

Misogyny in the winter's tale

Literature



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Introduction

The Winter's Tale by William Shakespeare, is an early example of tragicomedy. The play consists of three acts of tragedy, followed by two acts of comedy. In the play, King Leontes of Sicilia, accuses his wife, Queen Hermione, of carrying out an affair with his closest friend, King Polixenes of Bohemia. Even though King Leontes seems certain that Hermione was unfaithful to him, Shakespeare never gives the reader any cause to suspect the claim to be true, in fact all of the other supporting characters, rally behind Queen Hermione, Paulina most of all. In Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale, Queen Hermione serves as prime example of the subordinate role women were forced into in the world of The Winter's Tale. Although Queen Hermione had an upstanding reputation it did not matter once a man, King Leontes, found her to have committed an offence.

Sarcastic Remarks

King Leontes' misogynistic notions about women is prevalent at the start of the play. In Act 1, scene 2, when Leontes is trying to convince Polixenes to stay, Leontes remarks to Hermione "Tongue-tied, our queen? / Speak you." In the beginning of this scene Leontes is asking Hermione to convince Polixenes to extend his visit, this comes off as very sarcastic, as if to imply that Hermione and other women usually speak too much without prompt. Also, the statement could actually be seen as more of a demand than a question, since it doesn't give Hermione a chance to refrain from speaking. And when she does speak and manages to convince Polixenes to stay, King Leontes is filled with unfounded jealousy. He goes as far as to question the parentage of his son, Mamilius: Thou want'st a rough pash and the shoots

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that I have, To be full like me: yet they say we are Almost as like as eggs;
women say so, That will say anything but were they false As o'er-dyed
blacks, as wind, as waters, false As dice are to be wish'd by one that fixes No
bourn 'twixt his and mine, yet were it true To say this boy were like me. (I. ii.
163-171)

Jealousy

This quote further demonstrates Leontes misogynistic view towards women. In his mind, Leontes, believes that all women are untrustworthy and “say anything” to fit into their agenda, which Leontes probably believes to be tricking their unsuspecting husbands. When Leontes becomes convinced that Hermione and Polixenes are having an affair, he complains that an unfaithful wife has been the qualm of many men: There have been, Or I am much deceived, cuckolds ere now; And many a man there is, even at this present, Now while I speak this, holds his wife by the arm, That little thinks she has been sluiced in's absence And his pond fish'd by his next neighbour, by Sir Smile, his neighbour: (I. ii. 239-244)

Objectification

Leontes makes a metaphor comparing women to ponds that could be “fish'd” by any other man, unbeknownst to the owner of the pond. In this metaphor, Leontes makes it clear that he sees women, wives in this case, as being the property of their husbands. He sees women as inanimate objects that need to be guarded by even those a man would consider friends. In this case Sir Smile probably refers to Polixenes since Leontes believes that his friendship is just a facade because he is having an affair with Leontes' wife. Later when complaining to Camillo, Leontes says “My wife's a hobby-horse,
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deserves a name / As rank as any flax-wench that puts to / Before her troth-
plight: say't and justify't." (I. ii 338-340) In this statement Leontes compares
Hermione to an animal, because he now sees her as a creature unable to
control her basest impulses. He also compares her to a " flax-wench," that is
to say that she is not deserving of her title and that she is no better than a
common low-class working girl. Camillo pleads for Leontes to stop slandering
Hermione, " I would not be a / stander-by to hear / My sovereign mistress
clouded so, without/ My present vengeance taken." Maybe because he sees
her as being so low ranking it makes it easier for Leontes to imprison
Hermione.

The Trial

In Act 3 scene 2, Queen Hermione, is brought to trial, after being imprisoned
and having given birth to her daughter in jail, for allegedly being unfaithful to
the King Leontes and trying to conspire with Camillo to have Leontes killed.
Hermione has several long monologues throughout this scene. She carries
herself with grace and sophistication through the whole ordeal and speaks
quite eloquently on her own behalf. Right of the bat Queen Hermione is
aware that whatever she has to say will seldom make a difference in King
Leontes deciding if she guilty or not: Since what I am to say must be but that
Which contradicts my accusation and The testimony on my part no other But
what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me To say ' not guilty. mine
integrity Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it, Be so received. (III. ii.
22-26) In this quote Queen Hermione is saying that whatever she says will be
in her defense, but that if her only defense is coming from her, and she is
believed to a lying adulteress, than there is really no point in her trying to

defend herself. This shows how powerless an accusation from a man in power, her husband, the king, makes Hermione and leaves her with very little options. Nevertheless, Queen Hermione continues in her defense and comments about how ludicrous it is for her to even be in this position.

...For behold me A fellow of the royal bed, which owe A moiety of the throne a great king's daughter, The mother to a hopeful prince, here standing To prate and talk for life and honour 'fore Who please to come and hear. (III. ii. 37-42) Hermione cannot believe that even though she slept at the King Leontes' side for many years she is still being treated like a common criminal. She also brings up her status as the daughter of a king and the mother to the future king. She is incredulous to the fact that she has to defend her life and her honor to whoever cares to listen. Hermione maintains her honor throughout the scene and refuses to give in to Leontes' constant jabs. Although it might have been easier on her to lie and pretend to be remorseful, Hermione decides to stand up for herself, " More than mistress of / Which comes to me in name of fault, I must not / At all acknowledge."

Hermione admits that she is not perfect but her pride is too strong to acknowledge faults that are not hers. Leontes is furious that he cannot get Hermione to confess and retorts, " As you were past all shame,— / Those of your fact are so—so past all truth..." By that he means that like all unfaithful women without shame, she is also without any truth. After this misogynistic comment, he threatens her with unimaginable punishment. Hermione address her husband's threats. She uses a metaphor in reference to them, " The bug with which you would fright me with I seek." The use of the word bug in place of threats or death seems like an interesting choice. It paints an

image of a child chasing another child around with an insect of some sort. Because at this point in the play her situation seems hopeless, this feeling of hopelessness leads to a cynical and biting tone within the rest of the speech. Hermione does not fear death anymore because at this point she believes it would be a break or release from her situation. She has been lost the favor of her husband and is being kept away from his first-born child, Mamillius, “like on infectious.” Hermione feels like she has been cast away, isolated, like a quarantined leper. And much like a leper, Hermione feels like she has been demoted in society and somehow marked as being impure. She further confronts Leontes, and sarcastically asks him what he thinks she has to live for. She knows that Leontes had made his mind up about her and that life hold little prospect for her after losing favor with the King. She knows that her husband’s prejudice toward her and all women won’t let him see the truth and implore the god Apollo to judge her. As they are waiting for the oracle to appear, Hermione makes that comment that she wishes her father, the Emperor of Russia, was alive to see his daughter being treated like this. This is very interesting, because it shows that Hermione recognizes that the world she is living in is male-dominated and that in order to get out of the predicament she currently finds herself in, she needs the support or sponsorship of a man in a position of power. When the oracle finally enters and proclaims Hermione’s innocence, King Leontes refuses to believe it. The death of Mamillius is soon announced after that and Hermione dies of grief.

Conclusion

In the Winter’s Tale, by William Shakespeare, Queen Hermione is falsely accused of adultery, by her husband, King Leontes. Even after being shown

with proof of his wife's innocence, King Leontes misogynistic beliefs impede him from accepting his wife's innocence. After being put in jail, losing her children, and being forced to defend her honor, King Leontes' misogyny ultimately causes the death of Hermione in the third act.