wears his contrition on his sleeve at the end of Act III and, sixteen years later, at the beginning of Act V. He hides nothing from the audience.

Paulina, however, hides everything. If she has been keeping Hermione in hiding for sixteen years, she never openly confesses it, not even after the statue seemingly comes to life. There is no scene of Paulina reviving Hermione after she faints, no scene of them alone in the "removed house" (5.2.105), no scene of Paulina informing Hermione that her lost daughter has miraculously returned to Sicily. Conversely, if Paulina really does use occult powers to return Hermione from the dead, she gives no clue that she is a mistress of such magical arts or medical science until the scene at the chapel. The audience's access to Paulina is mitigated by the fact that, with the possible exception of 2.2.2-4 depending on how the jail is staged, she is never on

stage alone, and she has no scripted asides in the text. There is an abundant lack of textual evidence pertaining to Paulina's behind-the-scenes operations; the first line that hints at the possibility of Hermione's survival does not come until the penultimate scene with the implication that Paulina "had some great matter," which only in retrospect seems to the audience to be that she may be feeding Hermione "privately twice or thrice a day" (5.2.103-104). If we were to classify this type of textual ambiguity regarding Paulina's secret affairs, we might consider it "not giving the audience much to go on." The audience thus arrives at the play's final scene unprepared for Hermione's allegedly miraculous return; even Jacobean audience members familiar with Robert Greene's prose romance *Pandosto*, Shakespeare's main source for the play, which ends in the king's suicide rather than the queen's return, do not anticipate the happy ending.

An essential aspect of *The Winter's Tale* as a piece of performance that does not emerge with the same force when the text is read as a literary work is the audience's immediate recognition when Paulina reveals the statue that it is the actor playing Hermione behind the curtain. This does not necessarily preclude the audience from interpreting that actor as portraying a statue that will presumably neither move nor speak, but when the statue does first move, it is a gentler, though still highly significant, transition from art to life than when reading the play. The statue, even if it is only a statue at the start of the scene, is as much Hermione as Hermione ever was, both mimetic representations; in the words of Jill Delsigne, "Hermione is after all a mere actor (and actually a boy) who stands as still as stone and then suddenly moves" (Delsigne 91). When the statue comes to life, it is a moment of pure theater: acting itself is given new life as the player stirs at Paulina's command. Paulina is, among her other roles, the scene's director. By her metatheatrical lines that instruct both the play's characters and its audience—"prepare / To see

the life as lively mocked as ever / Still sleep mocked death. Behold, and say 'tis well" (*WT*

5.3.18-20), "resolve you / For more amazement" (86-87), "It is required / You do awake your

faith" (94-95), "Go together, / You precious winners all" (130-131)—Paulina establishes an

"affective communion of audience and actors" that "strongly resembles the experience of

medieval cycle plays" which "encouraged audiences to participate in the devotional practice of

affective piety" (Delsigne 91). Elsewhere in his plays, Shakespeare engages the audience as

participants in the theatrical experience, but here, perhaps more than anywhere else in his work,

the audience joins with the characters on stage to unite as witnesses to a spectacle. The scene

draws the audience into its explorations of perspective through drama and the visual arts, which

it infuses with mythic elements from Pygmalion, Persephone, and Orpheus to create a coup de

théâtre replete with wonder. This defining moment of *The Winter's Tale* invites the audience to

consider its beliefs, to consider the perspectives it holds, and the play serves as a mimetic

reflection of the real world by constructing a performance that the audience shapes according to

its beliefs and desires. The play incorporates its audience in its fiction-making.

Because of the interwoven complexities of performance, perspective, and belief in *The

Winter's Tale*'s final scene, and because it suggests multiple simultaneous, competing

interpretations, resituating the classroom's dynamics to position students in multiple capacities

related to the piece and to position the scene itself in different lights can help engage students in

considering diverse readings. I propose that an effective way of doing this is to have groups of

students deliver planned performances of the scene rather than the brief, impromptu

performances that can otherwise occur in the classroom. (See the appendix for an example

student assignment sheet.) Having students take the time to deliberately consider how to present

the scene requires them to play the parts of director, cast, and careful reader as they plan and perform while also acting as audience and critics during their classmates' performances.

For Shakespeare instructors who wish to include an additional end of semester grade beyond a term paper, this performance and its accompanying written components can serve as the course's culminating exercise in place of a final exam. Syllabi for Shakespeare survey courses that attempt to arrange the plays chronologically can (and often do) position *The Winter's Tale* as the penultimate play being taught, before *The Tempest* concludes the semester; this structure keeps *The Winter's Tale* fresh in students' minds at the end of the term while also leaving time for groups to plan the performances between discussing the statue scene in class and the end of the course or the final exam date. If the class is taught as a lecture with smaller discussion sections, the performance can instead take place during the final discussion section, after students have previously discussed the play the week when it was the subject of the lecture. Even a short fifty-minute class should be able to accommodate three performances at ten to fifteen minutes each so that eighteen students can perform; this may not leave time for students to discuss each other's performances afterward, but the reflection has students do this individually in writing, and they will have already discussed the play's ending in class.

The statue scene has six speaking parts (Leontes, Paulina, Polixenes, Camillo, Perdita, and Hermione), but Polixenes and Camillo can be combined as needed for the number of students in the class to ideally form groups of five or six; Camillo speaks only twice in the scene, always immediately prior to or following Polixenes and expressing a similar sentiment. The assessment involves three components. The first is a "performance rationale" written by the group (perhaps assigned to a group member who is content to write a little extra to take a speaking part with fewer lines) that explains the decisions that the group has made for how it will

stage the scene. The rationale will be due before the class period to distribute to students. The second is the performance itself. The third is a reflection by each student on another group's performance, detailing what the student found successful in that performance and how it contributed to different ways of thinking about the text.

Not all students will be enthusiastic about having to perform, but if the alternative that the exercise replaces is an exam or a longer paper, it can become more palatable. Some students will be anxious about performing; by the end of the semester, they will hopefully have grown more confident in their ability to read Shakespeare closely, and if the class discussions have featured impromptu performances of passages rather than simply readings of them, students should feel more at ease about the prospect of acting in front of classmates, especially if the instructor has been careful to create a low-stakes classroom environment during the performances wherein different student choices generally shape a scene's significance in unexpected ways rather than being "wrong."

The requirements for the performance are simple but adaptable. Groups can start their performance at the beginning of the scene, at the stage direction at 5.3.21 where Paulina draws the curtain, or possibly at an earlier start moments before Leontes and company enter Paulina's chapel; this gives the instructor some flexibility to fit the amount of time available for the performances. Regardless, the students should perform until the end of the play. The scene is sizeable enough that it would be rather demanding for students to have to memorize their roles, particularly those playing Leontes and Paulina. If the classroom has a screen that can display the digital text, seating the class so that the audience faces away from this screen lets the actors face the audience and see the text simultaneously, a much preferable option to students looking down at their books while performing.

The other task that the groups should tackle is selecting a piece of music to play at 5.3.98, when Paulina instructs, "Music, awake her; strike!" Several of Shakespeare's plays include songs, some of which are known to us from their titles or lyrics, but nothing is known about the music for which Paulina calls in *The Winter's Tale*. It is apparently instrumental given that she continues to speak while the music is presumably playing (her lines do not appear to be sung). John Pitcher, editor of the Third Arden edition of the play, notes that Paulina is directly addressing "musicians; probably lutenists, they are supposed to be in earshot of the chapel, so they may have been onstage in early performances" (*WT* 5.3.98 n.). The essential element, however, is that music is played, for music, itself a type of performance, is connected to devotional practices, enchantment, healing (both physical and mental), and, by way of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, the possibility of a return from death.

The music, then, offers students a method of shaping the play. We cannot reproduce the exact music that the King's Men used in *The Winter's Tale*; we do not know what it was. There is no intellectual value in students trying to guess or approximate what the original music may have been; as such, while some may opt to use period-appropriate music, students should freely select from any genre, style, or time. (A musically inclined student could even play something live rather than using a recording.) In selecting a piece of music to perform at that pivotal moment of the scene, students planning a performance must make a consequential decision that will frame Hermione's return, which is quite different if accompanied by gospel than by rock and roll. The volume has an impact as well, but the groups must make sure that it does not drown out Paulina. Selecting a piece of music gives the student-performers an extra element of creative control over the scene and expands the scope of their thinking. They can use the music to shape the pacing of the scene; how long does it play? Does Paulina wait for it to finish before declaring, "'Tis time;

descend; be stone no more" (5.3.99)? Does it stop when Hermione "stirs" (103)? Does it play

until Leontes finally touches her, its conclusion emphasizing his line, "O, she's warm!" (109)?

The musical selection can also serve as a starting point for groups that struggle to find a direction

for their performances and then scaffold their subsequent creative decisions.

Each component assesses students' understanding of the play and simultaneously

encourages them to think profoundly about the text. The performance and the rationale that

explains the students' decisions are opportunities for students to articulate a specific

interpretation but also to engage closely with the text, thinking about every moment in the scene

and how each both builds on previous moments in the play and contributes to its ending. The

reflection provides an opportunity for students to appreciate different interpretations from their

own as they consider the textual support for the other reading and the ability of the text to speak

to multiple artistic ends.

Tasking students with both directorial and performance responsibilities of *The Winter's*

Tale's ultimate scene also requires them to engage with the layers of directorial authority in the

scene, where Paulina acts as the director of a staged piece of theater within the play itself. In

determining how they will stage the scene, students also determine how Paulina will stage her

scene, and they must consider how the characters are, like the audience, spectators to Hermione's

return.

Consider the following hypothetical examples of student performances, all of which take

the play in different directions but remain grounded in the text.

The first group takes a traditional reading of the scene, believing that Hermione has been

in hiding but is eager to see Perdita, and foregrounds the affect that their reunion evokes. When

Paulina's guests turn from the "statue" to face the audience as they deliver some of their lines,

Hermione, who has heretofore been as still as possible, cannot help herself and turns her gaze to Perdita. Paulina hurries to draw the curtain to hide the truth now that Hermione has moved, but as Leontes begs her not to, the plan changes. Paulina turns to Hermione when she says, "If you can behold it, / I'll make the statue move indeed, descend, / And take you by the hand" (5.3.87-89), and Hermione gives the tiniest of nods. She descends wordlessly, and as she holds Perdita in a long embrace, "Baby Mine" from *Dumbo* plays. Hermione then gives her "You gods, look down" speech (121-128) quietly, still holding onto Perdita, filled with reverential wonder and gratitude at the providence of her daughter's return.

Group two goes the opposite route, delivering a performance that suggests that Paulina has miraculously brought Hermione back from the dead. The student playing Hermione remains motionless, hands together as though in prayer, until awakened. Paulina leaves the "stage" to walk among the classroom audience for lines 85 through 97, admonishing her classmates, "It is required / You do awake your faith" (94-95). She calls in a loud voice, as though to reach the heavens with her words, "Music, awake her; strike!" and continues to beckon the statue to life—"'Tis time; descend; be stone no more; approach"—as Whitney Houston's and Mariah Carey's "When You Believe" plays (98-99). Hermione carries the same fervor through her "You gods, look down" speech (121-128). This performance is predicated upon a different reading of the play than the first performance, but both end with awe.

The final group elects to preserve and reinforce the ambiguity in the scene and does so by shifting the dynamics of the music. When Leontes first addresses Hermione, "Chide me, dear stone…" (24), his verse turns singsong, returning to his previous, spoken cadence when he speaks to Paulina, "But yet, Paulina…" (27). He continues to slip in and out of this singsong rhythm. When Paulina calls for music, Leontes, moved by the spectacle, sings the chorus of

Player's "Baby Come Back." Paulina then calls the alleged statue to life, and Hermione steps down. Leontes' song, in which he admits his wrongdoing and accepts blame, concludes his sixteen years' penance, yet its potential implications are diverse. It positions him as Orpheus, whose song could have brought his wife, Eurydice, back from the dead by winning the gods' sympathy. It may not be the gods who are moved by the song, however, but Hermione, who has now seen Leontes' contrition and his recognition of his own foolishness firsthand. Leontes' repetition that he cannot carry on in Hermione's absence even suggests the possibility that the scene has truly driven him mad. The bathetic song choice simultaneously injects additional humor into the scene.

These examples only scratch the surface of the possibilities for performing the scene. Student actors could reinforce its comic potential as Paulina tries to prevent Leontes and Perdita from touching the human "statue," undermine Paulina's denial of being "assisted / By wicked powers," or play up the intertextuality with the Persephone myth (90-91). Each group of students produces a very different version of the play, each either founded on a competing interpretation or based on the ambiguity of the play's resolution, but each is within the realm of potential readings. Each group performs the same script of the play (*The Winter's Tale* does not have the textual issues of some of Shakespeare's other plays, appearing for the first time in print in the First Folio), but the resulting scenes shape the play in different ways. Ideally, the students recognize that the play's ambiguities allow competing interpretations to exist simultaneously, and rather than seeing this as a defect in a work that does not tell a clear, single, unambiguous story, they see how their engagement with the play brings new richness to the literary experience.

Moreover, the students step into roles beyond the ones that they individually play. They are all Paulina, planning and directing the scene. They are all Leontes and Perdita, watching

Paulina's spectacle. They are all Hermione, observing Leontes' contrition and subsequent elation. They are all Shakespeare's audience, marveling at the family's reunification however it happened, marveling at providence and at humans' capacity for forgiveness. In performing *The Winter's Tale*, the students bring this marveling, like Hermione, to life through art.

Appendix

The Winter's Tale: Performance as Interpretation

This assessment has three major components: a group performance, a performance rationale, and an individual reflection. [*It could be suitable as a final "exam."*]

Dates:

Performance Date: [Date 1, during the final class or the exam period].
Rationale Due: [Date 1,] submitted before the start of class.
Reflection Due: [Date 2, a few days after Date 1].

The Performance:

In groups of five or six, perform Act 5, Scene 3.
The roles for the performance are, in speaking order:

- Leontes
- Paulina
- Polixenes
- Perdita
- Camillo (joint role with Polixenes as necessary for group sizes)
- Hermione

Performance requirements:

- You may choose to start at line 1, at the stage direction before line 21 (Paulina drawing the curtain), or at an earlier "start" before the first line. You must perform through the end of the play (line 155), and you may not omit lines.
- You must choose a piece of music to play at line 98 ("Music, awake her; strike!").

Important notes:

- You do not need to memorize your lines and can read them. The text will be displayed on screen behind the rest of the class for actors to see while performing. You do, however, need to be sufficiently familiar with your part to not have to constantly stare at the screen.
- Remember that you are performing even when your character is not speaking! How is your character acting while others are speaking? Where are you standing—or moving? Where are you looking? What are your gestures or your non-verbal sounds?
- You do not need props or costumes, but you're welcome to use them if you'd like.

Evaluation:

The performance will be worth 40% of the assignment grade and will be assessed based on the following criteria:

- The student was prepared to speak at the appropriate lines.
- The student read the lines as part of an engaged performance, did not read in monotone.
- The student performed even when not speaking.
- The group delivered a cohesive performance that either presented a coherent interpretation of the scene or underscored the richness of its ambiguity.

The Rationale:

Each group should submit a single performance rationale. You may delegate the writing of the rationale to one or more group members, but each group member should contribute to your group's discussion of how to represent the scene. The rationale should be approximately 500 words.

Explain why you have made the creative decisions you have for your performance. You must address your overall choice of why you stage Hermione's return as a miracle or a trick (or possibly as something else) and how you generally plan to demonstrate that choice through your performance. You must also address why you selected the piece of music you chose.

Evaluation:

The rationale will be worth 30% of the assignment grade and will be assessed based on three criteria:

- Is its description consistent with your group's performance?
- Does it justify your group's creative decisions?
- Does it reflect careful consideration of the play's complexities?
- Does it link your song choice to your method of representing the scene?

The Reflection:

Each student should submit a reflection on another of the class's performances, preferably one that presented a different interpretation of the scene from yours. Respond to the following questions (though you aren't limited to them) in 300-500 words:

- What did you appreciate artistically about this performance?
- Was this representation convincing to you? Why or why not?
- How did this performance add to how you read the play's final scene?

Evaluation:

The reflection will be worth 30% of the assignment grade and will be based on evidence that you carefully watched your classmates' performance and on the consideration that you give to the required questions.

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