

Power and Nothing: What Causes Mistaken Judgement in *The Winter's Tale*?

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Do not muse at me, my most worthy friends,
I have a strange infirmity, which is nothing
To those that know me. (*Macbeth* 3.4. 84–85)

What should be examined are beings only, and besides
that—nothing; beings alone, and further—nothing;
solely beings, and beyond that—nothing.
What about this nothing? (Heidegger, *What is Metaphysics?*)

The credibility of Leontes' jealousy in *The Winter's Tale* has proved a continuing problem. Either its suddenness renders it hardly credible;¹ or Leontes must appear jealous from the outset in order to explain an otherwise inexplicable outburst;² or the jealousy starts somewhere between 1.2. line 1 and line 108;³ or yet again, the suddenness of the jealousy is appropriate to the drama,⁴ even if Shakespeare appears to rely upon the more gradual development of the jealousy recounted in Greene's *Pandosto*.⁵ By contrast, at the height of deconstruction, critics found no visible reason to think of Hermione as incapable of an occasional fling,⁶ which in turn brought about a wave of

1. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Shakespeare's Workmanship* (London, 1918) 290.

2. John Dover Wilson, *New Cambridge Shakespeare. The Winter's Tale* (Cambridge, 1931) 131.

3. For Coleridge, line 87 ("At my request he would not") reveals the commencement of the jealousy (*Notes and Lectures upon Shakespeare*, ed. Mrs. H.N. Coleridge, 2 vols. (London, 1849) I. 254). J.E. Hankins thinks it begins when Hermione kisses Polixenes—perhaps at 1.2.108. *Shakespeare's Derived Imagery* (Lawrence, KS, 1953) 77, 156.

4. See Dennis Bartholomeucz, *The Winter's Tale in Performance in England and America 1611–1976* (Cambridge, 1982) 221–31.

5. Roger J. Trienens, "The Inception of Leontes' Jealousy in *The Winter's Tale*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 4 (1953): 321–26.

6. Howard Felperin, "Tongue-tied Our Queen?: The Deconstruction of Presence in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and G. Hartman (New York, 1985) 3–18.

“strong empathy developed for Hermione”⁷ as a dutiful wife. All in all, as Kenneth Bennett succinctly states: “*The Winter’s Tale* presents us with extremes of critical views.”⁸

There is, however, a further reason for this range of reactions. Not only has the character of Leontes’ jealousy proved problematic, but the crucial speech in which he succumbs to that jealousy has been interpreted in various ways, none of them entirely satisfactory, making the soliloquy known as “notoriously difficult” in the Shakespearean corpus.⁹ The passage in question is 1.2.137–46:

Most dear’st, my collop! Can thy dam?—may’t be?—
Affection! thy intention stabs the centre:
Thou dost make possible things not so held,
Communicat’st with dreams;—how can this be?—
With what’s unreal thou coactive art,
And fellow’st nothing: then ’tis very credent
Thou may’st co-join with something; and thou dost,
(And that beyond commission) and I find it,
(And that to the infection of my brains
And hard’ning of my brows).¹⁰

“Here the obscurity of the language is deliberate, and in dramatic terms also highly effective,” observes R.P. Dramer of this speech,¹¹ but perhaps the obscurity of the language foregrounds a more tantalizing mystery which draws us again to the Shakespearian tragedies, and possibly to tragedy as a genre, and this concerns the cause or causes of evil action performed by apparently worthy human beings. Even according to Aristotle’s famous definition, the tragic protagonist is good rather than bad, being otherwise a politically powerful figure, larger than life, who never performs evil by intention,¹² and, thus, even the traditional rendition of the tragic genre foregrounds the absence of an immediate malicious cause to explain an error in judgement and its subsequent result. “Being wrought / perplexed in the extreme ... / ... threw a pearl away / Richer than all his tribe” (5.2.345–48), Othello ex-

7. Kenneth C. Bennett, “Reconstructing *The Winter’s Tale*,” *Shakespeare Survey* 46 (1994): 89.

8. Bennett, “Reconstructing” 88.

9. See Felperin: “The passage is itself a notoriously difficult one, termed by one critic the ‘obscurest’ in Shakespeare ...” (“Tongue-tied Qur Queen” 11).

10. Textual citations throughout are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston, 1974).

11. R.P. Dramer, *The Winters’ Tale: Text and Performance* (London, 1985) 19.

12. Cf. Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. & ed. S.H. Butcher (London, 1917) vi–xiii.

plains in anguish, almost thematizing the baselessness of *hamartia* or mistaken judgement.

In the wake of deconstruction, criticism has been reluctant to explain *The Winter's Tale* in terms of the Shakespearean corpus as a whole. In one of the most recent attempts to construct rather than deconstruct the play, Bennett attempts to justify the critical desire to foreground the context by arguing that there is a temperamental need in humans to construct or to move from a single instance to a general context: "What I can argue seriously is that the urge towards unifying the texts we know and linking them with other parts of the world is overwhelmingly strong—stronger than any urge to deconstruction, however inevitable this may be."¹³ But, perhaps, the reduction of the critical enterprise to temperamental predisposition is not necessary. It is equally or more plausible to suppose that the apprehension of unity may well reflect the power of a lost convention operative in the text, a convention implicitly understood by us, but no longer constituting an explicit part of our philosophical, psychological, or philological training.

In other words, what if Leontes' speech, somewhat obscure to us, reflects a genuine philosophical framework of Renaissance thought, recently ignored, but one which can provide an illuminating and sophisticated context for understanding the nature of the tragic flaw in Renaissance drama? This is the intent of our present collaborative effort. We shall argue that the focus of the lost framework is exemplified precisely in the baseless character of Leontes' jealousy, which may appear initially as the playwright's weakness, but is instead a persistent feature in many of the tragedies, and a feature dramatized in *The Winter's Tale* with the brevity and sureness of a well-acquainted theme. Thus, we seek to show that this partially a-causal view of evil is not idiosyncratic or peculiar to Shakespeare. Rather, it shares a common heritage with the frequently contradictory but fertile world of Renaissance Christian Neoplatonism and Neo-Aristotelianism, for which the nothingness of privation invariably remains the obverse side of a limitless pride, best exemplified by a deployment of unlimited social or political power which privation both assists and yet frustrates.

The tendency of critics to see the soliloquy as a strange and difficult speech, separate from Shakespeare's other works, has resulted in a type of investigation in which each word is analyzed on its own terms or examined in the light of general, parallel usages from Renaissance philosophical thought. The isolation of this speech, so to speak, has prevented it from being seen as a creative dramatization of a fertile and persistent conception of evil. Indeed, a brief overview of some noteworthy interpretations of Leontes' speech

13. Bennett, "Reconstructing" 87.

in the context of Renaissance thought will indicate how difficult it has become to reach general agreement among critics on what the speech in question actually means.

The meaning of the word 'affection,' to take one example, has been the subject of much debate. 'Affection' has been understood by some to mean 'lustful passions.' So J.H.P. Pafford takes the passage to describe how lust, in association with sexual imagination, leads to infidelity.¹⁴ But against this reading is the presence of the young Mamillius. It has been argued that the presence of Leontes' innocent boy is more likely, from a dramatic point of view, to cast doubt on the validity of his suspicions than to provoke an incongruous meditation on lust.¹⁵ Consequently, many treatments have concentrated on the psychological implications of 'affection.' Hallett Smith maintains that affection does not mean love or lust but rather "a sudden mental seizure." Affection is, thus, the equivalent of the Latin *affectio* signifying a mutation or trouble of mind.¹⁶ J.E. Hankins, developing this particular connotation, has placed the speech within the technical psychological vocabulary of Aquinas, Albert the Great, Ficino, and others. More recent criticism, however, has found little of interest in the historical connotations of the word in question.¹⁷

'Intention' has proved to be a similarly troublesome word, even if one finds a corollary to the term in the philosophical vocabulary of the time. For Hankins, 'intention' signifies a secondary image formed by the imagination from a primary image presented to the external senses by the common sense.¹⁸ And he provides similar contexts for other terms, such as 'centre,' 'communicat'st,' 'co-active' and so on.¹⁹ More recent work has tended to confirm this psychological interpretation of the construction of the imagi-

14. J.H.P. Pafford, *The Arden Shakespeare. The Winter's Tale* (London, 1963) 165–67.

15. Laurence Wright, "When Does The Tragi-comic Disruption Start? *The Winter's Tale* and Leontes' 'affection,'" *English Studies* 3 (1989): 225–32.

16. Hallett Smith, "Leontes' Affectio," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14 (1963): 163–66.

17. See Wilbur Sanders' carefree remarks: "I don't know whether Leontes' jealousy still seems 'notoriously unmotivated.' I would have thought that there is rather a profusion of explanations, than a scarcity of them. And they could be very easily multiplied. I might mention the curious freaks of feeling to which husbands are sometimes subject in the latter stages of pregnancy ..." (*The Winter's Tale: Harvester New Critical Introduction to Shakespeare* [Sussex, 1987] 21–22).

18. J.E. Hankins, *Backgrounds of Shakespeare's Thought* (Hassocks, 1978) 98–99. For other senses of intention see William R. Morse, "Metacriticism and Materiality: The Case of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*," *ELH* 58 (1991): 283–304, 293.

19. We accept Hankins' general parallels for the use of these terms (mostly from Aquinas), and consequently we shall not focus our attention upon their comparative usage in Aquinas, Albert, Ficino, or Shakespeare.

native images, simply transposing it into a wider context. Lawrence Wright has adduced parallels in Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) and Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Wright's thesis is particularly noteworthy. In his view, the caesura at line 142 marks the moment of crisis brought upon by the awakened images of the fantastic: "With what's unreal: thou co-active art, / And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent . . ." "Then," he argues, only appears to be a logical connective, "but there is no logical passage from the conventional wisdom surrounding the untrustworthiness of the Affection, to the possibility that the Intention may indeed be properly grounded in reality."²⁰ This break or rupture signifies the moment when Leontes' rationality is overcome by jealousy, and it is this moment which Wright identifies as the start of the tragi-comic disruption, and distinguishes from the onset of the jealousy which he considers of minor importance. Thus, Wright concludes that the affection is "the cruel theatrical blow by means of which the playwright-gods of tragi-comedy take hold both of the Sicilian court, and the audience in the theatre."²¹ Such a view abandons altogether Wright's initial attempt to locate the cause of Leontes' jealousy in a psychological state or to situate it within Renaissance usage. The exploration of Renaissance usage, therefore, does not converge with the directions or interests of most recent criticism.

One important word in this speech, however, is either overlooked or misinterpreted by critics who locate other parallel usages of the more difficult terms, and this is the 'nothing' in "what's unreal" and "fellow'st nothing." Hankins, one of the few to make any mention of it all, states categorically that 'nothing' for Shakespeare "does not mean non-existent, but non-tangible . . . literally 'nothing,' or mental images only."²² However, Leontes' words themselves seem to envisage a major role for non-being, for according to him affection forms a compound with non-being and gives rein to nothing (140–42). This indicates an active, influential role for privation in human psychology. One critic who does accord a more active role to 'nothing' in the soliloquy is Wilbur Sanders, and he points in passing to the apparently crucial concept of matter's 'vacancy' operative in the speech, but does not even attempt to explain the background upon which he bases his observation:

There is a realm of experience—and Shakespeare knew it well—where "nothing is but what is not." It is something more than delusion. Enter it, and your "single state of man" will be shaken by a "phantasma and a hideous dream" which inverts the categories of reality . . .

20. Wright, "When Does the Tragi-Comic Disruption Start?" 231.

21. Wright, 232.

22. Hankins, *Backgrounds* 92, 99.

“Nothing”—though a pure vacancy of matter—can nevertheless, like a vacuum, suck reality into itself. It even has a supra-reality of its own. It brings a dizzying sensation of initiation, this ‘diseased opinion’. And Leontes (there’s no mistaking it) has been infecting his brains with this hallucinogen.²³

One may well ask, however, what this experience of matter and hallucinogen is that Shakespeare apparently “knew so well” and what is the broader philosophic background to the role of nothing, especially in view of its rather modern-sounding ability “to suck reality into itself”? More specifically still, why does Leontes prove to be so prone to the power of privation?

The few critics who have in any way observed the role of ‘nothing’ in the speech either minimize its force (as does Hankins) or attribute to it an active capacity reminiscent of drug-induced experience and without any other clear Renaissance correlative (as does Sanders). What happens on the stage, however, is clearly the experience of an individual overcome by a kind of privation, which causes him not only to suffer, but also in some manner to cooperate with the unreal. In one way, his jealousy arises out of nothing, or so it seems, but it is dramatically real nonetheless, for non-being as a kind of negative potentiality acts as an infection or affliction. Leontes’ jealousy is, therefore, in an important way *uncaused*, for it arises—at least partially—from a deficient cause, and in this dramatization we see Leontes sensing and wrestling with this complex problem of privation, giving it utterance, and in fact, succumbing to its power in the process.

Here we have come to the heart of Shakespearean tragedy, for the swift deterioration from a seemingly perfect happiness and complete control to wild jealousy and ultimate catastrophe for both family and kingdom, presaged in this speech, links the first part of *The Winter’s Tale* with most of Shakespeare’s tragic plays. But what is even more important for our argument, however, is the fact, unobserved by all critics to our knowledge, that the controlling relationship between the initially benign autocrat and his insubordinate foreign wife reflects a radical transformation of a well-known philosophical *topos* in the Renaissance, namely the Neo-Aristotelian relationship between form and matter and its application and transmission to the world of power politics.

According to Thomas Aquinas, a central link between Aristotle and Christianity, the proper analogy for the role of the king to his kingdom is to be found in the relationship of the substantial form (that is, the principle of being) to its matter, or of soul to the body it informs: “Therefore, let the king recognize that such is the office he undertakes, namely, that he is in his

23. Sanders, *The Winter’s Tale* 23.

kingdom what the soul is in the body, and what God is in the world."²⁴ And, indeed, Shakespeare's autocrats, kings, generals, dukes, and earls inevitably live up to this analogical picture and see their role as the sole legitimate formative source of power for the world subordinate to them. In *The Winter's Tale*, for example, one can easily discern in Leontes' words the philosophical analogy in question, that is, the analogy of the shaping form and its subordinate matter, which the king employs when he needs to assert the legitimacy of his commands and to point to himself as the sole formative, moral, and legal force in the kingdom:

Our prerogative
calls not your counsels but our natural goodness
imparts this ...
... *The matter*,
The loss, the gain, the ordering on't, is all
Properly ours. (2.1.163–69; emphasis mine)

The transposition of the philosophical *topos* to a political and family relationship turns in *The Winter's Tale*, and more generally in Shakespearean tragedies, to a corruption that engenders an evil which then grows to catastrophic proportions. An ironic philosophical context becomes strikingly apparent in *Julius Caesar* when Caesar portrays his own imperial power in a tragic parody of Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover" ("I could be well mov'd, if I were as you Yet in the number I do know but one Unshak'd of motion; and that I am he, 3.1.58–73) and is killed precisely at this juncture. And yet at the very moment of his fatal mistake, Great Caesar remains confident that he alone as Caesar can separate reality from nothing, cause from the uncaused, and not commit error: "Know Caesar doth not wrong, nor without cause / Will he be satisfied" (3.1.47–48). Or again, when celebrating the success of his political career and choice of retirement, Lear tells his daughter, "Nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.90), he underestimates the catastrophic potential of that 'nothing' as he tries to punish Cordelia for it, and form his life around it with the clarity of political judgement he has hitherto enjoyed. A similar confidence is expressed by Othello in an equally precarious position. So certain, in fact, is Othello that his superior judgement (trained in the strategic operations of battles and sieges) will be able to control Iago's vague suspicions, that he who commands Iago to give the "worst of thoughts / The worst of words" (3.3.132–33), is reassured all the

24. See, for example, Aquinas, *De Regno a regem Cypri*, i, ch. 12, *Opuscula Omnia*, I, 338–39, who identifies the king with the soul as substantial form of the body. For further reference cf. Theodore Spencer, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Man* (New York, 1966) 16–18, especially note 38.

more because Iago speaks "not yet of proof" (3.3.196). Two themes are here interwoven: absolute confidence in the legitimacy of one's own power, proven by past military and political success, on the one hand, and the belief that nothing, that is, no-thing, can obscure or fall outside the scope of that power, on the other. And yet what happens next is an uncontrollable disaster. In *Othello*, for example, the baseless self-righteous need for revenge which has grown out of nothing, just as Iago prophesied ("Hell and night / Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" 1.3.403–04), is taken to be a true cause by Othello, so powerful that he does not permit Desdemona to speak, but muzzles and strangles her as he clings to his nameless 'cause': "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul; / Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars, it is the cause" (5.2.1–3). Contrary then to the prevalent view that Othello's jealousy is psychologically absurd,²⁵ for it is based upon nothing but a handkerchief which could too easily have been explained, it is actually more plausible to reverse the argument and to suppose that Shakespeare dramatizes a sensibility lost to us but grounded in the philosophical preoccupations of the time: namely, that the worst events or nightmares are engendered precisely out of nothing when the person in control is absolutely convinced of the moral superiority of his own judgement and power.

In such cases, political superiority legitimated by the societal structure becomes the supreme criterion of morality and simultaneously the ground for tragic action. To take but one further example, at the very apex of their success in battle Macbeth and Banquo see the witches whom no one else sees, and after the trio melts into the air, Macbeth begins to have visions of nothing, clothed in false images ("I have thee not, and yet I see thee still ... a false creation" [2.1.35–39]), which ultimately lead him to murder. His potential for fall is directly proportionate to his greatness, a fact to which he himself testifies: "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.46–47). The presence of a false phantasm grounded in nothing, and characterized by a conjunction of opposites, makes 'fair' engender 'foul,' a motif foregrounded in the words of the witches (1.1.11) and of Macbeth himself (1.3.38).

Leontes' jealousy in *The Winter's Tale* then clearly evinces the same pattern, grounded in an excess of power, skill, and prosperity, an excess which then becomes an exclusive, controlling force, unlimited by any recognizable social constrictions and instead legitimized by society as a sacred principle. Hermione's position leaves no ambiguity: as wife and royal subject, she is to be subservient to Leontes, that is, her nature is always servile. However, the

25. See Felperin: "In *The Winter's Tale*, at least as much as *Othello*, we are faced in a stark and peremptory way with this problem of what to make of unrepresented events" ("Tonguetied Our Queen" 4).

moment Leontes is confronted with the limit of his hitherto unlimited power, he never questions Hermione's subordinate position, but rather begins to see his wife as subordinate to some other controlling and thus immoral passion. Polixenes recognizes this predicament best when without blaming Leontes or attributing any negative quality to him, he locates the cause of the impending violence in the superior or excessive character of Leontes' greatness and the outstanding virtue of his wife:

This jealousy
Is for a precious creature: as she's rare,
Must it be great; and as his person's mighty,
Must it be violent; and as he does conceive
He is dishonor'd by a man which ever
Profess'd to him, why, his revenges must
In that be made more bitter. (1.2.451-57)

Quite contrary, then, to the view which holds that Leontes' jealousy is utterly inexplicable and too instantaneous to be credible, one may well uncover at least its partial cause in the reality of unlimited political power, legitimized by society as the supreme virtue, which remains, in fact, a persistent theme throughout Shakespeare's dramatic career.

There is, however, a new emphasis in the dramatization of power in *The Winter's Tale*. Up to this point in Shakespeare's corpus, the corruption of political power was invariably located in the unworthiness or social deficiencies of those who wielded power: for example, either in the self-deification of Caesar, or in the lust and fratricide of Claudius in *Hamlet*, or in the hidden sense of social inferiority in *Othello*, or in the mistaken judgement of Lear's old age, or again, in the overweening ambition and usurpation in *Macbeth*, and so on. Leontes, however, is presented at least on the level of appearances as a perfect and legitimate ruler in a perfect kingdom, married to a perfect wife and surrounded by loving family and servants. The confusion felt by critics has obscured a decisive shift in a familiar theme. In other words, instead of locating the potential for disaster in some deficiency characterizing the powerful figure, Shakespeare situates the deficiency in the very notion of unlimited political power itself when such power is viewed by the country as a focus of that country's moral force.²⁶

26. In this sense, Stephen Greenblatt's dictum that "Shakespeare's plays are centrally and repeatedly concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder" is clearly not without merit, which view must open rather than close the investigation of the philosophical context of the play. "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, *Henry IV* and *Henry V*," *Political Shakespeare: New Essays In Cultural Materialism* (Ithaca, 1985) 18-47, 29.

Why then has the perfect kingdom been at peace until this unfortunate moment in the play? The plot carefully furnishes an answer. Polixenes, another perfect ruler, is visiting Leontes for the first time since their idyllic childhood. The disagreement about Polixenes' departure is therefore the first occasion in Leontes' kingly life when his power is limited by an equal, and equally moral,²⁷ controlling force. When Leontes requests his wife to assist him in obliging Polixenes to stay, the king-husband expects her only to restore his accustomed superiority. However, when instead she, a daughter of a Russian Emperor, claims the victory for herself, the power-framed world of Leontes is shattered. His jealousy, therefore, springs from the dislocation between his habitual sense of personal power and his fear that he is no longer in control, but dethroned and betrayed by an equal king and an independent, insubordinate wife. His horror at this loss of power is translated immediately into sexual jealousy obviously compounded by his previous, but masked understanding that although a king, he is not in perfect control of such actual manifestations of the human spirit as love, emotion, feeling, and finally sexual desire.²⁸

Leontes' treatment of his son is equally emblematic of this transformation, and indicates that his rivalry is not limited to sexual jealousy or political control alone, but is directed more generally against any natural instincts lying outside his control. He habitually addresses Mamillius in terms of tamed animals and garden vegetables,²⁹ and wishes him to be solely a "copy" of himself and have no features of Hermione, knowing all the while that the boy will soon outstrip his father's control: "still virginalling," but already "wanton calf" (1.2.125–26).

While these themes of power as control, distrust of sex, disdain and fear of women and of their association with evil, and an almost desperate rivalry with nature, are present in the play from the very beginning,³⁰ the soliloquy in question, during which Leontes meditates upon Hermione's supposed adultery, compresses all of these into a tense and chaotic proximity. As he looks upon his son's face and reflects upon the lines of natural generation therein so clearly manifest, he loses the sense of distinction between affec-

27. See Polixenes' description of their childhood (1.2.66–71).

28. For example, Leontes describes his courtship with Hermione not as a time of joy, but as a protracted and agonizing contest which he eventually won (1.2.101–04).

29. *WT*. 1.2.124–27; 137; 159–60.

30. See particularly Polixenes' identification of women as the seat of evil at 1.2.71–80. A sense of rivalry between the two kingly retainers, further distorted by each trying to persuade the other of the other's greater generosity, is evident in 1.1, the scene between Camillo and Archidamus. Furthermore, the cool relations between the two kings, unusual amidst their protestations of great love for each other, are manifest in their very first exchange (1.2). On this see Nevill Coghill, "Six Points of Stage Craft," *Shakespeare Survey* 11 (1958): 31–41.

tion as love or lust or as any unpremeditated feeling or passion, seeing in all of them an apostrophized, uncontrolled source of activity “beyond commission” and, thus, against himself. While all these themes, then, provide a plausible context for understanding the nature of Leontes’ jealousy, Leontes in this speech gives utterance to none of them directly, focussing instead upon the spurious generative power of nothing when compounded with affection, which he then—ironically—takes to be the basis of his own unfounded suspicion. The reason, then, that critics have had difficulties with this speech lies in their tendency to explain it in terms of one controlling theme, such as jealousy or madness or meditation upon lust. When one sees this speech as a compressed articulation of a transition from unlimited political power to passionate rivalry with every natural impulse of human desire, then the polyvalence of the disordered meditation becomes not merely psychologically probable but simply necessary. At the very moment Leontes sees the limit to his until then unquestioned power, he realizes with frightening clarity how many forces in the universe are beyond his control.

We propose, therefore, that Shakespeare foregrounds the theme of the rivalry between unlimited political power (which is given legitimacy as the moral centre of the community) and the freedom of natural instinct in his dramatization of the apparently accidental conflict between the king and the queen in *The Winter’s Tale*. Moreover, the language of the play carefully underscores the philosophical sensibility at work. And yet the really curious feature of this eruption of evil consists in the fact that while Leontes embraces the grand philosophical status of his position, the play on the whole forcefully dramatizes the failure of any anthropomorphic assimilation of the shaping *logos* to unlimited kingly rule. This is not to say that Shakespeare rejects the Renaissance philosophical *topos* of form and matter, but that the dramatic conflicts of his plays present this political contextualization of this major philosophical principle as profoundly problematic.

Nor is Shakespeare alone in this, for the exalted role of the absolute monarch (cf. Aquinas “What God is in the world ...”³¹) is very much inconsistent with the primary explanation for the fall of the soul in early Christian, Medieval, and Renaissance moral philosophy which is virtually unanimous in identifying this fall with soul’s self-preoccupation and concentration upon its own power, and consequently pride. In Augustine, for example, we find:

For [the soul] had looked back to itself, had been pleased with itself, and had become lover of its own power. It went far from God and did not remain in itself, and it is pushed back from itself ... and slips out into external things ... it loves the world and temporal things ... it is carried away and is proud in insolence, lewdness, honours, power, riches, in the power of emptiness. (*Sermon* 142, 3, 3, *PL* 38, c.779)

31. See note 24.

Likewise, for Aquinas, inordinate self-love is the proper and direct cause of every sin (*ST.II.1.Q.77.a.4* resp.) and pride is "the root and queen of all sins" (*De Malo* Q.VIII,a 2).³²

In other words, Leontes' madness thematizes a dislocation between two notions of worldly power in the Renaissance philosophical tradition: legitimate power as kingly responsibility and the same power and love of honour as the *locus* of the soul's fall. One may even suggest that the artistic dramatization of the breakdown of an apparently well-intentioned king is a creative deconstruction of the appropriation of the form as power by the social theory of the absolute monarchy. However, while the application of a political understanding of the form/matter relation is shown to be destructive, many other aspects of this correlation remain viable, for in *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare comes also very close to a recognizably traditional (that is, Neoplatonic and Neo-Aristotelian) view of the generation of evil, in which purely self-absorbed power, in its attempt to limit the world to its own design, produces such a restricted focus that subordinate reality is effectively frozen or distorted by its formation, and what is generated becomes a kind of spurious phantasm which then operates as an actual nullifying force.

Let us first identify this movement of nihilation in the play and then show the philosophical context for its understanding. Leontes sees absolute morality only in himself, so much so that he eventually rejects even an oracle in the absolute certainty that he is the only arbiter of the truth: "There is no truth at all i' th' oracle" (3.2.140). Even earlier, however, when Leontes is disturbed that his son Mamillius might have been defiled by being born though Hermione, he pacifies himself by discovering only his own features in the boy. Thus, although some critics have remarked upon the incongruity of a madness speech in the presence of Mamillius ("Most dear'st, my collop! Can thy dam?—may't be?" [1.2.137]), there is a curious relationship between Leontes' desire that natural generation or birth should transmit only his own features and annihilate Hermione's role, on the one hand, and his meditation upon nothing, on the other.

Leontes, of course, minimizes the role of women in general (as is evident in 1.2.128–35), distraught by the fact that the boy who should have been "full like" him is "almost as like as eggs." This reduction to nothing of the woman's role even in the process of natural generation, and particularly in the case of a boy whose Latin name signifies 'of the breast,' makes him dream of a generation, which is purely his own, unmixed with supposed feminine

32. See also Aquinas, *De Divinis Nominibus* 459–65, *Opuscula Omnia* II, and *De Malo* Q.1. passim. For the equivalence of self-love and pride, see especially *ST II.1.Q.77* a 5 resp.; Q.84 a 2 resp. and ad. 3. The idea of going beyond the good out of excessive desire and power is reminiscent of the earlier Neoplatonic notion of "slipping away" from reality.

falsity, and he then, indeed, describes a generation out of nothingness which takes place within him, but whose reality he ascribes to his wife's lust. Nor is Leontes' alone in nullifying Hermione, for his "twin'd lamb," King Polixenes, treats the queen as if she were of no account when he plans to leave Sicilia with Camillo, thereby casting further suspicion of ill-doing upon her. His courtly turn of phrase just prior to his departure about Leontes' "gracious queen, part of his theme, but nothing / of his ill-ta'en suspicion" (1.2.459–60) is not as innocent as it may seem, since Polixenes' lack of care for Hermione's safety is consonant with his more general view of women, in so far as he says nothing whatsoever about his own queen apart from stating that she and Hermione were the original causes of the two kings' fall from innocence.³³ Both kings, in fact, contrive to disregard the queen's position completely, with the difference that Polixenes sees nothing untoward in Hermione's nothingness, whereas Leontes becomes aghast at the presence of an uncontrollable force which he had not suspected previously. He has engendered a vacuum, and now it becomes powerfully operative in his own thought. This much disputed speech, therefore, in which the tyrant perceives the presence of a nothingness that he then believes to commingle with every aspect of life, is a surprisingly accurate and yet striking dramatization of a traditional philosophical depiction of the generation of evil which is inevitably characterized by a *dual movement*: pride and self-will, on the one hand, and ignorance, delusion, and privation, on the other. This conception which links a corrupting notion of power with the negative contrariety of privation or non-existence is so widespread in the Neoplatonic and Neo-Aristotelian traditions (both Christian and non-Christian) that it is inadvisable to point to one text as the determinate source or context for Shakespeare. Certain key figures, however, must be identified not in order to establish the transmission of a tradition, but to indicate the prevalence of this theme in some of the major texts available to the Renaissance. For example, *The Divine Names* (well-known in the Renaissance through Aquinas' commentary), written by Ps.Dionysius, the father of Christian Neoplatonism, describes how a limiting focus in the informing *logos* causes the soul to slip away from reality and from nature and concentrate instead upon nothing to which it then gives spurious articulation. In this vision, evil is not the intention, but the acci-

33. 1.2.71–80 is the only mention of Polixenes' queen. Moreover, Polixenes' swift departure, which takes no account of Hermione, echoes one of the most uncomfortable scenes in *Macbeth* where the great hero, MacDuff, flees to Malcolm, abandoning his wife and son, and paying no attention to his wife's fears. Lady MacDuff's bitter words "Wisdom? to leave his wife, to leave his babes . . . All is the fear, and nothing is the love" (4.2.6–12) are met with Rosse's chauvinistic instruction to "school" herself for her husband" (4.2.15–17). After this instruction, Rosse also flees, leaving the household to immediate destruction.

dental, ultimately uncaused result in the self-limiting function of the otherwise benign focus of forming and making:

Souls become evil through a deficiency of good dispositions and energies, and through their own weakness by their inability to hit the mark and slipping away. (728 A, Migne)³⁴
 Evil must be posited as accidental being; and it emerges through another, not from its own principle, so that what comes to be seems to be right because it comes to be for the sake of the good, but in reality it is not right, because we think good what is not good. It is manifest that what is desired is one thing, and what comes to be another. (732 C–D, Migne, *Div.Nom.* IV).³⁵

In the Christian tradition, particularly in Augustine and Aquinas, this analysis of the origin of evil is developed further in terms of pride and self-will, on the one hand, and also as a function of ignorance and privation, on the other.

In Augustine, for example, the theme of ‘less and less being’ as a movement towards excess culminates in a theory of nihilation (*inarescere*) or tendency to nothingness: “When it becomes swollen with pride, [the soul] goes towards outward things, and so to speak nihilates itself which is to be less and less” (*De Mus.* 6, 13, 40, BA, 7, 446). In Aquinas, even more conspicuously, the evil in pride is precisely the excessive, restrictive power of the “good-seeking” individual: “Malum autem superbiae in hoc consistit quod aliquis in appetendo bonum excellens propriam mensuram excedit” (*De Malo* Q.VIII a.4).³⁶ This double-sided notion of excessive or unlimited power which moves beyond the form (e.g., *mensuram excedit*) and uncovers privation as negativity, Shakespeare transforms to new dramatic purpose in the political-sexual conflict between Leontes and Hermione, and this is thematized in key elements in Leontes’ speech discussed above.

Shakespeare’s debt to the philosophical milieu of the Renaissance, however, can be found not only in his treatment of power as a restrictive, albeit politically supreme *logos* which slips away from nature. It is even more striking that we find in *The Winter’s Tale* a clear depiction of privation, particularly in the notion that the generation of a false phantasm is called into being by an excessive and restrictive focus of power which subsequently operates as a nullifying force—in other words, the generation of evil from the viewpoint of privation. Again, philosophical descriptions of the effects of nega-

34. The idea of slipping off from the mark (*apolisthesis*) is first used by Plotinus of the vision which, failing to grasp substance, makes the mistake of slipping off the “something” and being carried away to the qualitative (*Ennead* II, 6 (17), 1, 42–48).

35. Cp. Proclus, *De Malorum Subsistentia in Procli Opuscula*, ed. H. Boese (Berlin, 1960) 253.9–256.43, and Aquinas, *De Malo* passim.

36. “But the evil of pride consists in this, that someone excelling in seeking the good goes beyond the proper measure” (author’s translation). For further references see note 31.

tive potentiality or privation extend over a period of more than one thousand years up to Shakespeare's time, but it will be instructive to initiate a comparison by citing the *locus classicus* of this influential notion in the *Enneads* of Plotinus. The soul or mind, Plotinus' maintains, can be affected by the experience of the nothingness of ultimate matter. But how can we conceive such indefiniteness? The mind or soul as such cannot grasp it unless it is affected by it. The mind capable of seeing privation is already a mind touched by annihilation, that is, a mind thinking contrary to its own nature. "The concept of the indefinite is defined," Plotinus answers, "but the application (*epibole*) of the mind to it is indefinite. If each thing is known by concept and thought ... that which wants to be a thought will ... be ... a sort of thoughtlessness; or rather the mental representation (*phantasma*) of it will be bastard (*nothos*) and not genuine, compounded of an unreal part (*ouk alethos*) and with the diverse kind of reasoning" (*meta tou heterou logou*) (II, 4 (12), 10, 4–10). The "diverse kind of reasoning" is the "bastard reasoning" of Plato's *Timaeus* 52 b, there related to the Receptacle of becoming, which Plato asserts we look to as in a "dream." For Plotinus, the indefiniteness or nothingness of matter, as pure indeterminacy or non-being, is ultimately the source of falsehood, error, and the dreamlike quality of a purely earth-absorbed existence.³⁷

Similar conceptions are to be found in Augustine, the Cappadocian Fathers, and also in Origen. To cite but one example, Augustine says that "human beings become nothing when they sin" (*Tract. in Job. ev. 1, 13, CC, 36, 7*) and describes this tendency as follows:

The soul loses strength when it consents to evil, and begins to be less, and for this reason to have less vigour than when, not consenting to any evil, it remains steadfast in virtue Now the less it is, the closer it comes to nothingness. For all things whose being lessens tend to absolute nothingness. (*Contra Secundinum* 15, BA, 17, 586)³⁸

37. The famous passage from III, 6 (26), 7 on matter as a field of contrary appearances is worth citing: "It always presents opposite appearances on its surface ... a phantom which does not remain and cannot get away either, for it has no strength Whatever announcement it makes ... is a lie; its apparent being is not real, but a sort of fleeting frivolity; hence the things which seem to come to be in it are frivolities, nothing but phantoms in a phantom, like something in a mirror which really exists in one place but is reflected in another; it seems to be filled, and holds nothing, it is all seeming ... ghosts into a formless ghost" (16–30, trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library, Vol. III (London, 1967)).

38. Trans. Emilie zum Brunn, *St. Augustine. Being and Nothingness* (New York, 1988) 53. Similar conceptions of the tendency towards non-being or the obscurity of matter as a diminution of being are to be found both in the pagan Middle-Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions. See J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists* (London, 1977), and *The Cambridge History of Later Greek and Early Medieval Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1967) They are also found in some of the foremost Patristic thinkers. On Gregory of Nyssa, for example, *De An. et Res.* 46, 93B, 100A; 101A; *De*

In other words, what for the Neoplatonic tradition, based on Plato's *Timaeus*, is the bastard reasoning which leads to the eruption of non-being finds its counterpart in the themes of Christian philosophy where the compound which the soul makes with such indefiniteness brings about a real experience of nothingness, however dreamlike this may be, and however non-existent the pure privation of ultimate matter might be in itself. In other words, the effects of this experience are real although they may start in a quasi-dream-like state or sense of unreality. And it is this dramatization that we find in Shakespeare in the complex triangle of king, queen and child, when their unity is threatened not only by the fantastic unreality of Leontes' suspicions, but also by his conviction that his polluted wife has produced a bastard child. Similarly, Shakespeare seems to foreground the real, if absurd, effects of nothingness when Leontes explicitly locks Hermione's supposed adultery into the vicious circle of his own empty thought:

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. (1.2.292-96)

Shakespeare further emphasizes the dramatic consequences of this communication 'with dreams' in Hermione's insistence in Act III that she has become virtually non-existent in Leontes' waking life: "You speak a language that I understand not: / My life stands in the level of your dreams" (3.2.80-81). Leontes' reply is the perfect counterpart, ironically transferring the spuriousness of his infected reasoning to his wholly innocent natural progeny: "Your actions are my dreams. / You had a bastard by Polixenes, / And I but dream'd it" (83-84).

We can see this even more clearly by an examination of a conspicuous contrast which has not received sufficient attention, namely the dramatic contrast, indicated above, between natural generation evinced in the determinate likeness between Mamillius and his father, and the bastard generation of falsehood in the mind of Leontes. These two contrasting generations can be found again in Ps. Dionysius and in Aquinas' commentary on the *Divine Names*. "Everything which is in accordance with nature, is generated from a determinate cause. But evil is without a cause and the indefinite is not according to nature" (*De Div. Nom. Lectio XXII*, 459).³⁹ What gives

Infant. 46, 176B-C; *Oratio Catechetica* 45, 24D-25A; 28C; *De Hom. Op.* 44, XII, 161-64; etc. For Origen, see *In Job*. XX, 16; *De Princip.* I, 7-8; *Fragm. in Luc.* (G. C. S., IX, Ist. ed., LIV, 260, I. 8, ed. M. Rauer, 1930).

39. Aquinas, *Opuscula Omnia* II.

birth to evil is “an incommensurable mixture of dissimilar things” (*mixtio dissimilium non commensurabilis*), which Aquinas explains later as one dissimilar thing being added to another without due proportion (463: *aliquid dissimile adjungitur alteri absque debita commensuratione*). Thus, evil remains indeterminate, without proper cause, and even without intention from the point of view of privation (*De Div. Nom.* 462–67). Elsewhere, in his commentary on Aristotle’s *De Anima*, Aquinas itemizes three ways the intellect becomes ‘veiled’ and thus pursues what is false as if it were true: passions, infirmity, and dreams: “For from these causes it happens that the intellect does not prevail over the phantasy, whence the person follows the phantastic apprehension as if it were true.”⁴⁰ A false image, ultimately grounded in non-being as privation, can disrupt the ascendancy of intellect and bring the agent to a quasi-dreamlike or sickness-infected state. This conception, transformed in *The Winter’s Tale* into Leontes’ jealousy which springs from nothing and then composes itself of every false suspicion and innuendo (cf. Paulina’s assessment: “Thy tyranny, / Together working with thy jealousies / (Fancies too weak for boys, too green and idle / For girls of nine), O, think what they have done, / And then run mad indeed—stark mad” [3.2.179–83]), is, therefore, a recognizable philosophical perception of the compound of causality and non-causality, being and nothing, in the generation of evil.

In other words, there exists a tangible contrast between natural and bastard generation which is developed in the immediate context of Leontes’ speech. When asked what has unsettled him, Leontes mentions only his meditation upon Mamillius and says nothing whatsoever of the apparent content of his disruptive soliloquy. To all intents and purposes, it is as if the actual intrusion of the unreal did not exist. By means of absence, absence is manifest and also concealed. What Leontes does *not* admit to Hermione, Polixenes, and Mamillius, highlights the negative potentiality (“Thou dost make possible things not so held”) in his soliloquy. From one point of view, then, that of absence or privation, Leontes’ jealousy *is* sudden and inexplicable in terms both of the lack of cause in Polixenes’ and Hermione’s innocent relationship. When Leontes, therefore, states that he finds the conjunction of affection which works together with nothing, and of ‘something,’ to the “infection” of his brain and “hard’ning of his brows,” he describes precisely what happens to him, for although it is his tyranny which predisposes him to find this infection, he is indeed a victim of the nothing he experiences and embraces, the nothing to which his excessive power gives such unbounded range.

40. Aquinas, *Commentarium in De Anima Aristotelis* III,iii, section 670, cited by J.E. Hankins, *Backgrounds of Shakespeare’s Thought* (Hassocks, 1978) 98–99.

There is, therefore, a sort of spurious logic at the caesura of line 142, as Lawrence Wright has observed, but its significance is, perhaps, more far reaching: "And fellow'st nothing: then 'tis very credent / Thou may'st conjoin with something" Leontes' mind recoils naturally from the "nothing," and instead, on the basis of the negative potentiality of which he has been speaking, forms a compound of affection and the unreal, which will yield that very negativity from which his mind has just revolted. In this sense, we have a precise dramatization how the spurious begets the spurious, while it clings to the apparent power of rationality for its very existence.⁴¹

Moreover, this analysis indicates that it is not necessarily the Plotinian or Augustinian version of this compound of affection and non-being which Shakespeare transforms in Leontes' speech (although Ficino does analyse *Ennead* II, 4 (12), 10 directly in his *Commentary on Plotinus*⁴²), for there is no hint that matter itself is an ultimate source of evil and nothingness (except, perhaps, in Polixenes' belief that the kings became corruptible because of their wives [1.2. 67–79]). As for the pagan Proclus, as well as the Christian Ps.-Dionysius, Aquinas, and Ficino,⁴³ so for Shakespeare, privation or non-being seems to be the source of evil rather than matter itself. Shakespeare seems therefore to be influenced by the more recent Christian Neoplatonic and Neo-Aristotelian tradition in which the nothingness of privation, and not matter itself, is the source of evil.

Far from being incomprehensible then, Leontes' swift deterioration into jealousy and madness reflects several complementary perspectives from a philosophical background which has been largely lost in our times. The recovery of part of this background also helps us to see how the theme of Leontes' acausal madness is not an isolated theme in Shakespeare but rather one which may be said to underlie the tragedies certainly, and also perhaps to some degree the histories and comedies.⁴⁴ As the Stoic Brutus prepares to

41. Compare Plato, *Timaeus* 52 b. Carol Thomas Neely recognises the "indeterminacy" in Leontes' state of consciousness which seeks "shape and expression in words," but she does no more than cite a lecture to the Aristotelian Society by Iris Murdoch for interpretation ("*The Winter's Tale: The Triumph of Speech*," *Studies in English Literature* 15 [1975]: 321–38, 324 n.12.)

42. Ficino, *Opera Omnia* 1648–49. For Shakespeare's apparent acquaintance with Ficino, and even Plotinus, see John Vyvyan, *Shakespeare and Platonic Beauty* (London, 1961); cf. also J.E. Hankins (note 11) and E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1948) 41.

43. For Proclus and Aquinas see notes 24 and 35. For Ps. Dionysius see *The Divine Names* IV passim and Ficino, *Opera Omnia* 146, 226: matter is situated midway between being and non-being; cf. also 1072–73.

44. For example, in *Richard II* the theme of the king's unlimited power corrupting England is given prominence in a famous speech of John of Gaunt: "That England, that was wont to conquer others, / Hath made a shameful conquest of itself" (2.1.65–66). See also 2.1.93–114.

kill Caesar, the argument which drives him is precisely the argument of Renaissance philosophical thought concerning power, namely, that unlimited autocratic power results in the moral corruption of the kingdom. Faced with this knowledge, Brutus has no choice but to be true to his philosophical principles and to kill Caesar: "Not that I lov'd Caesar less, but that I lov'd Rome more.... As Caesar lov'd me, I weep for him; as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was valiant, I honor him; but, as he was ambitious, I slew him" (3.2.21–22). However, Brutus does not prevent corruption by this murder; instead, after embracing the power of annihilation in the very act of murder, he is haunted until his suicide by the ghost of Caesar. One may argue more generally still that the problem of how to limit the king's power without bringing destruction upon oneself and one's country is a problem that runs throughout the tragedies and histories. For here Shakespeare, as we have shown, confronts the problem of autocratic rule, for which the Renaissance had two parallel models, equally popular but unconsciously opposed to one another: first, that of the controlling *logos* identified with kingship and, second, that of excessive pride engendering corruption both in its superabundance of power and its deficiency or privation.

It also seems that for Shakespeare this meditation on power as engendering nothing held not only a political but a personal interest. In the *Tempest*, for example, as Shakespeare muses on his theatrical career in perhaps the last of his plays, he comes to emphasize that the power to embrace privation is not limited to king or general, but may indeed spring up in the career of the artist or scholar, from the very purest of intentions. For even Prospero himself endangers the life of his kingdom and family when he confers and legitimizes, in his very self-absorption, an unlimited trust upon his deficient brother.⁴⁵ He thus summarizes and admits also in himself the problem of power and privation which he narrates and of which he too has been a part:

In the comedies the notion of excess in the power of the ruling class is a darker theme underlying the joyous and bountiful lives of characters in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Twelfth Night*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, and *Measure for Measure*. The tragedies speak for themselves, but one of the most celebrated occasions is Hamlet's father's account of his suffering in Purgatory when in the lives of all beholders he was a perfect king. On a not dissimilar note, all the years of Lear's autocratic kingship have left a profoundly corrupt household. This theme is also repeated in Gloucester's household. Furthermore, the magnanimous power of Timon of Athens is to a great degree a cause of corruption in the small-mindedness of the Athenians.

45. Like Polixenes, Prospero never mentions the role of his wife, making his relationship with the world depend entirely upon this masculine transference of power and subsequent competition. Miranda's training evidently changes this pattern just as the marriage of Camillo and Paulina will not permit the re-emergence of the old power structure where woman is as nothing, for according to Camillo himself, nothing, not even Autolycus, should be left out of account: "Who have we here? / We'll make an instrument of this; omit / Nothing may give us aid" (4.4.623–25).

... in my false brother
Awak'd an evil nature, and my trust,
Like a good parent, did beget of him
A falsehood in its contrary, as great
As my trust was, which had indeed no limit,
A confidence sans bound. (1.2.92-97).