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English 117B

Nov. 16, 2019

Scene Analysis: The Winter's Tale, 1.2

The scene that I chose to analyze is 1.2 of *The Winter's Tale*. I chose this scene not because it is filled with rich climactical conflicts, which it actually lacks, but because of the revealing dialogue between its diverse set of characters, which skillfully sets up the climax in the following acts. By analyzing the interactions between two pairs of characters, I aim to produce more insights into their relationships and draw better explanations for the development of the plot.

The first pair I'd like to analyze is Hermione and Leontes, whose interactions, though less intense compared to these in the later acts, can reveal much about their relationship. The first conversation between Leontes and Hermione is:

LEONTES Tongue-tied our queen? Speak you.
 HERMIONE I had thought, sir, to have held my peace until
 You had drawn oaths from him not to stay. You, sir,
 Charge him too coldly.

 —Yet, good deed, Leontes,
 I love thee not a jar o'th' clock behind
 What lady she her lord. —... (1.2.27-30, 42-44)

Among the lines, Hermione blames Leontes for “charging him (Polixenes) too coldly”.

Interestingly, while the actual speech which Leontes employed to persuade Polixenes is more bland than cold, his charge to Hermione appears indeed to be cold: “Tongue-tied our queen? Speak you.”.

The word “tongue-tied ” is astonishingly impolite, implicitly placing Hermione in a pathological status. The imperative “Speak you” is an even more telling sign of his irritated mental status, as it

takes the form of an order or charge by a king to his inferior, instead of a tender request by a husband to his wife. While one tends to perceive that the first sign of Leontes' jealousy occurs as late as in the "too hot, too hot" speech starting on line 108, in light of the above evidence, I argue that he has been jealous since the beginning of the scene, apparent in his cold and impolite attitude towards both his guest and his queen. Hermione, on the other hand, probably had noticed her husband's irritation, too, as she thus replied "I had thought, sir, to have held my peace until You had drawn oaths from him not to stay." There is possibly an intended irony in Hermione's speech, as she could mean "I thought to wait till you have screwed it up" in addition to the literal meaning. In this sense, she must have perceived the abnormality in Leontes and the inappropriateness in his speech and implied that he shouldn't have been so harsh to Polixenes and his queen.

Then, while Hermione was addressing Polixenes to persuade him to stay longer (as Leontes charged her to do so), she suddenly turned back to Leontes to state her love (1.2.42-44). By stating that her love is not "a jar o'th' clock behind what lady she her lord", she employed a metaphor by drawing a comparison between the amount of her love to her lord to the time indicated by the clock. "Not a jar behind" emphasizes the very abundance of her love, undiminished by any other lady's love. As to the abruptness of this declaration of love, there are two interpretations. One is what follows my previous perceptions that Hermione was aware of Leontes' jealousy and said so intentionally to ease his unsettlement: the love was expressed so affectionately that Hermione changed her usual pronoun for Leontes from the more respectful "you" to the more intimate "thee", even with Polixenes' presence. Another interpretation is that it's one of Shakespeare's dramatic ironies planted in the lines, with the speaker unaware. Just as Leontes' assertion "We are tougher, brother, Than you can put us to't. (1.2.15-16)" is a blatant irony since their friendship withstands none of the tests as it soon proves, Hermione's expression of love here has also ironically gone towards no end as Leontes

is soon consumed in his jealousy, deaf to her expression of love, and convinced otherwise. In either case, the lines confirm us of Hermione's love for Leontes and contrast Leontes' indifference. By taking a close look at the first of Leontes and Hermione's dialogue, we are informed more than we might be aware of of the subtleties in Leontes and Hermione's relationship, even before the main theme is fully revealed to us by Leontes' asides.

The second interactions I'd like to analyze are those between Leontes and Mamillius. In this group of interactions, Leontes claims a heavier presence, as his lines are much longer and are almost semi-soliloquies. By "semi-soliloquies", I mean that Leontes is constantly mixing his inner thoughts with unmindful speeches to Mamillius, making the overall meaning evasive (at least to Mamillius). Though these speeches are nominally addressed to Mamillius, Mamillius' lack of response to anything but Leontes' immediate and simplistic questions may suggest that he wasn't capable of comprehending Leontes' speech, let alone his insinuating malice hidden among the lines. In analyzing these conversations, we'll be able to gain more insights into the development of Leontes' jealousy and Mamillius' role in facilitating Leontes' expressions. Leontes' first lines with Mamillius start near the end of the "too hot, too hot" speech in which he just expressed his suspicion of adultery of his wife:

LEONTES ...—Mamillius,

Art thou my boy?

MAMILLIUS Ay, my good lord.

LEONTES I'fecks!

Why, that's my bawcock.

.....

—Still virginaling

Upon his palm? —How now, you wanton calf?

Art thou my calf?

MAMILLIUS Yes, if you will, my lord.

.....

Sweet villain,

Most dear'st, my collop. Can thy dam—? May't be?—

Affection, thy intention stabs the center; (1.2.119-121, 125-127, 136-138)

There are two details worth noticing about the conversation between Leontes and Mamillius. First is Leontes' repeated question of "Art thou my boy?". In fact, three of the four direct conversations between Leontes and his son in this scene are related to the same question — "Art thou my boy?", "Art thou my calf?", or "I am like you, they say. (1.2.205-206)" — that whether Mamillius is Leontes' genuine son. We know from Leontes' "too hot, too hot" speech (1.2.108-119) that he is brewing jealousy in his bosom, that he suspects his wife has committed adultery with his best friend. From there, he can't help but question whether Mamillius is his true issue or that of Polixenes'. While consumed in his uncontrollable jealousy and repeatedly making the same meaningless question that can neither be confirmed or denied, Leontes nonetheless seeks comfort in Mamillius' likeness to himself. He iterates how similar they look, that Mamillius is "a copy out of mine (1.2.122)", that Mamillius is "full like me (1.2.129)", and that they are "as like as eggs (1.2.130)". The last simile is worth noting. To stress how alike his son and himself are, Leontes compares themselves to two eggs, which are usually of identical shapes and difficult to differentiate, to give himself otherwise evidence regarding the trueness of their blood-bond, and thus some comfort. It is also interesting that Mamillius brings up this topic himself on line 207: "I am like you, they say." Again, this is a situation similar to Hermione's sudden declaration of love, which we cannot know for sure whether it's because the character perceives Leontes' thought and speaks to his comfort deliberately, or it's an unintentional dramatic irony planted by Shakespeare. The possibility of the first situation is certainly present in this case, as Mamillius is capable of understanding the shames imposed on his mother, because he later pines away and dies for it. Yet I lean towards the latter explanation as Mamillius seems too young to understand most of Leontes' speeches. In either of the cases, it greatly contributes to the dramatic effect by relating to Leontes' single concern: whether Hermione has been chaste and, therefore, whether Mamillius is his son.

The second detail worth noting in Leontes' speech is his discursive comments, i.e., either the interjectional asides in conversations with Mamillius, or the spontaneous sentences to Mamillius while Leontes is brooding on his inner thoughts, depending on how we define the nature of Leontes' speeches. The first example appears during their first conversation:

—Still virginaling
Upon his palm? — (1.2.125-126)

For contexts, Leontes is talking to Mamillius about whether they look alike. Yet, he is doing so very distractedly, because we know from his interjections that he is also closely watching the actions by Hermione and Polixenes. The above line of comment is especially sinister, as Leontes, in addition to using a metaphor to compare Hermione to a "virginal" (a musical instrument), also plays a pun on the word "virgin". By implying that Hermione is acting like a virgin, Leontes portrays his wife as a disgusting figure of a married woman who shamelessly flirts with other men and disguises herself in purity. By phrasing the sentence as a question, Leontes also dramatizes his expression of the unbelievability of the length of time Hermione and Polixenes are holding hands. With the filthy pun, this comment is apparently very improper to utter, especially in front of his son. Such behavior by Leontes is an indication that he is gradually losing control over his mood, that he couldn't help but voice his inner thoughts, notwithstanding his son's presence (though this could be an aside interjection that is inaudible to other characters - we'll see an surely audible example later). From the fact that both Hermione and Polixenes notice and comment on his unsettlement (1.2.146-147), we also know that, aside from his mood, he can't control his facial expressions either.

At this stage, Leontes' unsettlement is still under-developed. Hermione and Polixenes are still nearby, so that Leontes is more or less restraining his language and outbursts of emotions. His direct speeches to Mamillius are also tangential to his deepest concern about the honesty of Hermione.

We'll look at another dashed interjection by Leontes in support of the above claim:

Most dear'st, my collop. Can thy dam—? May't be?— (1.2.137)

On this line, we can clearly see that Leontes' sentence was forced to a stop by himself. We can well imagine his intended text: “Can thy dam [be this disgraceful strumpet that sleeps with your father's best friend]?”, or something of the like. Yet, he restrains from completing this horrible sentence but instead continues to reflect on how his suspicion has brought him “the infection of [his] brains (1.2.145)“. From here, we will continue with the investigation of the development of Leontes' jealousy and witness his gradual loss of patience with his son.

After Leontes has sent away Polixenes and Hermione for “angling (phishing)”, he begins again with this gnawing image—of him being a cuckold—ineradicable from his mind:

LEONTES ... Gone already!
 Inch-thick, knee-deep, o'er head and ears a forked one.
 —Go play, boy, play. —Thy mother plays, and I
 Play too, but so disgraced a part, whose issue
 Will hiss me to my grave. Contempt and clamor
 Will be my knell. —Go play, boy, play. —

Again, paying attention to the interjections, we see the striking repetitions of “Go play, boy, play” addressed to Mamillius in between Leontes' intense reflections about cuckoldry and the shame incurred. From Leontes' charging Mamillius away, it's evident that his unsettlement has developed into an impatience for his son. Compared to his earlier cordial and loving pronouns for his son — “bawcock (121)”, “calf (126, 127)”, “sweet villain (136)”, etc — Leontes' current attitude towards Mamillius indicates great intolerance of the “issue” that will be his “knell” (187-188) (“issue” punning on “offspring”, thus referring to Mamillius). Additionally, by mentioning the word “play” four times in mere two lines, Shakespeare is “playing” hard on this word. While the “play”s addressed to Mamillius is in the sense of childish plays, the mother's “play” implies that she “dallies sexually” (Norton Textual Comment), and Leontes himself's “play” refers to him playing a cuckold, “so disgraced a part”. A notable development of Leontes' mood from that in his earlier

speeches is that Leontes begins to directly plant his insidious word plays inside speeches clearly addressed to Mamillius. While earlier he either speaks his jealousy lines to himself or stops the sentence halfway while talking to Mamillius, now he directly says “thy mother plays”. Even though we are tempted to imagine that Mamillius is as naive as he could be, that he, too focused on his plays, could have ignored all the other speeches by Leontes, or he might not understand the sinister meanings by Leontes, here, we cannot convince ourselves with any evidence that Mamillius is not aware of the abnormality with Leontes. “What meant father by ‘my mother plays?’ Why did father say he plays a disgraced part?” These are all questions that Mamillius is quite capable of conjuring up after hearing this speech specifically directed at him. However, as a father and a king, it is neither graceful or responsible to expose such dark thoughts to his young son and prince. By now, Leontes has been fully consumed in his blinding skepticisms and completely developed his jealousy, with which he will later conspire the murder of his best friend, throw his pregnant queen into jail, and discard his own daughter.

By closely analyzing several interactions between Leontes and his wife and son in 1.2 of *The Winter’s Tale*, we developed more insights into the subtle relationship between the characters and the development of Leontes’ jealousy.