

“Competing Discourses in *The Winter’s Tale*”: Two Letters*

Dear David Laird,

This is a note of belated thanks for the copy of your essay in *Connotations*, “Competing Discourses in *The Winter’s Tale*.” I found it an engaging and provocative piece. Many years ago I proposed that Caliban’s word “scamel”—a word that editors had tried in vain to decipher—was meant to be indecipherable, a sign of Caliban’s foreignness, but of course that proposal seems modest indeed next to the more extravagant arguments that you have taken it upon yourself to criticize.

I have one puzzlement and one reservation: the puzzlement has to do with the relation between your exposition of the competing discourses in *WT* and your theoretical argument. In order to make your case against Orgel, wouldn’t you have to give a coherent reading of one of Leontes’s mad speeches rather than Hermione’s “verily”? And even if you gave such a reading, would that in itself demolish his proposal that the audience was meant to find it tortured and confused? My reservation has predictably to do with my own small role in the essay. I cannot quite bring myself to go back to that old chestnut, “Invisible Bullets,” but I don’t think that even in my most enthusiastic Foucauldian moments I was ever arguing that “subversive doubts are silenced” in the theater of absolutism; on the contrary, I proposed both that such doubts were actually generated by that theater, as a positive condition of its articulation, and that the term “subversion,” as we tend to use it, was

*Reference: David Laird, “Competing Discourses in *The Winter’s Tale*,” *Connotations* 4.1-2 (1994/95): 25-43.

trickier than it appeared, since we identified those things as subversive that posed no particular threat to our own assumptions.

Sincerely,

Stephen Greenblatt

Dear Stephen Greenblatt,

I was delighted to get your note about *The Winter's Tale* piece. Good of you to read it and to trouble to say what you did. I suspect that our friend Nancy Hutcheon had a hand in bringing it to your notice and I'm grateful to you both. To respond with equal generosity, I suppose, I should pursue matters no further, stop before falling more deeply into debt. I don't seem able, however, to resist a couple of comments and then to make a request.

I like your suggestion that the piece should have included a reading of one of Leontes's mad speeches. An earlier version did include a fairly detailed discussion of a speech which some have read as, if not mad, at least nonsensical or absurd. Since you spotted the omission in the published version, I'd like you to see a portion of what was deleted.

The inclusion of the reading of Leontes's speech would not, perhaps, have settled the argument. If, in your view, Caliban's "scamel" is indecipherable, is it not also the case that, since as you put it, it counts as a sign of foreignness, it becomes decipherable to the extent that it works within a larger structure of meanings? If I understand Orgel's argument, he's disinclined to consider the possibility of a "comprehensive" connection between one element and another. It's not the fact of the mad speeches that I would deny but rather Orgel's featuring of them in an effort to warn us away from what he calls a common sense interpretation that would endeavor to bring various elements of the text into a coherent relationship or anything that might turn in the direction of a unified or coherent reading.

About your second point—what you graciously refer to as a reservation—let me say that you're right and I am wrong. I should *not* have characterized the argument in "Invisible Bullets" by saying that "subversive doubts are silenced." I'd have been closer to the mark if I'd made it clear that the argument holds that such doubts are expressed, and, in the process of representation, not silenced, that's the wrong word, clearly, but neutralized, defanged, disabled. The word I was trying to avoid was "contained." I wanted to say that the motive seems to me less the containment or redirection of political energies than the interrogation of absolutist aims, theatrical, monarchical, and linguistic, but that's another story and besides the case is closed.

Sincerely,

David Laird