Witchcraft and Wonder in The Winter's Tale

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Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kirby_farrell1/21/
The Winter’s Tale is constructed to generate an experience of wonder. Everything in the play prepares for the miraculous “resurrection” as Hermione’s statue comes to life. Audiences are meant to share what Leontes calls “The pleasure of that madness” (5.3.73). This revelatory madness is the benign counterpart of the paranoid paroxysm that begins the play. Leontes associates the quickening of the statue with magic (110), and it functions as a form of magical undoing, once again deranging the “settled senses of this world” (72) in order to reorient and reintegrate minds.

As many sophisticated readings illustrate, the psychological, artistic, and religious themes in the statue scene are so intriguing that it is easy to forget that at bottom the scene is about overcoming mourning and death. It is an immortality fantasy wishfully answering to creaturely motives. As Leontes exclaims: “Oh, she’s warm! / If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating” (5.3.109-11). He is ecstatic at the prospect of Hermione’s resurrection. He associates the escape from death and his release from grief with the return of bodily warmth and an appetite for nurture and food. In this perspective the play dramatizes a conversion experience in which guilty self-hate turns into renewed faith in love, appetite, and joy. But these motives in turn are symptomatic of a deeper transformation in which years of poisonous death-anxiety turn into belief in a future and more life identified with the immortalizing art of Giulio Romano. “Bequeath to death your numbness,” Paulina commands, “for from him / Dear life redeems you. You perceive she stirs” (102-03). Although Paulina appears to be addressing the statue, her summons to “you” applies to her audience on stage and in the theater. It seeks to banish the anguish over death that may cause people to retreat into “numbness,” obsession, and paralysis.

Once in focus, death-anxiety turns up everywhere in the play. In the opening conversation at court, for example, Polixenes worries about sinister developments at home and goes on to rhapsodize about a time free from fear, when he was “boy eternal” (1.2.65) with Leontes. Women, he implies, brought an end to that childhood conviction of Edenic immortality. As mothers, women nurture a child’s security and the family’s posterity, but as Love’s Labour’s Lost insists, the passage from a life of imagination to sexual love brings an awareness of time, ageing, the ills of the flesh, and ineluctable death. As mothers, that is, women could scarcely be more profoundly implicated in the processes by which people develop the defenses against fears of weakness and death that make adult autonomy possible.

Hermione protests against Polixenes’ anxiety, crying “Grace to boot! / Of this make no conclusion, lest you say / Your queen and I are devils” (80-82). She introduces an idea that haunts The Winter’s Tale as it did Europe, and especially at the time Shakespeare was writing the play. For women who copulate with devils and poison communities with death-anxiety are witches. Almost at once this glancing
thought becomes contagious. Leontes begins to suspect Hermione of “ill-doing” (70), and panic trips him into a persecutory rage.

Leontes’ paroxysm shares the dynamics of the witch craze that had been fitfully epidemic throughout the sixteenth century. The tempo of prosecutions had risen during Shakespeare’s lifetime and was about to reach a savage climax, especially in the mass executions on the continent, where in the years following the play’s creation (1612-1637), in the electorate of Cologne, about 2000 people were put to death (Roper 15). Consumed by suspicion and a sense of pervasive evil, the King becomes sleepless, wracked by psychosomatic symptoms. You may drink from a cup with a spider in it, he contends, but suffer from the venom only if you see the spider and your knowledge is “infected.” And “I have drunk, and seen the spider” (2.1.39-45). He imprisons his wife, wrests Mamillius from her out of fear for the child’s life, and condemns the tainted infant Perdita to be burned (2.3.132, 139). In his prosecution of Hermione he demands supernatural proof of her guilt and would have her “given to the fire” (2.3.8)—burned as witches were. As his obsession feeds on itself, he begins calling Paulina a “mankind witch” (68), a “gross hag” (106) to be put to death as a witch: “I’ll ha’ thee burnt” (114). Without the revelation of the Oracle and the shocking death of Hermione, the King’s persecutory frenzy would presumably destroy Paulina as well.

In this context the play can be understood as a fantasy-argument working to relieve anxiety about a sinister connection between women, demonic malice, and death. The idea of the witch is an emergency tool for managing the terror of death and evil as well as our ambivalence toward mothers and sex and the eventually fatal goal of growing up. Although men and girls were among those accused, the majority of prosecutions involved elderly women. Through the concept of Satan, who embodies all the horrors that would otherwise potentially be attributable to God, the witch brings into focus the ultimate, terrifying ambivalence about the religion and the supernatural that fueled the vicious doctrinal wars of the early modern period.

Lyndal Roper calls attention to creaturely motives in grounding witch-beliefs in “one of the fundamental values of early modern European society. Fertility and its preservation were key social imperatives. Most of the magic that passed from mother to daughter or was sought from wise women or cunning men concerned fertility: how to cure male impotence, how to ensure the birth of healthy children” (103). Trapped in an aging, doomed body, envious of fertility and the substantiation of self that sexual love and child-bearing promises, a would-be witch supposedly turned to demonic powers to counter despair and act out her spite. Artistic images of post-menopausal women routinely stressed hateful markers of physical deterioration (Roper 162-66). Depictions of the fountain of youth are poignantly wishful about the delightful after-effects yet cruelly grotesque in imagining crones about to enter. In its deepest motives, Shakespeare’s statue scene is actually a fountain of youth, but more successful in sublimating underlying terrors insofar as Leontes can perceive that “Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing / So aged as this seems” (5.3.28-29). “Oh, not by much,” Paulina lightly counters (29). As in the fountain of youth trope, the play’s fantasy of renewal answers to basic fears, yet the old are still in the picture, and the creaturely awareness that sooner or later everyone dies—the core anxiety—remains. Love, art,
and other heroic values afford us a conviction of enduring significance, but symbolic immortality virtually always has a counternphobic quality.

Witch lore was prolific, multiform, and inconsistent. From folk beliefs and sensational popular broadsides to the treatises of “expert” witch-hunters such as Kramer and Sprenger, from Reginald Scot’s skepticism (1584) to King James’s reproof of Scot in the rambling preface to his Daemonologie (1597) and subsequent change of heart, the public mind tolerated radically conflicting theories. People struggled to integrate these materials and unruly personal experience into stories that could account for terrifying pain and disorder. Of course no narrative can wholly explain the mishaps and suffering that flesh is heir to, especially in a pre-scientific world, and witch lore was always dogged by doubt. This is one reason why prosecutors relied on torture and what today would be considered brainwashing techniques to guarantee truth through confession.

Witchcraft owed its explanatory power to its creation of scapegoats to personalize misfortune. Prosecution of a witch was a fight to the death with Satan in a local guise. We still speak of “fighting off” an infection or a “war” against cancer. In the witch-hunt, levels of abstraction blurred into one another. Parabolic and figurative thinking became concrete, and “metaphysical fears . . . became relentlessly literal once they were transposed into the humdrum idiom of village life” (Roper 158). Conversely, an incidental spider or an apple given to a child could suddenly shimmer with cosmic evil. Interrogation through torture was a contest of narratives, a struggle to create a persuasive story of guilt or innocence that could overcome inflamed passions.

As a narrative contest, a witchcraft prosecution has much in common with theater. Both explore the interaction between truth and fantasy. The players work to overcome audience disbelief, testing taboos and deep motives. Plays such as The Witch of Edmonton, The Merchant of Venice, and The Winter’s Tale actually dramatize prosecutions. But prosecution also tacitly structures plays as different as A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Othello. (“he thought ‘twas witchcraft” [3.3.211]). In addition, and not to be underestimated, both the theater and the witch-hunt guided participants through climactic spectacles that evoked extreme emotions with intimations of transcendence. Witches could be comic grotesques or, in a full-blown panic, tragic individuals destroyed by satanic wiles. For some contemporary skeptics such as Johannes Weyer in the 1560s and Reginald Scot, witches were troubled, fatally misinterpreted victims. As Roper puts it, “Beliefs and apprehensions about witches who flew to Sabbaths, fornicated with Satan, made men impotent and cooked and ate dead infants formed a ‘fantasy’ in the sense that they give a structure to wordless terrors and grief, translating them into a recognizable narrative” (10). The artist and the witch both give narrative shape to urgent ineffable experience, bodying forth the forms of things unknown and giving them a local habitation and a name.

As illustrated by the early modern urban legend of an extra devil counted onstage during a performance of Dr Faustus, theatrical illusions could literally bedevil some spectators. Early modern culture was in a “transitional state between a previous era in which religion was much more imbued with superstition, magic, and the miraculous and an emerging modern culture of scripturally centered faith and secular rationalism” (Marotti 230). Cognitively, theater was a principal focus of these
ambiguities, since audiences could understand particular characters with different levels of abstraction and self-awareness. A “villain” such as Iago could be construed as a malicious but autonomous individual. But he could also be taken to embody supernatural evil like the old Vice—or the witch.

Nowhere was this transitional state more critical than in the religious conflicts of the period. In moments of crisis, religious radicals demonized their opponents with so many echoes of the witch craze that in some degree witch-persecution seems to have sublimated sectarian antagonism. The connection is explicit in attacks on Jews for magical evil-doing. But it operates as well in persecutory behavior between Christian groups: in the importance of interrogation, torture, demonic conspiracy, hysteria about sexual and bodily degradation, and of course judicial killing at the stake.

This interplay of psychic forces glimmers throughout *The Winter's Tale*. If Shakespeare came from a Catholic background, as increasingly seems likely, then in Richard Wilson's summary, "his most famous stage direction could be taken as symbolic of the fate that devoured so many [Catholic] émigrés who followed Antigonus (the name of the mythical ferryman at Antwerp), pursued by the Earl of Leicester, the terror of Catholic exiles (whose emblem was, of course a bear). 1 In 1577 the soon to be martyred Campion wrote from refuge in Prague to a Jesuit operating near Stratford who may have been related to [Shakespeare’s mother] Mary Arden to encourage recruits to sail for “the pleasant and blessed shore of Bohemia.” Like the exiles in the play, Catholics bound through Antwerp sought to escape persecution in "Places remote enough . . . in Bohemia" (3.3.30). “To original audiences of *The Winter's Tale*, 'fair Bohemia' (4.1.21) might, indeed, have been code for the land of Campion” (Wilson 27).

Schism is one of the basic ideas structuring the play, evident in the sinister meanings lurking in Archidamus’s naïve reference to “great difference betwixt our Bohemia and your Sicilia” (1.1.3-4). Camillo observes that the kings “were trained together in their childhoods” (22), which would include religious discipline. He adds that “there rooted betwixt them then such an affection”—the same word Leontes will use to describe his visionary transport (1.2.138)—“which cannot choose but branch now” (1.1.24), imagery that could describe the Reformation.

This thread becomes entangled with witch ideation in the kings’ conversation from the outset. After revealing his fears of unknown evils “breeding” back in Bohemia (1.2.11-14), Polixenes turns the conversation to Eden, eternal boyhood, and sin. Even as he calls Hermione “my most sacred lady” (1.2.76), Polixenes also unwittingly insinuates—as she protests—that she and his wife may be “devils” (82). Although eclipsed by Leontes’ rage, Polixenes’ anxieties make him as compulsively aggressive as his counterpart. Like Leontes, he too is insecure about evil “at home” (14) and dangerously judgmental. Bohemia offers refuge to Perdita until she offends its ruler, who then attacks her as a “fresh piece / Of excellent witchcraft” (4.4.422-23), an enchantress able to “hoop” his son’s “body more with thy embraces,” and threatens “to devise a death as cruel for three / As thou art tender to’t” (439-41).

Before the intervention of Apollo and Paulina, art and magic, Sicilia and Bohemia are murderously authoritarian places. As in Leontes’ plan to poison Polixenes, insecurity makes the rulers savagely ambivalent. For them reality is split into irreconcilable opposites: good and evil; love and hate; truth and deception;
obedience and subversion. Leontes recalls his courtship in images that suggest tyrannical will forcing open secrets and commanding loyalty oaths in order to escape “sour” death: “that was when / Three crabbed months had soured themselves to death, / Ere I could make thee open thy white hand / And clap thyself my love; then didst thou utter / ‘I am yours forever’” (1.2.101-04). Love me, he seems to say, or you will kill me.

In their compulsion to idealize or demonize, the rulers operate in the psychic force field epitomized in the witch craze. Even Antigonus sees women in split focus. About to abandon the infant Perdita in 3.3, he has “a double, polarized vision, in which Hermione appears first as an idealized image of maternal chastity and sorrow, ‘in pure white robes, / Like very sanctity,’ next as a witch, a dreaded, vengeful fury who warns him that he will never see his wife again: ‘and so with shrieks, / She melted into air’ (22 -23, 36-37)” (Rose 306).

Splitting the queen into a witch or “very sanctity”—a saint or an angel—Antigonus is responding to the force field that keeps the kings discomposed. His invocation of “very sanctity” also opens a window on the religious context shaping the conflicts in the play and in Shakespeare’s personal background. Like Queen Hermione, the Queen of Heaven was also an object of persecutory rage. While on progress in 1578, as Frank Brownlow recounts, the royal party apparently framed one of Queen Elizabeth’s hosts, an excommunicate papist named Rookwood, searching his barn on a pretext and claiming to find there a hidden picture of the Queen of Heaven. In Richard Topcliffe’s account, “Her Maty commanded it to the fyer, wch in her sight by the cuntrie folks was quickly done, to her content, and unspeakable joy of every one but some one or two who had sucked of the idoll’s poisoned mylke” (171).

However cynical, Topcliffe’s sneer resonates with witch lore. Like Hermione’s statue, the “idoll” of the holy mother promised more life. But In the recusant-hunter’s eyes, idolatry makes her a devilish illusion; her “poisoned mylke” parodies nurture as the witch does in poisoning children in her care (Roper 128). Having tried to poison Polixenes and terrified to be poisoned himself, Leontes despairs that “I have drunk and seen the spider” (2.1.45) and directly snatches Mamillius from his mother to save him from “poisoned mylke.” “Give me the boy,” he commands. “I am glad you did not nurse him” (56). This is a late echo of the Fairy King and Queen’s struggle over the changeling child that disorders nature in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and it proves fatal to Mamillius for reasons robustly explored by psychoanalytic criticism.

In Hermione’s trial, her language links mother’s milk to infancy, nurture, innocent motives, the breast, and in turn the heart or the core of self. The infant Perdita, she cries, “is from my breast, / The innocent milk in its most innocent mouth, / Hal’d out to murther” (3.2.99-101). In this indictment the righteous persecutors’ attack on the young mirrors the evils of the witch, even to the “immodest hatred” of denying Hermione “the childbed privilege” (102-03). “From the viewpoint of ministers and physicians, and perhaps too for many husbands,” says David Cressy, “the gathering of women at childbirth was exclusive, mysterious, and potentially unruly” (55). More profoundly, childbed was a site of tremendous physiological stress and terror of death. By imprisoning his pregnant wife, Leontes acts to police his fears as the authorities
would do on behalf of their communities by mastering witches through shackles, torture, and burning.

Hermione is saved from the stake by Apollo and Giulio Romano—by the higher truth and saving illusions of art. By analogy, it appears that Shakespeare survived—or flourished despite—the homicidal religious conflicts of his youth by sublimating religion in art. Paulina, Giulio Romano, Apollo, and “great creating nature” form a pantheon of substitutes for divinity too controversial to be directly invoked. With its religious associations, the “Pauline” statue of Hermione could be a form of “idoll,” yet the play’s comical exposure of its illusion and artfulness makes the statue complexly parodic: at once the thing itself and a critique of it. In an era of “epistemological instability, and uncertainty about the boundary between the real and the illusory,” says Arthur Marotti, “Shakespeare often metadramatically analysed the illusion-making power of the theatre, [but] he nevertheless rescued from an older culture, and from the ‘old religion’ specifically, those very modes of perception and belief that were under attack (as Catholic ‘superstition’) by polemical Protestant writers and by rationalistic sceptics (such as Reginald Scot)” (Marotti 230-31).

Here is Huston Diehl’s lucid formulation of the maneuver by which the artist managed to have his cake and eat it too: to preserve and yet demystify traditional verities: “By embracing the notion, cherished by Calvinists, that the visible world is itself a ‘magnificent theater’ created by the great ‘Artificer,’ Shakespeare deflects his own capacity to inspire wonder onto a deity Calvin calls the ‘wonder-worker’. Shakespeare’s remarkable achievement redeems art, rescuing theater (at least temporarily) from antitheatrical threats by transforming (before our eyes in The Winter’s Tale) the betwitching image [witchery again]—painted and stony, dead and man-made—into a living person, wrinkled by time” (86-87).

Even without any overt metadramatic analysis, Shakespeare’s theatrical mentality is incipiently modern. As distinct from magical ritual, plays require an acknowledgment of parabolic thinking since they presuppose the constructedness of reality out of conventional signs. In play, identity is tacit: a function of roles and of markers such as costume and idiom. In London’s commercial theater the performers had to be informal psychologists, studying their customers’ perceptions, expectations, and prejudices. In action, they had to learn to manipulate emotions to maximize arousal and yet escape the serpent’s tongue or even prison.

As theater became less homiletic toward the end of the sixteenth century in England, people grew used to seeing ambivalence acted out and mastered or at least framed onstage in histories, comedies, and tragedies. Leontes’ final vision dramatizes psychic reintegration and also invites its audience to share the experience: “Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely / Each one demand and answer to his part / Performed in this wide gap of time since first / We were dissevered” (5.3.152-55). Like older, irenic King James, Leontes calls for a conference in the service of consensus and psychic reintegration. By contrast, dis-integration is the precondition of witch beliefs, as uncontrolled ambivalence split neighbors into demonic predators and angelic innocents, turning mothers, for example, into the dried-up hag and the fertile young victim. And in a nightmare feedback loop, the use of torture to guarantee truth commonly destroyed the integrity of victim’s personality and elicited insane confessions.
Leontes’ reintegration does draw on religious themes and—however parodic—revelations. The threat of witchcraft is still alive, so that like Peter Quince’s actors preempting audience alarm, Paulina cautions that “You’ll think I am assisted / By wicked powers” (89-91). With “Pauline” resonance, she guides her “congregation” by intoning that “‘It is required / You do awake your faith” (94-95). Leontes confesses his sins—the “magic in thy majesty . . . has / My evils conjured to remembrance” (5.3.39-40)—and seeks forgiveness. Whereas the witch sought perverse rejuvenation in cold sex with Satan, Hermione is “resurrected” to lawful warmth. As Paulina vows, “her actions shall be holy as / You hear my spell is lawful” (104-05).

In transforming paranoia into wonder, then, the scene dramatizes a form of conversion experience. In Leontes’ “transported” (69) state, qualities that inspire fear and loathing in the witch—“Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing / So aged as this seems” (28-29)—now remind him of the cherished qualities usually attributed to the witch’s beloved and mourned victim: “she was as tender / As infancy and grace” (26-27). Instead of stealing dead infants from the grave and making infernal unguents from their bodies, as witches do, now Hermione has herself been “stolen from the dead” like Christ (115). Instead of resenting the women’s sixteen year conspiracy to spy on his grief, Leontes celebrates the generosity of the return.

Nevertheless, the conversion experience in this scene is also a forthright cognitive exercise. The play’s emphasis is on artifice and therapeutic illusions. The audience watches itself watch Leontes watch himself watch a magic trick by Giulio Romano who is really Paulina devising a “statue” that is really Hermione who is really an actor who is really a boy dressed as a woman who is giving voice to Shakespeare who has borrowed a story from Robert Greene, who . . . .

The moment maximizes a cognitive strategy Shakespeare relied on throughout his career: the generation of superabundant meanings to overwhelm reason and thereby free intuition to reconceive reality. The illusionism works by positioning imagination afflicted by distress and desire in a chamber of mirrors that reflect back on one another in an infinite regression, which posits a not-quite-graspable insight. While the exercise is mystifying, it is also composed of recognizable partial truths, and carried out in a spirit of affectionate irony. That is, the play says something deliberately untrue that implies a meaning that an auditor with the right spirit of trust and imaginative sympathy can share. The trick depends on cues that appeal to an unspoken sense of solidarity or even intimacy. The artist is cultivating charisma and yet, given the dazzle of supercharged meanings, he is personally invisible. Like the Oracle of Apollo, the play offers a stirring new experience to a clientele that is actually paying for a new perspective on safely familiar materials.

Since I love only you, says Sonnet 76, "all my best is dressing old words new." Rather than repeat or rephrase "I love you," which exposes our dependence on empty formulas (“I really love you very, very, very much”), the poet pushes the Sonnets to the edge of expressivity. He compounds familiar meanings through wordplay, ambiguous syntax and punctuation, paradoxes, and riddling ironies within ironies, generating supercharged language (Farrell 1976). We can sense love in the urgent music of the poetry even if we cannot grasp—in its root sense, to comprehend—all the meanings we sense are there. As in the structure of irony, where a voice says something other or more than it appears, the listener has to trust
the poet’s intention. In a vow such as "Will, will fulfill the treasure of thy love, / I, fill it full with wills, and my will one" (Sonnet 136), Will Shakespeare vows that he is volition itself, and yet the vow is also winking, and even contains a dirty joke akin to the scandalous sex manual that Giulio Romano illustrated and to which Aretino contributed sonnets (cf. Will will fill the treasure or vagina of thy love with wills, and my will one of many). In this way seriousness and mockery combine to give the poem a riddling quality whose answer—love—we feel rather than reason out. Just this riddling surplus of meaning characterizes the oracle of Apollo, famous for giving answers more pregnant than the questioner can manage. The trope of the holy fool is familiar in religious thought, but in Shakespeare the foolery is distinctly psychological, or psychological as well.

Sigurd Burckhardt has argued that Shakespeare supercharges language in a systematic effort to create meanings that can resist the deadening effects of habit and, in the ineffable but intuitively coherent meaning that results, renew the authenticity of words. By "making strange"—putting words under such pressure that they baffle conventional expectations—a sonnet such as 116 renews imagination. Burckhardt sees a twofold rhythm at work. Playing the fool with wordplay and paradox, Shakespeare explodes dead formulas and then, in the speeches of "priest-figures" such as Cordelia and the Pauline Paulina, he renews meanings—or more exactly, arouses listeners to be open to rethink reality (Burckhardt 45). This is the conversion Leontes undergoes when his prejudices dissolve and the priestly Paulina reorients his imagination.

Like supercharged language, wonder in the plays pushes meaning to the breaking point where it may seem momentarily transcendent, as in magical thinking, or in Freudian parlance, "omnipotence of thought." Magical thinking presupposes that inner experience such as wishes, fears, ideas, and visions may be as real as external phenomena and even able to influence them. Ordinary wishful thinking often has a magical quality. Worried about a hospital patient, you may fervently say to yourself, as if a wish could determine the outcome, "Get well!" or "Don't die!" Psychosomatic ambiguities encourage the popular belief that a "positive attitude" or "faith" can heal disease. Just this phenomenon characterizes Leontes’ healing of his psyche and the “resurrection” of Hermione. As Paulina unsettles his senses (72) with wish-fulfilling surprises, she intones, “It is requir’d / You do awake your faith” (94–95), as if his aroused “will” and belief in love are summoning his wife from death.

The problem of course is that despite magical vows, meanings can be mutable and people do die, so the artist must keep pressing the boundaries of meaning, compounding riddles and ironies. The result may be radically equivocal: not visionary ecstasy but self-intoxication or madness. In Sonnet 129 lust literally acts out its meaning on the page. Grasping obsession spawns promiscuous adjectives—"perjured, mur’drous, bloody, full of blame, / Savage, extreme, rude," and more—that swarm insatiably toward chaos until the final couplet intervenes. If passion “dost make possible things not so held” and communicates with dreams and what’s unreal (1.2.139–41), the outcome may be marriage or murder. Macbeth embodies this treacherous ambiguity in the three witches, whose uncanny words lead Macbeth to his dying vision of cosmic futility.
Witchcraft prosecutions were often plagued by a sense of deepening mystery that demanded closure, through torture if necessary. It is haunting to hear the historian Robin Briggs conclude that after decades of fruitful investigation, “We certainly understand far more about the inner logic of both belief and persecution than our predecessors. Yet it is apparent that no kind of definitive interpretation has emerged. . . . One would prefer to have something more than an ever-increasing complexity to claim as a result of one’s efforts” (49). Wonder and witchcraft reveal experience to be an inexhaustible riddle, ecstatic or evil. Usually the plays whisk characters offstage before wonder wholly subsides, trying to hold critical questioning and awe in equilibrium. At the same time self-awareness—“we are mocked with art” (68)—provokes meta-questions and more amazement, so that the play lingers in imagination, effectively endless.

Any account of wonder is inescapably open-ended, since we can be sure that individual responses to plays differed. Wonder is a sophisticated cognitive strategy, but it had to encompass a wide range of attitudes, from religious unorthodoxy and outright skepticism to popular magical beliefs such as Keith Thomas has catalogued. Giulio Romano’s statue fascinates as did the lifelike funeral effigy of Prince Henry about the time of *The Winter’s Tale*, or even the voodoo-like wax figurine found in a vacant lot and taken for a magical charm against Queen Elizabeth (Thomas, 513). The bear that devours Antigonus plays out the fears thrillingly tamed in the bear-baiting pit in the neighborhood of the Globe Theatre. It may also have reminded playgoers of a pamphlet reporting on “a woman possessed with the devil; who in the likeness of a headless bear fetched her out of her bed and in the presence of seven persons most strangely rolled her through three chambers and down a high pair of stairs on the 4 and 20 of May last 1584” (Farrell 1976, 238n.).

In its capaciousness, wonder in Shakespeare is analogous to the accommodationist stance toward religion that he seems to have adopted. The technique of mingling of ritual elements with relentless critical self-awareness is not simply equivocation or mystification or a cloak of personal invisibility, but an interplay of Catholic and reformist mentalities. Shakespeare honors but disenchants miracles; he mocks idols but is no iconoclast. It is fitting that this expanded idea of wonder accommodates—or shows its inheritance from—both the Church fathers and Aristotle. “Augustine Christianized the marvelous by connecting it to miracles,” Peter Platt points out, defining a miracle as “‘anything great and difficult or unusual that happens beyond the expectation or ability of the man who wonders at it,’ but he found nothing unnatural in the miraculous: ‘We commonly say, of course, that all portents are contrary to nature, but in fact they are not. For how can anything done by the will of God be contrary to nature, when the will of so great a creator constitutes the nature of each created thing?’” (8). Not only is Augustine’s definition all-accommodating, it brings together the words that make up Shakespeare’s “great creating Nature” (4.4.88). But as Platt goes on to observe, there is a rational dynamic latent in wonder as a behavior. In his commentary on Aristotelian metaphysics, Albertus Magnus holds that “the effect of wonder is to excite inquiry . . . . we define the man who wonders as one who is in suspense as to the cause, the knowledge of which would make him know instead of wonder” (10).
Unlike fundamentalism, wonder contemplates an inexhaustible reality with equanimity. It represents an effort to absorb or suspend strangeness and threat rather than confront them. Wordplay and paradox dissolve or expand particular ideas, putting them beyond the reach of brute judgment, just as heroines such as Portia and Rosalind defuse threats by assuming multiple identities and managing conflict through illusionism. But as the tragedies cry out again and again, wonder is not a state or a product, but a behavior at the boundary of conventional controls. And the boundaries, as Shakespeare dramatizes them, can be ephemeral and mutable. Like the witches’ prophecies in Macbeth, Apollo’s priestess at Delphi offered answers that were, so to speak, in motion. Too greedily seized, they could be treacherous. The psychic equilibrium of the beholder is critical, in the theatre as well as in Apollo’s temple.

Imagining an invisible world rife with evil, fearing that an unfamiliar belief or an apple given to a child could be poisonous, religious zealots and witch-hunters policed the boundaries of conventional thought and tried to exterminate disturbing anomalies. Their horrific executions compelled wonder and awe, but in the service of inexorable righteous closure. By contrast, like the merchants that were expanding trade in a London outgrowing its medieval walls, Shakespeare sought out and transvalued an exceptionally wide range of cultural materials to work with. It would be easy to treat his development of strategic wonder as a great discovery: an answer to grave problems. After all, the man was monumentally creative in a famously conflicted world. Yet wonder is less a product or a goal than a process or an adaptation. Its peculiar cognitive style gave him a means to resist deadly judgments and to dissolve righteous certitude into a vision of psychic plenitude. In continually deferring finality, The Winter’s Tale especially functioned like the fabled fountain of youth, taking in old, used-up conventions, that could be “hooted at / Like an old tale” (5.3.116-17) or despised like the aged witch, and undressing them in order to imagine them anew.

1. For a detailed treatment of the associations of Antigonus with Antwerp, see Anne Lake Prescott’s entry on “Belge” in The Spenser Encyclopedia, which points out that Antigonus was not just a ferry-man but also a giant, a “wonder,” who would cut off the hands of stingy passengers: hence the name of the city built after a hero slew him, “Hant-werp” or “hand removal.”

Works Cited


