

Trial by ire: hermione's inquisition



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The trial of Hermione (Act III, Scene 2), Queen of Sicily is the pivotal moment in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. It effectively closes the tragic chapter of the play, making way for the short comedy that follows. It sets up the unbelievably improbable ending, and leads into the scene that establishes the basis for the action in the following acts. Perhaps most important of all, it is in this scene that we are shown the full extent of King Leontes' degeneration, which brings the very identity of the play into question. *The Winter's Tale* is effectively two plays in one. The first three acts comprise a mini-tragedy, for which the trial scene is the climax. The two following acts appear to belong to one of Shakespeare's comedies. It is this dual-nature that requires such a monumental event to take place so early in the play. Structurally, this scene gives the play a sense of cohesion when it would otherwise be a jumbled, polarized mess. However, this scene does more than successfully separate two contrasting portions of the same story. The deaths of Hermione and Mamillius set up the action that fills the rest of the play, as well as the play's joyous, yet impossible conclusion. After Mamillius dies, Leontes is forced to accept (because of the Delphic Oracle's proclamation) Hermione's fidelity and to acknowledge the yet-unnamed Perdita as his legitimate daughter, else he "shall live without an heir" (II. ii, lines 135-136). Hermione's subsequent demise sets up the wondrousness of her "resurrection" scene, as well as the controversy that surrounds it. The fact that her death occurs offstage with only Paulina (the woman who supposedly brings her back from the grave) for a witness leads the practical reader to question whether she ever died at all. If we accept Hermione's death, we are legitimizing the mysticism that surrounds her return, not something our realistic-minded culture is eager to do. Yet if we reject the

idea of her death, we must acknowledge the fact that a Queen has remained hidden in the home of a nobleman's widow on an island for a decade and a half, which is just as unlikely as her becoming a female Lazarus. Regardless of whether or not we accept Hermione's death, it cannot be denied that her rejection at the hands of Leontes creates the action of the remainder of the play. It is because of this mistrust that Perdita, Leontes' final living heir, is banished to Bohemia, where drama and confusion ensue. While the young girl's exile occurs elsewhere in the play, the reason for it is Leontes' jealousy, of which this scene is the culmination. In fact, this scene focuses mainly on Leontes' degeneration into a mistrustful, jealous shell of a man. Throughout this play, Leontes transforms from a mighty king into a mock-Othello. However, unlike the tragic Moor, the king's downfall comes at his own urging. He convinces himself in an instant that Hermione is an adulteress, with no other evidence than her commission of an act with which Leontes himself charged her (the attempt to prolong Polixenes' stay). He is neither deceived nor goaded by any but himself. Because Leontes' demise is his own work, we cannot even grant him the pity we do to the ignorant Othello, nor the respect we show the revenge-hungry Hamlet. Othello may be pitied because his crimes were committed in rash ignorance, having been duped by a diabolical man in whom he placed a great deal of trust. Hamlet may be respected because he seeks revenge for those he loves on a villain that actually exists. But Leontes cannot be deemed worthy of either affection. There can be no respect for a man who trusts a random jealous whim more than his faithful wife, his beloved friends, and his devoted servants. Leontes rejects the advice of countless men and women, none of whom have given any reason for his mistrust, simply because the errant thought of adultery

blew through his empty head. He even goes so far as to dismiss the word of Apollo, claiming that “there is no truth at all in the oracle” (II. ii, Line 140).

There can be no pity for a man who brings about his own misfortune without the help of anyone else, especially when that misfortune spills over to take the lives of people he is supposed to love and protect. At this point, I believe Leontes to be beyond redemption. Despite the supposedly happy ending that is to follow, Leontes' sins in this scene cannot be erased. Hermione's reappearance at the end of the play cannot redeem Leontes for murdering (or banishing if you don't accept her death) her now. His eventual reunion with his daughter cannot acquit him of the charges of murdering one child and abandoning another (it should not be forgotten that Mamillius does not return with his mother at the end of the play). In fact, the happy ending of this play does nothing more than accentuate the ridiculousness of Leontes' folly during Hermione's trial. His subjects may have pitied him when Perdita and Hermione were thought dead, but their return showcases Leontes' idiocy in rejecting them in the first place. Were I his subject, I would have an immense amount of respect for Leontes knowing that his baseless accusations nearly killed three innocent people (my queen, prince, and princess, no less).

Indeed, I would lose far more respect than if those same accusations had been true and he had been proven a cuckold. If anything, the ending of the play shows us that Leontes never recovers from the degeneration that culminates in this scene. His sins are not forgotten by the reader, and are only forgiven by the other characters because of another case of *Deus ex Machina*. Leontes' failure to redeem himself brings into question the very identity of the play. While it is categorized as a romance and has elements of a comedy, the permanent fall of an exalted figure like Leontes pushes The

Winter's Tale farther into the realm of tragedy than that of any other genre. The scene of Hermione's trial is indeed powerful. It gives coherent structure to an otherwise disjointed play. It is the fulcrum on which the play turns, setting the stage for later action. It shows us just how low Leontes has sunk. The fact that Leontes never really recovers from this degeneration even brings the play's very identity into question. This is undoubtedly the most important scene in The Winter's Tale, and is arguably one of the most substantial scenes in all of Shakespeare's writings.