

The winter's tale – paulina and hermione essay



Critics have said that in the first movement (Acts I-III):" Hermione and Paulina are models of feminine strength" and" Hermione's passivity is dwarfed by Paulina's dynamism"* How do you respond to these different views of Hermione and Paulina?* What is your opinion of the impact of the two characters on an audience? These two views present conflicting arguments with regards to Hermione (King Leontes' wife) and Paulina (Hermione's assistant). The first argues that the pair display equal amounts of grit whereas the second proposes that Paulina's confrontational approach is more effective than Hermione's dignified docility. On the one hand, it is true that Paulina's dynamism is particularly effective.

Her entrance in Act II is both bold and striking. She confidently commands: " the keeper of the prison, call to him. Let him have knowledge who I am". She continues to use imperatives as she takes control of the situation, " conduct me then", " call her" and " withdraw yourselves".

Her succinct orders have particular effect due their concise and straightforward nature, which contrasts with the lengthy speeches of the previous scene. Her gusto is further shown as the Act progresses when she ignores one of the Lords' commands that she " must not enter" in order to present Leontes with his daughter. Equally, from her request to " let him have knowledge who I am", the audience can immediately infer that her position is one of significance. She further exerts her authority when she reassures the jailer when he fears what he " shall incur to pass" the Queen's newborn. Paulina simply responds, " you need not fear it, sir". She is the only character to resolutely confront Leontes' madness telling him outright that he is a " lute", " mad" and " a tyrant".

She is shows both controlled aggression and intelligence when she puns on Leontes' objection that Hermione is a " good queen": " Good Queen, my lord, I say ' good Queen', And would by combat make her good". Her speeches in the following Act differ significantly from the pathetic attempts of the King's courtiers to stand up to him (" please sir"). Her speech of particular note is the one immediatly following Hermione's death. She begins with a torrent of rhetorical questions showing her confusion over the inequality of the situation (" What wheels? Racks? Fires? What flaying? Boiling? In leads or oils?"). The repeated use of the hard consonant " t" has a particularly cutting and irate effect.

Her fury here is out of control. This unprecedented resistance would have a huge impact for the audience as it is the first time the King's irrational madness has been truly addressed and it follows such a poignant and shocking series of events. Her speech, similar to Leontes' speech which ended " she's an adultress", seems to build up to an almighty crescendo. In performance the rage and pace of the diction would build until the ominous and threatening final blow: " vengeance for't not dropped down yet".

On the other hand, Hermione's approach is, although very different (as the first statement suggests) an equally effective display of strength. As with Paulina, Hermione's initial diction should be focussed on. She speaks eloquently and cleverly. It is indeed her tack with Polixienes following Leontes' repeated attempts, which persuades him to stay. By punning on Polixenes' use of " verily", Shakespeare shows the audience that she is both witty and intelligent.

While she is not as confrontational as Paulina, she is by no means submissive (although her opening line of “ I thought, sir, to hold my peace” may have suggested otherwise). She is not afraid to tease her husband:” What, have I said twice well? When was’t before? Prithee tell me; cram’s with praise, and make’sAs fat as tame things.” Again, when Leontes attempts a bitter jibe by reminding her that “ three crabbed months had soured themselves to death” before she accepted his proposal, she chooses not to rise to the bait and continues as if this sourness had not registered. Her strength is shown more explicitly when she is falsely accused of adultery in Act II.

Not only does she remain collected, but she also continues to prioritise Leontes warning him:” How will this grieve you, When you shall come to clearer knowledge, thatYou have thus published me?” This humility, combined with her display of maternal love in the previous scene, creates an instant affinity with the audience. It takes considerable strength for her to be so selfless in the face of such damning accusations. When she is officially accused in front of the courts in Act III, she continues to use calm and rational language:” To say, ‘ not guilty’; mine integrity, Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it, Be so received”. Despite the overwhelming poignancy (and irony as daughter of “ the Emporer of Russia”) of her position, she is collected, valuing her “ honour” and “ dignity”. She shows particular courage when she refuses the be afraid of “ the bug which you would fright me with” (death) as she has lost the love of her husband and is “ barred” from her children. She goes so far as to claim that she actively death is something she would actively “ seek”.

The Winter's Tale is remarkable for presenting women as the strongest characters in the play. Paulina has a striking impact on the audience as she displays her strength like no other character, through aggressive resilience. Hermione's collected and dignified display has an equally surprising impact, but she shows equal strength through humanity and honour. It is this that makes her death quite so poignant.