

Competing Discourses in *The Winter's Tale*

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In a recent article, Stephen Orgel makes a case for textual incomprehensibility.¹ He suggests that earlier editors were mistaken when they worried obscure passages into sense. He fastens on several notoriously difficult passages in *The Winter's Tale* and tells us not to bother—the passages were probably as incomprehensible in 1611 as they are to a modern audience. The argument is an intriguing one and I recall it here by way of introducing questions raised and variously answered in recent criticism about how and at what level a particular text invites interpretation, the effort, that is, to realize or resist whatever play of signification may be lurking in the wings.

The essay has a distinctive postmodern flavor. It views with suspicion any project that would reduce the Shakespearean text to a pattern of meaning, to some general conceptual scheme. In the case of *The Winter's Tale*, Orgel argues not so much for the deferral as for the denial of meaning, for the deliberate blurring of features which might sustain what he calls a common sense interpretation. To the question of what a speech by Polixenes might have conveyed to a Jacobean audience, his answer is: "Pretty much what it conveys to us: vagueness and confusion" (437). Such a determinate underscoring of the indeterminate seems consistent with postmodernist practice as does the general tenor of the essay which hints at what Frederic Jameson describes as blank parody or pastiche.² The drift of Orgel's irony favors a cool and essentially reassuring approach to the textual riddles and uncertainties so troubling to earlier editors. To the extent that Orgel is in earnest about trying to ease the burden of intelligibility, he registers an important difference between modern and postmodern critical practice, the former identified with a determined effort to work through obscurities, textual and otherwise,

to some sort of unifying or comprehensive story or explanation rather in the fashion of scholars who, as he complains, were prepared to emend, substitute, or even arbitrarily select from among a range of possibilities so as to make sense of a text. The quest for intelligibility and the assumption that traditional modes of thought provide the groundwork for such an enterprise are less likely to figure in postmodernist projects. Jean François Lyotard links postmodernism to a certain incredulity or skepticism about totalizing or overreaching interpretive schemes or meta-narratives.³ Others are no less incredulous about more modest or circumscribed attempts to decode meanings. As M. H. Begnal puts it, "since ambiguity and uncertainty undermine all hope of social discourse, all narratives or fictions are undercut by the indeterminate nature of language that remains tainted and equivocal . . ." ⁴ In its most sweeping and insistent formulation, the argument takes on a dubious, even nonsensical circularity.

This radical appeal to the indeterminacy of language and even Orgel's more restrained endorsement of textual incomprehensibility, his determinate underscoring of the indeterminate, will doubtless comfort skeptics among us prepared to protest the reduction of any text to an essentialist "truth" or totalizing interpretive scheme. But such challenges to the interpretive process seem to me imperiled by an overreaching not unlike that against which they protest, their force more rhetorical than substantive. There is, perhaps, as much blindness as insight in dismissing out of hand the claim that a literary work might register and channel meanings within a particular community and thus meet the requirements of social discourse and intelligibility at levels of meaning less insistently univocal or conclusive than those upon which recent critics, Orgel among them, have focused their dissent.

My purpose here is to ask where we might look for clues to what are admittedly partial and conflicted meanings, to whatever supplementary values or emphases a particular text, in this case, *The Winter's Tale*, manages to impart on this side of meaninglessness and indeterminacy. Prominent among such clues is the deliberate, tell-tale use of opposing or alternative discourses not only to locate characters and to fuel conflict or competition among them, but also to link up with a world beyond the fictional one, with issues and attitudes, conventions of utterance and

behavior, sited in and reflecting upon the larger culture. Competing discourses release meanings that outrun the fictional space in which the play exists. Such relational or contingent valuations are not apt to surface in the heavy weather of linguistic indeterminacy. They are not likely to emerge in a critical practice that disregards the historical specificities upon which local meanings depend.⁵ To reckon with the competition and how it works in relation to other currents and issues within and beyond the play, I propose to identify the several vocabularies and discursive strategies and to track their destination or valuation according to their capacity to capture or distort, enliven or direct some sense of what is at issue in the emerging action. The focus is not so much on the discourse of agency as it is on the agency of discourse, on those discursive determinations that underlie or secure the interplay of character and event. If, in effect, one mode of discourse is deconstructed, others are entertained, even validated. There is an attempt to show how language works in a public space, how it variously enables and constrains. As regards *The Winter's Tale*, chief among the cited and, paradoxically, anonymous discourses are those bearing the marks of gender, class, and what Foucault refers to as the emergent power of the modern state.⁶

To control language, to exercise the power to name, categorize, and classify is an essential weapon in the arsenal of monarchy and the modern state no less than it was, for instance, of republican or imperial Rome. Leontes' ill-conceived defense of his sovereignty and rule is in no small measure a linguistic one. He enlists a discourse that is exclusionary and preemptive, meant to silence contrary or subversive voices. Ambiguity and duplicity tend to put an absolutist monarchy and the institutions of its government at risk. Leontes wants to banish whatever threatens the stability of language.⁷

That threat arises initially in Hermione's voicing of a discourse where meanings are multiple, ambiguous, and shadowed by an implicit recognition of what W. K. Wimsatt terms "the polysemous nature of verbal discourse."⁸ Hermione speaks a discursive skepticism that measures the distance between words and things. Her agility and wit draw attention to the contingent nature of linguistic representation, to what Jonathan Goldberg refers to as the problem of "putting into

language what has occurred." "Language," he writes, when it is most accurate unspeaks itself."⁹ Hermione's discursive practice, at least in its initial phase, undertakes to "unspeak" the linguistic "absolutism" Leontes is determined to uphold.

Resistance arises as well from linguistic practices grounded in class and occupation. Some critics fasten upon elements of Paulina's performance that identify her as a stereotypical shrew character, but her characterization draws as well upon the vocabulary and skills that a more nearly contemporary audience would have associated with the therapeutic or the healing arts. Her dealings with Leontes replicate the interventions prescribed for the treatment of delusion in the medical literature of the period. When Leontes calls her "a mankind witch," he targets behavior he deems cruel, unnatural, virago-like, a crossing of gender lines (II.iii.67).¹⁰ His annoyance springs as well from Paulina's defiant, uncompromising insistence on an occupational or institutional standing outside the sphere of his control. Her declaration that she will act as his "physician" assumes sufficient disciplinary and rhetorical force to enable her to stand up to, even to defy, the king's authority (II.iii.54).

The linguistic practices of Autolycus and Perdita's foster brother, while less directly confrontational, are, in the main, no less subversive to that authority. Autolycus' shape-shifting, multi-tongued, entrepreneurial spirit mocks a reliance on a fixed correspondence between words and things. But it is Perdita's foster brother who finally and quite unexpectedly stumbles into a speech that levels classes and generations and seems to dispel forever the notion that the discourse of power can silence opposing voices or fortify itself against a conspiring relativity of things.

* * *

In Act I, scene ii, Leontes, having failed to persuade Polixenes to extend his visit, asks Hermione to intercede. She responds by urging Leontes to assure their visitor that all is well at home: "say this to him, / He's beat from his best ward" (I.ii.32-33). It matters, perhaps, that her first speech should end with the pun on *ward/word*. "Ward" is used in fencing to signify a defensive or protective position. In that sense, Hermione is advising Leontes to draw Polixenes from his announced position, out

of his ward. The move would also win him from the "word," persuade him, that is, to go back on his word, to re-word or revise. It may point as well to Polixenes' wardship of his son to whom Hermione refers in the next lines. She then speaks directly to Polixenes, grounding her appeal in an authority that is merely personal and indifferent to the rigidities of positions previously defined and vows exchanged: "You put me off with limber vows; but I, / Though you would seek t'unsphere the stars with oaths, / Should yet say, 'Sir, no going'" (I.ii.47-49). Her good-natured, bantering tone creates a sense of intimacy and familiar, easy confidence: "Verily, / You shall not go; a lady's Verily's / As potent as a lord's" (I.ii.50-51). Her language displays extraordinary agility, a defiant, teasing playfulness that blurs or reverses established or prescriptive relationships. In the circle of openness and freedom which her performance describes, oaths uttered in earnest can be recovered or forgiven, obligations momentarily set aside, images of youth renewed, and even rivalries turned to harmonious, hospitable exchange. Hermione practices a kind of illocutionary legerdemain, the effect of which is to win Polixenes and enrage Leontes.

Hermione's "a lady's Verily's / As potent as a lord's" is a clever, gently chiding, multi-layered remark. On the one hand, it mocks Polixenes' earlier use of "verily," drawing attention to the word as precisely that, a word, a conventional marker used to dress up or intensify an utterance. In answer to Hermione's request that he extend his visit, Polixenes has just said: "I may not, verily" (I.ii.45).¹¹ We recall that Archidamus had used the word to underline his claim to unmediated speech.¹² Hermione catches up the word to emphasize its rhetorical function, thus dispelling whatever persuasive advantage Polixenes might hope to gain. A lady, she reminds him, can speak the word as well as a lord, with equal potency or justification, the word understood to be the common property of a linguistic community. Her claim seems plausible enough; in the grammar of discourse one person's "verily" works as well as another's. There is the implication that the word itself is no guarantor of the truth, no proof that the predicate to which it belongs does in fact correspond to conditions or relationships existing on the non-linguistic side of things. But that Hermione is saying something more as well becomes increasingly clear as the exchange

continues. Her "verily" may be taken to designate metonymically the substance or content of a particular truth claim and, if we take that to be the case, then Hermione suggests that there are competing or rival truths which must be understood in terms of sexual or social difference. When Polixenes vows that he will take one course of action, Hermione holds out the possibility that she can persuade him to another, that her truth is as likely to prevail as his. In a male-dominated society such as the one the play represents, it is, of course, a singularly daring assertion and all the more so when her opponent in the debate is a monarch at the locus of power. In any event, Polixenes is persuaded to renege on his vow and Hermione shows herself to be as good as her word; in this instance, a lady's verily does prove as potent as a lord's. She wins the first round or, at least, there is reason to think so until Leontes intervenes. The balance of power suddenly shifts. Hermione's acknowledgment of rival truths and the confident, easy way in which she has imposed her will upon another infuriates Leontes. He proceeds to construct and then enforce his own reductive, unambiguous version of events.

Events dispute Hermione's belief in the potency of her truth and do so disastrously when she is declared an "adulteress" and sentenced to prison, when Polixenes is named an accomplice and his life put at risk. Her situation brings home the conditionalities and eventualities by which she is constrained, the measure of her captivity and subjection. The discursive freedom to which she had earlier appealed, her wit and spontaneity, her willingness to entertain rival hypotheses, are in sharp contrast to the exactitude and finality which Leontes labors to impose, what, for his part, becomes an obsessive, anxious effort to preserve the integrity of language and thereby to strengthen his hold on an elusive, threatening reality, to stabilize and control the shifting social and political relationships by which he imagines himself threatened.¹³

The particular trait or humor of Leontes' character is a jealousy so sweeping and obsessive that it blurs perception and poisons understanding. A good deal of critical discussion has centered on this aspect of character, whether it is adequately motivated or simply one among the numerous givens the play asks us to accept, a necessary condition of plot or conventional feature of character portrayal. It has not been

sufficiently stressed that Leontes' jealous rage is provoked at least in part by verbal play, by Hermione's facility with language and the autonomy it implies. Leontes reacts to an assault upon the stability of language as if it were an assault on social and political identities and institutions as well. Confronted with an alternative, even a rebellious, discourse, he recognizes the peril and marshals his forces. Imagery stresses the stormy climate of a world suddenly changed, made fluid, murky, dissolving in ceaseless, shifting motion: "I am angling now," "My wife is slippery," "I have drunk, and seen the spider." The bawdy puns, the extravagant, reckless metaphors give forceful, alarming expression to a pathogeny that threatens to possess both consciousness and kingdom, private and public worlds. Leontes is determined to dispel by whatever power he commands the shadows that have so suddenly engulfed him. When Camillo warns against the dangers of "diseased opinion," Leontes lashes out in anger and contempt: "Make that thy question, and go rot!" (I.ii.324). To give over to doubt or interrogation, not to act decisively, is to become a "hovering temporizer that / Canst with thine eyes at once see good and evil, / Inclining to them both" (I.ii.302-04). To comply with the rules that normally season and constrain both thought and language, that is, to acknowledge the possibility that words cheat, that things are both lost and found in re-presentation, is to surrender to the forces of instability and change, to "Remain a pinch'd thing; yea, a very trick / For them to play at will" (II.i.51-52).

Charles Frey suggests that Leontes is obsessed by "an almost metaphysical mistrust of reality."¹⁴ It should perhaps be added that the aspect of reality which inspires his mistrust is the indeterminacy of things, their shifting shapes and meanings which he is resolved to fix and stabilize: "Nor night, nor day, no rest: it is but weakness / To bear the matter thus: mere weakness" (II.iii.1-2). Unwilling to tolerate verbal or perceptual ambiguities, he is determined to impose a meaning on events which is unequivocal, decisive, and in which deception can find no foothold. To that end, he is prepared to invoke an absolute authority that muzzles opposition and plumes itself in claims of "natural goodness" (II.i.164).¹⁵ In a world of words, he is the chief artificer and enforcer, accountable to nothing beyond himself and the dictates of his now rancorous passion.

The movement of the play and its emerging web of ironies scale and measure Leontes' world of privileged knowledge and authority; they show it to be stubbornly wrong-headed, thoughtsick, and ill-conceived—indeed, it can be said that he is “mock'd with art.” But for those within reach of his still sovereign power, it remains a grimly menacing, kindening, wasting world as well.

If

The cause were not in being,—part o' th' cause,
 She th' adultress: for the harlot king
 Is quite beyond mine arm, out of the blank
 And level of my brain: plot-proof: but she
 I can hook to me: say that she were gone,
 Given to the fire, a moiety of my rest
 Might come to me again. (II.iii.2-9)

On the offensive, Leontes turns to a language of combat, ships grappling in battle, engines of war and violence. Human relationships are expressed through images of retribution, enforced punishment, and death, Leontes struggling to maintain his embattled position against imagined hostilities. He creates a world of jealousies which members of his court must take for truth or be denied both place and personhood:

Our prerogative

Calls not your counsels, but our natural goodness
 Imparts this; which if you, or stupefied,
 Or seeming so, in skill, cannot or will not
 Relish a truth, like us, inform yourselves
 We need no more of your advice: the matter,
 The loss, the gain, the ord'ring on 't, is all
 Properly ours. (II.i.163-70)

His suspicions, he argues, must be grounded in actuality—to mistrust the signs as he perceives them is to find the world unknowable. No longer a question of partial error, of misperceiving or misnaming, it is for Leontes a matter of the existence of fixed relationships and the meanings which flow from them, the denial of which would yield up the world to chaos and confusion. If, Leontes argues, his judgment

should prove wrong, if he should be misled about the world and all that's in it, then the world counts for nothing.

. . . is this nothing?

Why then the world, and all that's in't, is nothing,
 The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
 My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
 If this be nothing. (I.ii.292-96)

Such a destructive conclusion is, in a sense, inconceivable, literally unthinkable, and counter-hypothetical beyond the realm of possibility. Its invocation confirms its necessary opposite, an intelligible world where reason and the authority of the sovereign serve as reliable guides, both working together to uphold the rules and standards by which truth is pursued and judgments made. On precisely this point, James I had declared that where there is no king, nothing is unlawful, that *rex est lex*: "No King being, nothing is unlawfull to none."¹⁶ Later in the century Thomas Hobbes warned against the clouded judgments of ordinary men who embrace not justice but

a false and empty shadow instead of it. . . . Since therefore such opinions are clouds . . . , the question whether any future action will prove just or unjust, good or ill, is to be demanded of none but those to whome the supreme hath committed the interpretation of his laws.¹⁷

Leontes does not falter in the performance of his judicial office. He is determined to uphold the integrity of political and legal discourse. To that end, he would nail down meanings, make them determinate, unequivocal. What is unruly, shifting, or duplicitous in language must be suppressed in favor of speech that is decisive, direct, and unambiguous. His over-riding concern is to affirm both the order of language and the language of order. His absolutist vocabulary bends the evidence to its own validation and thereby checks a threatening indeterminacy or namelessness. He rules by the word and the word must be law. Like the Stuart monarch, he clings to the illusion that language might effect a change in reality.

In a series of pronouncements, Leontes stipulates precisely what is at issue: order against chaos, fixity and stability against disruption and decay. In Act II, for example, he declines to use a word that names Hermione's position at court for the reason that to do so would be to corrupt the word, and thereby put at risk the authority of language, "the mannerly distinguishment" that keeps a nameless barbarism in check:

O thou thing—
Which I'll not call a creature of thy place,
Lest barbarism, making me the precedent,
Should a like language use to all degrees,
And mannerly distinguishment leave out
Betwixt the prince and beggar. I have said
She's an adultriss. . . . (II.i.82-88)

The king's determined effort to match language to event fails to do justice to either. Interpretive conclusions reached by other characters contradict those voiced by the king. His attempt to establish the nature of his son's illness is a case in point. His erroneous diagnosis, his misreading of the signs, is no sooner concluded than Paulina arrives to confront the king and his affliction: "I / Do come with words as medicinal as true / . . . to purge him of that humour / That presses him from sleep" (II.iii.36-39). Some—including Leontes who calls Paulina "a mankind witch . . . a most intelligencing bawd"—have viewed her ministrations as betraying a shrewishness of character, but it should not be overlooked that the chiding she delivers, the various therapies she undertakes, are sanctioned in the medical literature of the period.¹⁸ Her skillful diagnosis and treatment contrast with the king's incompetence in the earlier endeavor and thus constitute still another instance where the king's claim to a superior knowledge is countermined by the performance of a character vested in an opposing, in this case, an institutional discourse and authority.

But Leontes is ill-prepared to countenance such opposition. He takes the view that if he should be deceived in his reading of signs, then it is reason that fails and there is no foundation left for the meanings which language articulates, for progress from the sensible world to an intelligible one:

No: if I mistake
 In those foundations which I build upon,
 The centre is not big enough to bear
 A school-boy's top. (II.i.100-03)

Increasingly the vocabulary narrows, becomes more reductive and insistent. Hermione is brought to trial and Leontes casts himself as prosecutor and judge. Hermione confesses her bewilderment before the fiction that power imposes,¹⁹ a verbal ordering of events that remains entirely foreign to her.

You speak a language that I understand not:
 My life stands in the level of your dreams,
 Which I'll lay down. (III.ii.80-82)

She acknowledges the king's authority even as she protests the illusion that holds her hostage. Earlier she had succeeded in reversing Polixenes' decision to leave Sicilia. Now she can find no room in which to maneuver. The name conferred does, in effect, determine and arrest. She is sentenced to the sentence in an unanswerable display of both linguistic and judicial tyranny. Her only recourse is to appeal the judgment of the court: "Apollo be my judge" (III.ii.116).

The arrogance of power is no less on display in the scene in which Leontes is told of the Oracle's pronouncement that Hermione is innocent and "the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found" (III.ii.134-36). It is, of course, ironic that, having tried to stamp out ambiguity and the play of multiple meanings, he should now be hit with speech that is riddling and paradoxical. The mode of discourse is that which James had likened, appropriately enough, to "the old Oracles of the Pagan Gods" and warned against as "rent asunder in contrary senses."²⁰ Leontes is not persuaded; the prophecy that "the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found," with the enigma of its conditional element and even, perhaps, the play of meanings associated with the word "heir," is beyond his capacity to decipher.²¹ He rejects the speech as "mere falsehood" and orders the trial to proceed.

Persons and conditions are subject to the name Leontes gives them, but most of all it is the namer's name and what it signifies that the trial brings into question. As Edmund Morgan puts it with awesome understatement:

the rules of the game . . . were simple: the first was that God's lieutenant could do no wrong; the second was that everyone else (including everyone who sat in Parliament), was a mere subject. Acknowledged subjection to a faultless authority would seem to leave little room for political maneuvering. But divinity, when assumed by mortals (or imposed upon them) can prove more constricting than subjection.²²

Leontes' "faultless authority" is, of course, freighted with constrictions. It presupposes a belief in the constitutive nature of language, the power of language to call the world to order. The pronouncement of the Oracle and the shattering finality of Mamillius' death rebuke that authority and lay bare its vulnerabilities. Leontes feared he would become a pinched thing, a very trick for others to play at will. Events fulfill his worst fears. He must endure the dissolution of the social and political identity in terms of which he had earlier understood and defended his performance. Roused at last from the dream of majesty, he confronts the suddenly indissociable consequences of an action against which Hermione had earlier protested.

. . . if I shall be condemn'd
Upon surmises, all proofs sleeping else
But what your jealousies awake, I tell you
'Tis rigour and not law. (III.ii.111-14)²³

Accordingly, Leontes pronounces sentence against himself. In the theater of kingship, the player-king is found guilty and sentenced to a "shame perpetual."²⁴

Thus far we have followed Leontes' attempts to order what lies beyond the reach of his control. He has sought to impose meaning, to centralize and unify, to bring the world to order. And now the failed strategies and the havoc he has wrought are distanced by another mood and climate. The hinge which permits this turning is provided by the figure of Time whose speech to the audience in Act IV claims authority over

however much of time is left in and beyond the realm of fiction. It is, of course, the dramatist's apology for leaping forward some sixteen years. In that aspect, it reminds us of our subjection to the power of the dramatist, who, godlike, sets the pace and intervals of time's progress through the play and might yet manage to draw the rabbit of comedy from his tangled web of dark suspicion, anxiety, and loss. We are reminded of where we are just as we had been moments before by the bear's pursuit of Antigonus. The presence of the bear must give us pause. Similarly, Time acting as chorus or presenter and the rhymed couplets in which his message is encased declare themselves as theatrical convention. We locate ourselves in the theater, in a world of "infinite doings" and dissemblings, of play and possibility, and in the presence of what we are told is an awesome power that can "o'erthrow law, and . . . plant and o'erwhelm custom" (IV.i.8-9).

A crucial, if unwitting, agent of this sea change is Autolycus. It is perhaps significant that Simon Forman, recounting a performance of the play in the spring of 1611, should have singled him out for attention. We leave the den of the lion only to find ourselves in the lair of the wolf. Autolycus maintains his authority by stealth, giving and taking fortunes, picking pockets, and trading in tall tales. As pick pocket and peddler, he makes the shepherds prove sheep for his shearing. He wears many disguises and speaks in various tongues. For him, language is duplicitous and he thrives on duplicity, able to impose meanings without being bound by them. Like Leontes, he rules by the word but in an altogether different register. He usurps language and murders the king's English. He is never sentenced to the sentence, never at a loss for words, because for him as for another corrupter of words "A sentence is but a chev'ril glove to a good wit—how quickly the wrong side may be turned outward!" (*Twelfth Night* III.i.11-13). Leontes would strangle ambiguity and the play of multiple meanings; Autolycus would be strangled but for the loopholes they afford. In the exercise of his linguistic legerdemain, he offers a lopsided, inverted, fun-house mirror image of Leontes' ill-fated effort to sustain his mastery through quite another mode of discourse, a reflection which their animal designations would seem to support.

Disclosures of various kinds abound in the remaining scenes of the play—the final one occurring in Act V, when Paulina summons the court to view the sculpted image of the late queen. That Hermione should suffer this transformation into the condition of statuehood, a “dying” into art, is, of course, richly suggestive. Among other things, it represents the culmination of a movement initiated by Leontes and carried forward with the complicity of Paulina; it is paradigmatic of the strategy by which Leontes had previously used linguistic forms to address and curb the flux of things, to stay their restless motion. Now that strategy is recalled only to be rebuked again when representation gives way to an unmediated actuality, the idea suddenly de-reified, the fixed and seemingly lifeless sign incarnate in a living, speaking presence. The transformation thus accomplished suggests a release into a field of possible meanings and relationships which the discourse of domination had failed to reckon with.

My project has been to suggest that the play carries forward a searching interrogation of the linguistic and ideological structures according to which characters endeavor to “know” the world, to fix and stabilize the rush of events within a political society. One consequence of that interrogation is the exposure of the perceptual or moral blind-side of some historically sited institutional formations and, especially, an absolutism that is both linguistic and political. The line of argument holds that language must ground itself in the *long durée* of communal practice where words work by custom and usage, where meanings remain associative, freighted with ambiguities, contingent, and provisional. Such undercutting of linguistic “absolutism” and especially the assumption of a fixed and certain relationship between words and things would seem to dispute Stephen Greenblatt’s thesis that subversive doubts are silenced in “the English form of absolutist theatricality” and the triumphant celebration of monarchical power.²⁵ The instruction Leontes receives is by no means celebratory of absolute power, but, instead, limits that power by restricting the language by which it is projected to less conceptualized, more pragmatic, mundane functions.

A less rigid and enforcing discourse prevails in the concluding scenes: the signs of power are erased by powerful signs and subjects are endowed with personhood: “there was speech in their dumbness,

language in their very gesture" (V.ii.12-13). This alternative, even consensual, discourse allows for what Richard Rorty calls "the contingency of language."²⁶ Words and gestures impart a certain openness and suggestivity; they serve to express interests earlier neglected or foreclosed. The effect is to remind us of the communicative possibilities of language without implying that its constructions, narrative or conceptual, are valid in some timeless or universal fashion. It points to something quite different, to the communicative efficacy of linguistic gesture and to the performative possibilities of language. A postmodernist argument, in a sense, but one that stays on this side of incomprehensibility.

In a final gesture, Leontes holds out his hand to Paulina asking that she

Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely
Each one demand, and answer to his part
Perform'd in this wide gap of time, since first
We were dissever'd. (V.iii.152-55)

Voices once raised in anger or dissent are muted or refined, the first person "we," earlier the sign of royal privilege and singular authority, is transformed into the sign of a collectivity, present and familial. There is a joining of hands and motion toward a place where each is free to question and to answer, where, significantly, language is released from absolutist or solipsistic deployment, restored to its discursive function, where monologue gives way to dialogue, where kingship and prerogative fade like old photographs in the stronger light of kinship renewed, and where, beyond the artifice of pomp and majesty, beyond the rigidities of traditional power relationships, a portion of the play's healing power finds breathing room and time enough for its fulfillment. It is Perdita's foster brother who assures us that these relational changes have indeed occurred and he does so in a riddling speech that shows him wise enough to play the Clown, the only title the play text gives him. His mode of discourse seems an especially telling one if the task at hand is to give linguistic representation to what has transpired in the course of the play's "doings."

... the king's son took me by the hand, and called me brother; and then the two kings called my father brother; and then the prince, my brother, and the princess, my sister, called my father father; and so we wept; and there was the first gentleman-like tears that ever we shed. (V.ii.140-45)

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NOTES

¹"The Poetics of Incomprehensibility," *SQ* 42 (1991): 431-37.—I would like to thank Charles Beckwith, Paul Zall, and the editors of *Connotations* for their helpful comments and support at various stages in the preparation of this essay.

²*Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 17.

³*The Post-Modern Condition*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1984) 66.

⁴*Choice* 29 (1992): 744.

⁵Charles Frey's caution against reducing the formal complexity of *The Winter's Tale*, the teeming and sometimes discordant particularities of character, incident, and tone, to some totalizing pattern of explanation or argument, has not dissuaded critics from accentuating the play's embeddedness in a larger contemporaneity, its ideological and political content (*Shakespeare's Vast Romance: A Study of The Winter's Tale* [Columbia: U of Missouri P, 1980]). Stuart Kurland, for example, links Leontes' court to the court of James I, arguing that Shakespeare's agenda includes instructing the monarch on the role of good counsel in the exercise of monarchical authority ("We need no more of your advice": Political Realism in *The Winter's Tale*," *SEL* 31 [1991]: 365-79). Michael Bristol believes that the play has more to do with Jacobean economic theories and controversies than with court politics ("In Search of the Bear: Spatiotemporal Form and the Heterogeneity of Economies in *The Winter's Tale*," *SQ* 42 [1991]: 145-67). Two recent essays on *The Winter's Tale* offer a philosophically informed and sensitive treatment of how words work in the production of meanings and values. Maurice Hunt draws on speech act theory to identify the consensual contexts upon which communication depends and shows what can happen when those contexts are violated or ignored. He is concerned to show how communication goes wrong and how Shakespeare's "linguistic dramaturgy" manages to transcend ordinary modes of communication (*Shakespeare's Romance of the Word* [Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1990] 103-04). William Morse argues that, in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare sets out to subvert "a dominant absolutist ideology centered in the court" ("Metacriticism and Materiality: The Case of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*," *ELH* 58 [1991]: 283). He contends that the play "strikingly dramatizes the poverty and shrunkenness of the emergent discourse of modernism," a discourse with which the institution of monarchy is allied and by means of which it seeks to rule (298).

⁶Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980) 93.

⁷James I expressed similar concern over the stability of legal and civil discourse. In his inaugural speech to Parliament in March of 1604 (o. s. 1603), he assured his subjects he was prepared to assume responsibility for his own language, making of it an instrument of accurate, clear representation and banishing such diseases as duplicity and ambiguity (*The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles Howard McIlwain [New York: Russell and Russell, 1965] 280):

. . . it becommeth a King, in my opinion, to use no other Eloquence then plainnesse and sinceritie. By plainnesse I meane, that his Speeches should be so cleare and voyd of all ambiguitie, that they may not be throwne, nor rent asunder in contrary sences like the old Oracles of the Pagan Gods. And by sinceritie, I understand that uprightnesse and honestie which ought to be in a Kings whole Speeches and actions: That as farre as a King is in Honour erected above any of his Subjects, so farre should he strive in sincerities to be above them all, and that his tongue should be ever the trew Messenger of his heart: and this sort of Eloquence may you ever assuredly looke for at my hands.

⁸*The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (New York: Noonday, 1958) 268-69.

⁹*James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1983) 238. Goldberg provides an illuminating, searching account of links between Jacobean theater and the political culture, emphasizing representational strategies employed by royal actors on the stage of history as well the "refigurations" through which they are presented or otherwise made to make their presence felt in the theater of the period. Of immediate concern to this paper is the claim Goldberg makes in the context of his judicious, seasoned analysis of *Measure for Measure* that "by representing representation, Shakespeare contributes to the discourse of his society and to its most pressing questions about prerogative, power, and authority" (239).

¹⁰*The Winter's Tale*, ed. J. J. P. Pafford, Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1953). Citations from Shakespeare's works follow the Arden Edition.

¹¹Of the fourteen occurrences of "verily" cited in the Shakespeare Concordance, seven come from *The Winter's Tale*. Five of the seven occur in the scene discussed above.

¹²It is noteworthy that in Archidamus' brief appearance in the first scene of the play he should attempt to answer the language question even as he raises it in his innocent assertion of linguistic transparency, the capacity of language to provide an exact translation of non-linguistic phenomena. He boasts of his ability to speak candidly and without mediation or embellishment: "in the freedom of my knowledge" (I.i.11). He rejects elaborate compliment in favor of plainness and honesty: "I speak as my understanding instructs me, and as mine honesty puts it to utterance" (I.i.19-20). This endorsement of plain speech and truth-telling and the assumption on which it rests that language can get things straight, can fulfill its task as a medium of "honest" representation, are made to seem the more remarkable when, in short order, the play recalls other, less benign uses of language, including those by which tyrannical power is exercised and justice denied. No sooner has Archidamus voiced his resolve to speak truth and made a glancing reference to the unspeakable comfort afforded by Sicilia's young prince Mamillius than he leaves

the stage never to be heard from again. A proponent of linguistic clarity is ushered off stage even with the entry of Leontes, prefiguring, perhaps, other losses including the death of Mamillius, the "gallant child" who, as Archidamus says, "physics the subject." See Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Romance* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972) 223, for a discussion of another aspect of the exchange between Camillo and Archidamus and for an instance of what Felperin terms "oracular language," a distinctive feature of which is its ability to generate meanings of which the speaker may be unaware but which are nonetheless reflective of "the romantic nature of the play" and impart a sense that, miraculously, all may be well in the end. Such deployment contrasts sharply with the harsh, foreboding quality of Leontes' speeches.

¹³Howard Felperin, "'Tongue-tied our queen?' The Deconstruction of Presence in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985) 10, finds that the ambiguities and innuendoes of Hermione's language invite not only Leontes' suspicions but the critic's as well. He believes her bantering, witty dialogue is sufficient cause to doubt her integrity. My approach turns not so much on how we might construe Hermione's relationship with Polixenes, but rather on the distinctiveness of her language in relation to other rhetorics or types of discourse, the combined presence of which thematizes linguistic practice in relation to power and raises issues including those of patriarchy and order and, by contrast, political subversion and dissent.

¹⁴Frey 78.

¹⁵James I similarly boasted that, though it was within his power to govern as he saw fit, he was inclined by his own good nature to take counsel where it pleased him to do so, "not bound thereto but of his own good will and for good example" (*The Political Works* 310; for a discussion of James's speech to Commons in the spring of 1610, from which the passage comes, see David Laird, "'A curious way of torturing': Language and Ideological Transformation in *A King and No King*," *Themes in Drama*, vol. 12 [Cambridge: CUP, 1990] 113-14). In another speech to Commons, James warned its members not to abuse his good nature by presuming to "meddle with the maine points of Gouernment; that is my craft . . . ; to meddle with that, were to lesson me" and, he continued, "I must not be taught my Office" (315). Fortunately, he said, he was a good king, of which God be thanked, he had given ample proof (310).

¹⁶*The Political Works* 66. For an insightful review of the current controversy surrounding the question of Stuart absolutism and the ancient constitution, see J. P. Sommerville, "James I and the Divine Right of Kings: English Politics and Continental Theory," *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge: CUP, 1991) 56-58.

¹⁷Preface to Hobbes's translation of his *De Cive*, quoted from *Man and Citizen*, ed. Bernard Gert (New York: Doubleday, 1972) 98.

¹⁸See, for example, Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990) 2.2.6.2, pp. 110-11, where readers are advised that if "fair promises, good words, gentle persuasions" are of no avail, then it becomes necessary to handle the patient "more roughly, to threaten and to chide." Thomas Willis believed that "the madman must be so handled both by the physician, and also by the servants that are prudent, that he may be in some manner kept in, either by warnings, chiding, or punishments inflicted on him, to his duty, or his behavior, or manners" (*De anima brutorum*, quoted in Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and*

Healing in Seventeenth-Century England [Cambridge: CUP, 1981] 196). Paulina may be alluding to her role as one proficient in the healing arts when she tells Leontes, irritated by the "noise" occasioned by her visit, that she brings "No noise, my lord; but needful conference / About some gossips for your highness" (II.iii.40-41). A note in the Arden edition informs us that "gossips" are sponsors at a baptism, godparents. Since Paulina carries in her arms a new-born child, it seems likely that her remark points to the christening she hopes Leontes will allow. In a more general sense, the word is used to designate individuals able to promote spiritual and physical well-being and, thus, the passage may include a glancing reference to the service Paulina herself is prepared to offer.

¹⁹Stephen Greenblatt remarks that "one of the highest achievements of power is to impose fictions upon the world." *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1980) 141.

²⁰*The Political Works* 280.

²¹Felperin, "'Tongue-tied our queen?'" (8), takes the contrary view, arguing that the Oracle is relatively unambiguous and must be clear even to Leontes. David M. Bergeron, *Shakespeare's Romances and the Royal Family* (Lawrence: UP of Kansas, 1985), on the other hand, shares this author's view that "Leontes misreads, misinterprets the message. The Apollonian oracle, both clear and cryptic (italics mine), retrospective and prophetic, judges the past—finding Hermione, Camillo, and Polixenes all blameless and Leontes guilty—and opens a riddlike future: '... the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found'" (162-63).

²²*Inventing the People* (New York: Norton, 1988) 21.

²³That Hermione sets rigour against law in binary opposition must be counted as a departure from normal usage. The more frequently expressed relationship was a complementary one as in the commonplace expression "rigour of the law." The variation is especially noteworthy because it occurs in one of the few passages that comes almost word for word from Shakespeare's source, Greene's *Pandosto, or the Triumph of Time*. There it is the omniscient narrator who tells the reader that if Hermione "were condemned without any further proof it was rigour and not law."

²⁴Christopher Hill recalls that Raleigh had concluded his *History of the World* with an acknowledgment of Death's power to humble the proud and punish the insolent: "O eloquent, just and mighty Death! whom none could advise, thou hast persuaded; what none hath dared, thou hast done; and whom all the world hath flattered, thou only cast out out of the world and despised" (*The History of the World* [1810], vol. 6, 370, quoted by Christopher Hill, *Intellectual Origins of the English Revolution* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1965] 224). Hill adds the question: "Did no one apply those words to the first two Stuarts, whom none could advise and whom all the world flattered? What none had dared, the men of 1649 did; and called in Death the Leveller to cast kingship out of the world." In the scene we are considering, Death the Leveller strikes down the presumption of a linguistic and political absolutism, leaving the kingdom bereft of an heir and transforming the king into a grieving parent, subject to the tyranny of loss, to a life of penance and remorse.

²⁵"Invisible bullets," *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1988) 65.

²⁶*Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989) 25.