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**'which 'longs to women of all fashion': Churching and Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale***

In a 1583 speech to Parliament, Queen Elizabeth pronounces, 'One matter touches me so near as I may not overskip; religion is the ground on which all other matters ought to take root, and being corrupted may mar all the tree'.<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* dramatizes the implications of Elizabeth's statement, in that the play performs the movement, as so much of the scholarship describes, from losing to finding, from law to grace, and from transgression to redemption. A syncretic jumble of classical myth, Christian scripture, pagan solstice ritual, church holy day celebration, Apollonian oracle, and Pauline theology, *The Winter's Tale* provides a richly textured portrayal of the tensions implicit in matters of religious faith and practice.

To be sure, the political significance of *The Winter's Tale* is wideranging; as Leonard Tennenhouse contends, the Jacobean theatre (and this play in particular) 'was never more political than when it staged a king as a father and a court as a household', and in such plays, 'the stage was a place for disseminating an iconography of state'.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, to recall Elizabeth's metaphor, while the tree (in this case the family tree) is marred in *The Winter's Tale* because of the destructively jealous rage of the political 'parens patriae' – that is, Leontes, King of Sicilia – the soil in which the tree is rooted and from which it is nourished is religion.

In Act 3, scene 2 of *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes brings his wife Hermione to trial, formally charging her with conducting an adulterous relationship with his long-time friend and confidant, Polixenes, King of Bohemia. During her defense, Hermione rightly complains that she has had 'the child-bed privilege denied, which 'longs / To women of all fashion' (3.2.103–4).<sup>3</sup> In this trial scene Shakespeare draws the audience's attention to the fact that Leontes, in his hasty condemnation of his wife, not only denies Hermione her month of privilege after giving birth and exposes her to the public humiliation of not being afforded a proper churching ceremony, but also deliberately disregards the divine oracle. Shakespeare's contemporaries would

certainly have been aware of the fact that Hermione's first public appearance should have been not her trial, but her churching. Thus, the personal, legalistic action that Leontes puts forward as a matter of state usurps the obligations of religious discipline and the authority of the church that, as Hermione notes, is not simply a wrong she suffers individually, but one that affects the community at large, since it "longs to women of all fashion". As a consequence of the breach in divine order caused by Leontes, Hermione's reappearance in the play's final scene serves as a delayed churching service that reaffirms the redemptive themes so often discussed in this play by celebrating (in the language of the *Book of Common Prayer*) her 'safe deliverance ... in the great danger of childbirth'.<sup>4</sup> Further, the epistemological concerns found throughout *The Winter's Tale* regarding the apprehension of truth are resolved specifically in Hermione's reintegration into public life and more broadly in the affirmation of a dialogic unity attained, for both players and audience, through shared communal knowledge.

The service for the churching of women, a practice carried over from the medieval church, was derived from the Old Testament laws of purification for women after childbirth, as specified in Leviticus 12.<sup>5</sup> The Church of England prayer book service (that is, from 1552 onwards) nevertheless does not directly characterize the ceremony as one of purification, labeling it instead 'The Thanksgiving of Women after Childbirth'.<sup>6</sup> By custom, undoubtedly influenced by the number of days of purification specified in the Levitical laws, churching occurred roughly one month after the woman had given birth.<sup>7</sup> To begin the service, the woman entered the church and was directed to kneel 'in some convenient place nigh unto the place where the table standeth',<sup>8</sup> so that, as Gail McMurray Gibson argues, the churching service fashioned 'for women a theatre of their own', in which 'the symbolic and ritual center of this drama was a woman's body'.<sup>9</sup>

The priest then expressed to the woman his gratitude that God 'hath preserved you in the great danger of childbirth', and he enjoined the celebrant to 'give hearty thanks unto God and pray'.<sup>10</sup> This pronouncement was followed by a reading of Psalm 121, which begins, 'I have lifted up mine eyes unto the hills: from whence cometh my help', and which also includes such reassurances as, 'The Lord himself is thy keeper: the Lord is thy defense upon thy right hand, ... The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil ... [and] The Lord shall preserve thy going out, and thy coming in'.<sup>11</sup> These assurances were reinforced by a recitation of the Lord's Prayer, followed by a brief antiphonal exchange between priest and celebrant, during part of which the priest prayed that God will be to the woman 'a strong tower', and the woman asked that

she be delivered 'From the face of her enemy'.<sup>12</sup> The priest offered a final prayer, in which he again thanked God who 'hast delivered this woman thy servant from the great pain and peril of childbirth'.<sup>13</sup> The comments on the danger and pain of childbirth framing the churching service speak to the high mortality rate for both children and mothers during this historical period, as well as to the official emphasis by the Church of England on survival rather than on cleansing. Following the service proper, the liturgical instructions stipulated, again with obvious parallels to the Old Testament, that the woman 'must offer accustomed offerings' (these ranged anywhere from 4d to 11d, though if the child died it was typically 1d–2d,<sup>14</sup> and the offering also included the chrisom cloth, that is the cloth in which the child had been wrapped at baptism).<sup>15</sup> As one final liturgical instruction, the prayer book specified that 'if there be a Communion, it is convenient' that the woman being churchied 'receive the Holy Communion'.<sup>16</sup>

In addition to celebrating the survival of the woman, churching ended the time of sequestration and thereby marked the woman's return to everyday, public life through a ritual that, as David Cressy explains, 'connected the semi-secret domestic world of women and childbirth with the public ecclesiastical and communal business of religion'.<sup>17</sup> This connection between the domestic and public configures the churching party itself, which typically included the midwife, the month-old child, and the newly-delivered mother's gossips. Because of the isolation women endured in childbed, during the period when they were considered to be 'green', the churching service had taken on the secularity of something akin to a coming-out celebration, for as William Coster argues, 'the ceremony of churching was the only means by which, after childbirth, a woman could return to the community of the Church, and indeed to society in general'.<sup>18</sup> In spite of the fact that canon law actually specified that such isolation was not required,<sup>19</sup> popular practice dictated otherwise, and in the space between the private and the public, many extra-liturgical customs arose, such as the wearing of veils and the various social gatherings (including tavern visits) with midwives and gossips.<sup>20</sup> Many debates related to churching target these extra-liturgical practices, as in the objections raised by dissenting puritans in *An Admonition to the Parliament* (1572):

Churching of women after childbirthe, smelleth of Jewishe purification: theyr other rytes and customes in their lying in, & coming to church, is foolishe and superstitious, as it is used. She must lie in with a white sheete upon her bed, and come covered with a vayle, as ashamed of some folly. She must offer, but

these are matters of custome, and not in the book .... They pray that all men may be saved, & that they may be delivered from thundering & tempest, when no danger is nighe.<sup>21</sup>

A number of the complaints during this period focus on matters of custom that fall outside of what is specified in the prayer book and that as a result lend to the ritual a secular, and even purely social, character.

Regardless of the varieties and discrepancies, as well as of the controversies, related to the churching service, the records demonstrate how fixed a practice churching remained in Shakespeare's day.<sup>22</sup> When viewed against the backdrop of the churching ceremony, Hermione's trial dramatizes not simply the broken relationship of a husband and wife, nor solely the disorder between this particular king and queen, and thus of the kingdom, but more importantly, the division between Leontes and the divine order as a result of his usurpation of divine law.<sup>23</sup> By denying Hermione the sanctuary of 'the child-bed privilege', Leontes' legalistic action, generated by his personal jealousy, disrupts the balance between domestic life and communal responsibility (or religious discipline) as he humiliates Hermione by means of a public interrogation while she is still 'green'. Act 5 of *The Winter's Tale* reflects and responds to the disruption of the private and public that occurs in the trial scene of Act 3. In particular, the three scenes comprising Act 5 draw attention to the tensions that threaten communal order and harmony as a result of the acts of selfish individuality that were committed earlier in the play. These final three scenes, then, ultimately provide the necessary corrective to Leontes' violation of both public and private order and, in addition, open the possibility for preserving and redefining the common-weal.

Scene 1 of Act 5 is set in Leontes' palace, where the King, accompanied by servants, meets with Cleomenes, Dion, and Paulina to discuss Leontes' earlier trespass with Hermione in the broader context of the commonwealth. Thus, Leontes' earlier private act of revenge is now being interpreted as a problem of public policy. Because at this moment Leontes believes Hermione is dead, because his son Mamillius died as a consequence of Leontes' defiance of the gods, because Leontes has not remarried during the ensuing sixteen years, and because Leontes also sent his newly born daughter Perdita (whom he wrongfully believed to be the offspring of Polixenes' and Hermione's affair) to her death, the King has no heir. While Leontes' advisors warn, 'What dangers, by his highness' fail of issue, / May drop upon his kingdom' (5.1.27–8), Paulina reminds the King of the oracle which stipulated 'That King Leontes shall not have an heir, / Till his lost child be found' (39–40). Paulina then

secures Leontes' sworn oath that he will never remarry without her permission. At this moment in the play (that is, after Leontes reestablishes his religious responsibility as the ground in which both his personal concerns and the matters of state take root), a servant enters and announces the arrival of Prince Florizel and Perdita. The appearance of these two offers the dramatic promise for solving the commonwealth's problem regarding its issueless king. The happy ending, however, cannot yet occur because those involved have not yet properly resolved the situation, soon jeopardized again by the arrival of Polixenes, who threatens the action by seeking to keep his son from marrying Perdita, whom he mistakenly believes to be nothing more than a shepherd's daughter.

In the second scene of the final act, the action occurs in an unlocalized, though public, space in or near Leontes' palace where three gentlemen tell of the reunion and reconciliation of Leontes and Polixenes, and of Leontes and Perdita. Significantly, none of the three gentlemen knows the full account of the reunion – the First Gentleman tells part of the story, then the Second Gentleman adds more, and finally the Third Gentleman fills in the remaining details. In his discussion of this scene, Walter Lim contends that *The Winter's Tale* 'has an inordinate preoccupation with the subjects of truth and knowledge' so that 'the point impressed in this [second] scene', he argues, 'is that there is always some gap in the individual apprehension of an actual event'.<sup>24</sup> In other words, the full truth can only emerge through the communal dialogue performed in this scene, in contrast to Leontes' jealous isolation in the first half of the play and his refusal to recognize the truth because of his refusal to hear any voice except his own. Immediately after recounting the thanksgiving for the royal friends and family who find one another, the Third Gentleman then tells of the perils and dangers of Antigonus being devoured by the bear and of the sailors being drowned in the storm as a consequence of delivering the infant Perdita to the land of Bohemia. This second scene ends with the reported reconciliation of the royals, reenacted by the low, comic characters, as the Shepherd and his son forgive Autolycus and vow to swear that he is 'as honest a true fellow as any is in Bohemia' (5.2.157). The public reconciliation enacted in this second scene, which offers thanksgiving for the safe delivery of those who survived the perils that befell others and which reaches every stratum of society, prepares the way for the return and communal reintegration of Hermione.

The last scene of Act 5 is set in the chapel of Paulina's house, and this setting, which is at once both domestic (private) and religious (public), complements the liturgical aspects that encourage us to read scene 3 as a

delayed churching service. So, for example, Paulina draws aside the curtain, in an act equivalent to raising the churching veil, that hides from view the 'statue' of Hermione. Leontes then confesses before Paulina and the others, 'I am asham'd' (5.3.37), as he gazes on his wife and remembers his earlier transgressions.<sup>25</sup> Perdita's physical response to the image of Hermione is to kneel, initially of her own accord and then a second time in response to Paulina's directive. Throughout this scene, Paulina brings order and ceremony to the highly charged emotions of those present, even as the ritualized actions further heighten their feelings of anticipation and wonder. In other words, Paulina serves here as a priest, directing the action as well as the verbal responses of Leontes and Perdita.<sup>26</sup> She thus informs Leontes that if he would see 'more amazement' (87), then 'It is required', she demands, 'You do awake your faith' (94–5). Paulina's officiating role in this scene seems to demonstrate Caroline Bicks' argument with regard to churching that 'although the priest was officially responsible for the woman's reentry into society, the women who accompanied her [the celebrant] created the impression of an empowered female society on public display'.<sup>27</sup>

Paulina continues in her priest-like function as she, in effect, brings Hermione back to life, especially to communal participation. Sequestered in the domestic sanctuary of Paulina's house for sixteen years, Hermione was essentially dead to her husband and to public life during this unusually extended 'time of privilege'. In this final scene, however, Paulina gathers a community of women (herself, Hermione, and Perdita) in a public ritual of thanksgiving that celebrates Hermione's surviving the dangers and perils not only of childbirth, but also of the jealous, murderous rage of her husband, the king.<sup>28</sup> Hermione is thus positioned in this scene as the celebrant at the centre of the ritualized action, and the reassurances from the prayer book liturgy for churching, especially those from Psalm 121 and from the antiphonal exchange between the priest and the new mother, seem to echo throughout this scene in that Hermione's return celebrates her sanctified preservation from the evil that threatened her life.

The controversies Shakespeare represents here at the play's end further reinforce a reading of the third scene of Act 5 as a delayed churching service. As a number of critics have pointed out, many of the details in this final scene call attention to precise points of sectarian religious dispute.<sup>29</sup> The entire scene is suffused with the language of Roman Catholic and protestant contentions regarding miracles, iconographic representation, and the eucharist. Thus, Paulina initially presents Hermione as a work of art 'newly performed by that rare Italian master, Julio Romano' (5.2.95–6), 'whose name,' Lim asserts,

'cannot be extricated from the contaminating context of papal politics'.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Perdita kneels before this image to 'implore her [Hermione's] blessing' (5.3.44—cf. 118–19) and then addresses the 'statue' as 'Lady, / Dear queen' (44–5) before requesting, 'Give me that hand of yours to kiss' (46). Even though Perdita prefaces her words and actions with the disclaimer, 'do not say 'tis superstition' (43), the Mariological implications of her terms of address, coupled with her act of kneeling, are not easily ignored.

In fact, Shakespeare seems well aware of just how thin the theological ice is that he is treading, as indicated by Paulina's repeated insistence that this ceremony is lawful. For example, Paulina first expresses her concern to Leontes 'that you'll think / (Which I protest against) I am assisted / By wicked powers' (89–91); then she warns, 'those that think it is unlawful business / I am about, let them depart' (96–7); and finally, as Hermione becomes animated, Paulina insists that Hermione's 'actions shall be holy as / You hear my spell is lawful' (104–5). Leontes' response, 'If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating' (110–11), overtly places the transformation of Hermione in the context of the eucharist and the debate over transubstantiation, especially since at this point in the action those present (including the audience) believe that stone has been miraculously transformed into flesh.<sup>31</sup>

While the visual aspects of this scene suggest a Roman Catholic influence, Paulina's words ('her actions shall be holy as / You hear my spell is lawful') point toward an aural, and thus more protestant, emphasis. In other words, Paulina knows that the miraculous transformation is lawful because Hermione has been alive all along – or, in eucharistic language, the transformation is lawful because the 'magic' is that of protestant real presence rather than of Roman Catholic transubstantiation. Furthermore, Paulina knows that the truth of what she has performed will be realized, and perhaps can only be realized, in a communal act of telling and retelling, which Leontes reinforces in his closing words:

Good Paulina,  
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely  
Each one demand, and answer to his part  
Perform'd in this wide gap of time. (151–4)

As with the liturgy of the churching service itself, this final scene enacts a ritual of thanksgiving for lives preserved from danger and peril, in which, in this case, a lost daughter comes from the green world of the shepherd and opens the way for the transformation and communal reintegration of her 'green' mother.

By dancing purposefully between the tangles of iconoclasm and the cult of the Virgin, and between Roman Catholic transubstantiation and Church of England real presence, Shakespeare may be indicating that his primary concern is not that of promoting a particular sectarian position. In an informative study of ‘Shakespeare, Carnival and the Sacred’, Anthony Gash examines Bahktin’s study of Dostoevsky’s poetics as a preface to his reading of *The Winter’s Tale* and the ways in which carnivalesque parodies of church rituals and idiom purify, rather than undermine and reject, christian belief and practice.<sup>32</sup> Gash then asserts, specifically in relation to his analysis of *The Winter’s Tale*:

arguably the climax of Shakespearean comedy and romance are the scenes of recognition or conversion where the audience is invited into a new sense of communion with the actor-characters on stage—rather than the often perfunctory or merely conventional return to social norms which then takes place to bring them back to earth, and out of the theatre.<sup>33</sup>

In Leontes’ closing speech, his invitation to depart ‘from hence, where we may leisurely / Each one demand, and answer to his part’ (152–3) is an invitation extended within, but intended to reach beyond, the fictive world of the play. It is an invitation, especially to the audience, to discuss the wonders of transformation and rejuvenation that they have witnessed, an invitation to respond to the dramatic performance not simply as an escape or diversion from reality, not simply as some work of ‘weak and idle theme, / No more yielding but a dream’ (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, 5.1.416–17). The liturgical echoes of the churching service in the final act of *The Winter’s Tale* provide a framework for redeeming the schism Leontes creates, and more importantly for extending such lawful transformations outside of the wooden ‘O’, into the world at large, where dialogue does not always enlarge community, nor always foster forgiveness. And thus Shakespeare seems to insist in this play that the public dialogue of kings and commoners, of women and men, and of mothers and daughters provides, if not the only possibility, then at least the best possibility, for communal healing and wholeness.

## Notes

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- 1 'Speeches: On Religion, 1583'. *Luminarium: 16<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance English Literature: Elizabeth*. 3 June 1996. 15 April 2003. <<http://www.luminarium.org/remlit/elizabib.htm>>.
  - 2 Leonard Tennenhouse, 'Family Rites: Patriarchal Strategies in Shakespearean Romance', *Shakespeare: The Last Plays*, Kiernan Ryan (ed) (London and New York, 1999), 43–60, esp 49 and 55.
  - 3 *The Winter's Tale*, The Arden Shakespeare, J.H.P. Pafford (ed) (London and New York, 1994), 59. All references to the play are from this edition.
  - 4 *The Book of Common Prayer, 1559*, John E. Booty (ed) (Charlottesville, 1976), 314.
  - 5 The Old Testament laws of purification specify that a woman was considered unclean for seven days following the birth of a male child (and for fourteen days if the child was female) and continued in 'the days of her purifying', isolated from touching anything holy or from entering the sanctuary, for another thirty-three days (sixty-six if the child was female). After completing this period of purification, the new mother then brought to the priest a year old lamb for a burnt offering and a pigeon or turtledove for a sin offering, although if she could not afford a lamb, she could bring two pigeons or two turtledoves (one for each offering).
  - 6 BCP, 314. For an authoritative overview of the churching ritual, see David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), 195–229.
  - 7 Jeremy Boulton, *Neighborhood and Society* (Cambridge, 1987), 278; and William Coster, 'Purity, Profanity, and Puritanism: The Churching of Women, 1500–1700', *Women in the Church*, W.J. Sheils and Diana Wood (eds) (Oxford, 1990), 377–87, esp 380 and 385–6.
  - 8 BCP, 314.
  - 9 'Blessing from Sun and Moon: Churching as Women's Theater,' *Bodies and Disciplines: Intersections of Literature and History in Fifteenth-Century England*, Barbara A. Hanawalt and David Wallace (eds) (Minneapolis, 1996), 149.
  - 10 BCP, 314.
  - 11 BCP, 314–15.
  - 12 BCP, 315.
  - 13 BCP, 315.
  - 14 Boulton, *Neighborhood and Society*, 277; and Christopher Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church* (Oxford, 1956), 168.

- 15 While the chrisom cloth disappears from the churching ritual after the first Edwardian prayer book in 1549, it remained a part of standard custom and practice. See Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 210–11.
- 16 *BCP*, 315.
- 17 Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 197.
- 18 Coster, 'Purity, Profanity, and Puritanism', 377.
- 19 See Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, vol 2, W. Speed Hill (ed) (Cambridge, 1977), (esp 5.74.1–4), 406–9.
- 20 See Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 201–3 and 216–22.
- 21 W.H. Frere and C.E. Douglas (eds), *Puritan Manifestoes: A Study of the Origin of the Puritan Revolt* (London, 1954), 28–9.
- 22 See Boulton, *Neighborhood and Society*, 277–8; Coster, 'Purity, Profanity, and Puritanism', 386; Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 198–201 and 212–16; and F.G. Emmission, *Elizabethan Life*, vol 2 (Colchester, England, 1973), 159.
- 23 Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York, 1992), notes that 'in the withdrawal and sanctified return of mothers after they give birth, Shakespeare found a dramatic equivalent for the customs surrounding churching' (347, n13).
- 24 Lim, 'Knowledge and Belief in *The Winter's Tale*', *Studies in English Literature* 41 (2001), 327–8.
- 25 While Gail Kern Paster, in *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1993), asserts with regard to churching that 'the ceremony's popularity among women may argue just as forcefully for their internalization of shame and embarrassment as for their pride, relief, and self-congratulation' (195) and that Hermione's existence is 'diminished' in as much as she is a 'living statue [who] is herself the subject of an evidently successful, self-imposed discipline of shame' (279), it is significant to note that here Leontes, rather than Hermione, is the one who expresses shame and embarrassment.
- 26 See Roy Battenhouse, 'Theme and Structure in "The Winter's Tale"', *Shakespeare Survey* 33 (1980), esp 136–8; and Anthony Gash, 'Shakespeare, Carnival and the Sacred: *The Winter's Tale* and *Measure for Measure*', *Shakespeare and Carnival: After Bakhtin*, Ronald Knowles (ed) (London, 1998), 177–210, esp 189–95.
- 27 'Backsliding at Ephesus: Shakespeare's Diana and the Churching of Women', *Pericles: Critical Essays*, David Skeele (ed) (New York and London, 2000), 215.
- 28 At this point in the play, Perdita remains unbaptized, unless we are to read Act 3, scene 3 as a type of baptism when Antigonus delivers her, wrapped in 'a

bearing-cloth' (114), to the rain-drenched shores of Bohemia. In the broader context here, the Third Gentleman reports (5.2.31–6) that the Shepherd and his son kept this bearing-cloth, as well as Hermione's jewel that hung around the infant's neck when they found her. The appearance of these items might possibly be read as the chrisom cloth and offering for Hermione's churching service.

- 29 See, for example, Lim, 'Knowledge and Belief', 317–34; Gareth Roberts, "'An art lawful as eating"?: Magic in *The Tempest* and *The Winter's Tale*', *Shakespeare's Late Plays: New Readings*, Jennifer Richards and James Knowles (eds) (Edinburgh, 1999), 126–42; and Ruth Vanita, 'Mariological Memory in *The Winter's Tale* and *Henry VIII*', *Studies in English Literature* 40 (2000), 311–37.
- 30 Lim, 'Knowledge and Belief', 319.
- 31 See Bicks who, in her article on churching in *Pericles*, examines 'the struggle of the reformed Church of England to negotiate its Popish/pagan past while constructing a new Protestant theology—one that was inescapably founded on idolatrous rituals and traditions' (209).
- 32 Gash, 'Shakespeare, Carnival and the Sacred', esp 177–80.
- 33 Gash, 'Shakespeare, Carnival and the Sacred', 196.