

Marginal female roles  
and the development  
of plot in "the winter's  
tale" and "gaw..."



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In Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale*, the "death" of Hermione catalyzes the narrative development. Quantitatively, she plays little role beyond the first three acts, but the play revolves and eventually unites around her. It is, initially, her perceived flirting with Polixenes that begins Leontes's jealous rage and sets into motion the play's main chain of events. Hermione's rhetorical wordplay and her use of the word "Prisoner" (1. 2. 52) present a familiar and possibly even slightly flirtatious character. The sense of Hermione wooing Polixenes into staying is picked up by Leontes and juxtaposed with Leontes's attempts of "three crabbed months" (1. 2. 103) to woo Hermione. We can almost sense the bitterness creeping into Leontes's words, emphasized by the plosive sound and implicit meaning of "crabbed." Furthermore, his three-month time scale is contrasted against the relative speed with which Hermione persuades Polixenes to stay. Later, as she about to be imprisoned, her vivacity is diminished, but Shakespeare exposes her resolve, spirit, and strength of character. She repeatedly refuses to condemn Leontes as a villain, stating instead with absolute fidelity: "You, my lord, / Do but mistake..." (2. 1. 80-81), and later, "You did mistake" (2. 1. 99). Leontes's actions cause tumult among the court and protest among the attendants. The sense of injustice is compounded by Hermione's pregnancy, and it is out of Leontes's disposal of their baby that the main substance of the later acts emerge in Shakespeare's deviation from the tragic model of *Pandosto*. The passion with which Hermione speaks during the trial scene is also particularly harrowing. Part of that effect is due to the delicacy of imagery: "My life stands in the level of your dreams, / Which I'll lay down..." (3. 2. 81-82); that line evokes W. B. Yeats: "I have spread my dreams under your feet / Tread softly because you tread on my dreams." Hermione's

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dignity is in absolute evidence when she details the wrongs committed against her: the loss of Leontes's "favour," the denial of "the first fruits of [her] body" Mamillius, and the title of "Strumpet" accorded by Leontes (3. 2. 94-102). These wrongs foreground her once more at the absolute center of the narrative and its subsequent progression. It is only the death of Mamillius and Hermione's own "death" which bring about remorse from Leontes and change the power dynamic within their relationship. His earlier dispatch of Antigonus with what he believes to be a bastard child was also, essentially, an attempt at infanticide by proxy. Importantly, it is this female child who will grow up to unite both kingdoms through the political alliance of marriage; coupled with the reanimation of Hermione, she leads to the critical designation of the play as a tragi-comedy, or more frequently as a romance. Perdita's is a relatively marginal role (and thought to be of marginal status until the denouement), though she is, in fact, the crucial reconciliatory link uniting the pastoral and the urban. Further, the character responsible for the resurrection of Hermione and the person to orchestrate her absence occupies another marginal female role: that of Paulina, who is initially Hermione's most vociferous defendant. The idea of revelatory female intervention into narrative is by no means uncommon; we see it in a slightly altered form at the conclusion of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Morgan Le Fay is invoked as the cause of action within the poem: "She sent me on that errand to your noble hall" (O'Donoghue 56). This slightly odd invocation by the Gawain poet places the female spirit — particularly the errant female sorceress who parallels Paulina — prominently into the narrative. Le Fay's appearance at this point in the story does not cohere with the rest of the narrative, though, and it may well be an attempt by the Gawain poet to tie <https://assignbuster.com/marginal-female-roles-and-the-development-of-plot-in-the-winters-tale-and-gawain-and-the-green-knight/>

the disparate “beheading game” and “temptation” plots together.

Furthermore, that the object of Le Fay’s plot should be Guinevere, another marginal female character within the story, is odd. With Guinevere and Le Fay in mind, we can again assert that (despite being narratively unsatisfying) they are central to the story’s progression within the fictional world itself, if not necessarily central to the narrative. In fact, narratively, Sir Bertilak’s wife plays a far greater role. She inverts the conventional passive and active gender roles of courtship within the story, actively and provocatively seeking the love of Sir Gawain. She brazenly offers him the “welcome” of her “body” (O’Donoghue 1237), which is in stark contrast to the conventionally hard-fought battle for a woman’s love in chivalric romance. In this, we can see the familiar idea of the female temptress (with Biblical parallels) whose purpose is to trick the knight or throw him off course. Therefore, we can also see in these episodes an exposition of ideas about chivalry, chastity, and the correct manner in which a knight ought to behave. In particular, the wife becomes the archetypal desirable-but-unattainable female, who is usually married and for whom the knight will perform tasks. We can also trace echoes of Hermione’s attempts to keep Polixenes at Sicily, which Leontes interprets as a flirtatious wooing. Interestingly, Sir Bertilak’s wife is instructed, presumably by her husband, to make advances upon Gawain, which changes the dynamic radically from that of the jealous Sicilian spouse. We can see, therefore, Sir Bertilak’s wife’s role in maintaining suspense within the story: she poses the biggest threat to Sir Gawain’s chastity, and in an attempt to stay her advances, he accepts a love token in the form of the girdle. Her role unites the plot’s conclusion with the episodes in Bertilak’s castle and gives context to what has taken place, with the three kisses

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mirroring the three axe blows. Despite attempts to recast these women in empowered roles, I still overwhelmingly feel that they are objects to be acted upon within these two works. I maintain that they are of fundamental importance to the development of the plots even though they never have true power or autonomy. *Works Consulted* O'Donoghue, Bernard. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* , United Kingdom: Penguin Books, 2006. Print. Shakespeare, William. *The Winter's Tale* . Fourth ed. The Arden Shakespeare, 1963. Print. Stone, Brian. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* . Penguin Classics, 1975. Print. Yeats, William B. *The Collected Poems of Yeats* . Penguin Books, 1991. Print.