

A Metacritical and Historical Approach to *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*

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I usually teach Shakespeare in a survey course for upper-division nonmajors, and for several years I have taught the course metacritically, that is, by emphasizing the plays' multiple strategies for foregrounding the synthesizing imagination and the human construction of all perception. The self-reflexivity of Shakespearean dramatic art, its constant articulation of human activity in terms drawn from the stage itself, provides both a powerful thematic perspective and an open invitation to pursue the relation of structure and content, especially when we end the course with *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Recent new-historicist approaches to the canon, however, raise questions about the ahistorical presuppositions of the metacritical perspective. Not only does concentrating on the individual as the author of his or her own worldview devalue the role of culture in shaping individual perception, but teaching the coherence of any one critical reading of a text obscures the actual play of significance within it, with its openness and surplus of meanings. Metacriticism may thus misrepresent not only the historical contingency of the given play itself but the relation of art to culture as well. Thus I have been faced with the need to reconceive Shakespeare's metacritical art and, in particular, challenged to "open" it to some of its historical contexts.

However, a dialogue between the two approaches becomes possible if we focus on the historical emergence, in Shakespeare's day, of modern discourse, which responds to a Renaissance epistemological crisis by positing the objective independence of discursive reason from the world it observes in order to valorize the reasoning individual mind as the source of knowledge. The pervasive cognitive reflexivity of Shakespearean drama, with its progressive construction of self out of the encounter with the otherness of a reality discovered beyond social convention, is revealed as both implicated in this historical development and struggling to articulate a critique of its most dangerous presuppositions. The work of Timothy Reiss, particularly his *Discourse of Modernism*, which carefully traces the rise of our modern "analytico-referential" discourse through the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, demonstrates that self-reflexive art, in the context of the rise of this new discourse, is inherently political.

Thus it becomes possible to retain the powerful pedagogical strengths of a thematic approach to the canon — and the metacritical approach is effective in the classroom exactly because it encourages students' questions about identity and social roles, even as it challenges their assumptions about human nature — and at the same time to provide a more historical articulation of

the skepticism, openness, and overdetermination of the texts. Of course, the challenges of introducing such a perspective are obvious: how to present such a second critical pole clearly and succinctly; how to ensure that it complements rather than compromises the metacritical approach that is still the essence of the course; and, regarding the romances, how to maintain their pedagogical value as the most metacritical plays in the canon while also utilizing their potential for revealing historical contingency. But while I still want nonmajors to focus on the texts themselves rather than critical perspectives on the plays, it is well worth the effort to raise these important questions about the nature of literature and its place in society.

In my survey, with a syllabus of ten plays, I now devote about a quarter of the course, or ten classes, to *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* so that I can explicitly introduce a new-historicist perspective. While trying throughout the semester quietly to nurture the students' historical sensibility, only with the romances do I address at length the issue of culture and the cultural circulation of all meaning. The place of the two plays at the conclusion of the traditional syllabus is felicitous, because the first is the most self-consciously metacritical in the canon and thus marks a natural culmination of this line of inquiry in the course, while the latter is historical in ways quite accessible to students.

The metacritical richness of *The Winter's Tale* well repays several classes, and we unfold this complexity by responding to the "artfulness" of all the play's human activity. The romance genre, to which I introduce the students by means of the opening chapter of Howard Felperin's *Shakespearean Romance*, makes natural the play's references to oracles, defenses, dreams, reports, ballads, old tales, and plays but can't explain the careful development Shakespeare gives to their appearances. Following Mamillius's naive tale in the second act (which, presumably, gives the play its name), the tale immediately comes to life in a carefully orchestrated elaboration of the many types of human narration, the stories that, in all their forms, we tell about ourselves and the world. To speak metacritically of *The Winter's Tale* means to recognize the large claims that the play makes for narrativity, in particular for the dramatic enterprise, for this is a play "self-reflexive" not about drama per se but about the dramatic, the artful, in all human endeavor. The play is filled with references to narrative forms because narrative best represents the quintessential cognitive form-imposing activity that distinguishes the species.

In opposition to the parodic or dysfunctional world-creating narrative of Leontes, a narrative perverted by emerging analytic practices revealed as only pseudobjective, stands the artful "making" (5.3.63, 71), by both Camillo and Paulina, of stories that affirm relation and the possibility of humanly constituted orders resonant of "great creating nature" (4.4.88). Camillo's intervention in the action of act 4, presented in the terminology of the stage, reveals all the attributes of a playwright; Paulina, not "Julio

Romano," is the presiding artist of the final scene. If Leontes's self-destruction exemplifies the rationalist alienation of the incipient modern culture from communal and psychic roots of meaning, then the play is clearly shaped to draw on this self-destruction, foregrounding an alternative mode of being centered in imaginative identification with the world. Paulina's creation of a reconciliation scene so thoroughly interpenetrated with "art" and "reality" depends on her conceiving of the human within the cyclical rhythms of creating nature itself. Far from being presented as "like" a statue, Hermione is both statue *and* human precisely because human reality, as cognitively constructed, is artful, that is, imaginatively devised.

Once we have established a metacritical reading of the play, I find that the most immediate approach to the historicity of *The Winter's Tale* is through a rereading that monitors the play's striking relation to its audience. The romances are marked particularly, as David P. Young makes clear, by their manipulation of detachment and engagement: detachment is a primary concomitant of Shakespeare's sophisticated move to the primitive romance form itself, and the plays carefully distance their audience in many scenes. As Franco Moretti's discussion of "the birth of (the audience from the structure of) tragedy" implies (19), this detachment recognizes and addresses the development, over the course of Shakespeare's own career, of a sophisticated audience associated with the emergence of modern rational discourse; because we are a product of this discourse, the students can easily be led to catalog points in the drama where they feel "alienated" from the action. But this detachment proves ultimately ironic (much as was Theseus's reason in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*), established to make all the more compelling the final peripety, the discovery of Hermione in the statue scene. As we consider this issue in the dual context of the students' reading of the play and a lecture on Reiss's cultural premises, we discover that audience detachment has important parallels to the new seventeenth-century emphasis on objective reason and that, conversely, Shakespeare uses audience engagement in close alliance with imaginative dramatic constructions to actively question the assumptions of this new focus. If the students have for our fourth class explored detachment, then the final class can examine the way theme, action, and spectacle work in the fourth and fifth acts to undermine this detachment. The omnipresent theme of narrativity and art itself, while at first apparently related to the sophisticated evocation of a "primitive" dramatic form, works progressively, and, finally, insistently, on the audience's half-reluctant engagement to replicate in their own theatrical experience the imaginative, world-constituting activities of the dramatic action. The apparent meaning of the statue scene follows on a *dramatic* experience of the inadequacy of any rational understanding of the communal moment. Such a consideration of the relation of the play to its audience provides the first step in setting aside the students' habitual assumption that the play, as a species of "art," is to be taken (objectively) as isolated artifact.

Thus we move in our understanding of the play from the metacritical to an awareness of the dialectic between the play and its historical audience, and I end with a lecture on this context and the ways in which it has both shaped and been shaped by the production of this play.

Having broached the question of the cultural contextuality of art, we turn to *The Tempest* to address the issue directly. Again, though, we begin with a class devoted to an initial reading and a discussion of the play from our usual perspective, as the first of opposed interpretations that demand choices of the students. How does it reticulate the dialectic of "art and nature"? What is the import of Prospero's project, and what is the nature of the "sea-change" associated with it?

After this cursory first reading, Montaigne's *Of Cannibals* and excerpts from Sir Walter Raleigh's *Discovery of Guiana* (the first part of his summary of the value of following up his expedition with colonization [388-91]) can be used to provide a particular historical context. We are interested in these texts not as relevant (from the old historical perspective) "explanatory" agents that fix a meaning assumed to be inherent in the text but rather as contemporaneous manifestations of the culture's discourse that help alert the students to the overdetermined play of meaning represented by the text. This perspective reflects the new pedagogical goal in teaching this last play: if the students have thus far succeeded in learning some of the critical skills necessary for their independent work with a literary text, they now need to discover that every text represents a surplus of meaning and that for *The Tempest* there is no one determinate reading. For at least once in the course they must recognize the constructedness of rival readings and thus of meaning itself.

Montaigne's straightforward use of the nature-culture topos leads the students to work on the metacritical aspect of the play, especially Prospero's "art." But beyond this Montaigne's perception of European ethnocentrism — an ethnocentrism vividly exemplified in Raleigh's comments — raises two questions that complicate the students' first reading of the play. Most obviously, both Montaigne's ennobling and Raleigh's exploitation of the native challenge the students' usual identification with the Europeans at the expense of Caliban. Montaigne's idealization of the primitive is intimately connected with a critique of the European sociopolitical as well as moral "civilization" that Raleigh represents. Students may be asked in what ways Montaigne's criticisms resonate against the behavior not only of such characters as Antonio, Sebastian, and Stephano but against Prospero and even Miranda, even as the behavior of these positive characters reveals contiguities with Raleigh. This complexity takes a further turn when we consider Gonzalo's allusion to Montaigne's essay when he evokes an edenic commonwealth in 2.1. The discovery that Gonzalo's views are those of Montaigne tends to stimulate a revaluation of Gonzalo's position in the economy of the play. The class might consider what Shakespeare's purpose is in alluding

to Montaigne's argument and, more generally, what we are to make of the presence of the Europeans on "Caliban's island."

Raleigh's text is productive in a second way, for it brings into the open a driving motivation of early modern European culture, the desire for power over nature as a species of society's material acquisitiveness, its greed. Motivation is a crucial question in *The Tempest*, as it has been in all the other plays we've studied. Shakespeare is preoccupied with human will, especially "rude will" (*Romeo and Juliet* 2.3.28); though Prospero's silence is sometimes overlooked in critical studies, it troubles students throughout the first few acts, which concern his own precise goals. Even the first reading reveals Antonio's manifest motives, and students draw on them to construct the basic oppositions in the play, but Prospero's silence undermines this dichotomizing. And although students recognize in Raleigh a stance akin to Antonio's toward the objective world, Raleigh's more immediate parallel to Prospero as a colonizer now further complicates their assumption that they "ought" to identify with him. This complication crystallizes the class's heretofore peripheralized unease with Prospero's imperiousness and focuses attention on his unarticulated motivation through the early acts, thus tending to produce a subversive counterreading. (Though generally beyond the limits of a survey for nonmajors, the bearing on the play of recent feminist and psychoanalytic criticism should be noted; see, e.g., Kahn; Williamson; Sundelson [2 works]; Orgel, "Prospero's Wife".)

How do these sociopolitical perspectives relate to the metacritical approach to the plays that students have been prepared by the course to take? Here the class needs to be given some means of relating these specific forms of economic motivation to those more universal forms of will that they have seen Shakespeare address. Thus for the session following Montaigne and Raleigh I ask them to read the peroration (129) of Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum* (537-39). Here they find a claim for the power of European culture's emergent model of rational, objective knowledge to which, as Bacon's heirs, they assent unquestioningly. But as we read Bacon's text more closely and consider it in conjunction with Raleigh's particular "discovery," this founding celebration of science and invention seems shot through with a vocabulary of power, empire, and ambition so metaphorically charged that it decenters the speaker's claim to disinterestedness. In noting that the basis of Prospero's power is his knowledge—his "books"—and the commandment over nature that they give him; that it is Prospero's books that hold Caliban in awe; and that these books must in some profound sense be disavowed before Prospero can complete his reconciliation, students begin to discover a means of interrogating the species of will represented in the play, particularly that motive of Prospero's so conspicuously absent from his early self-presentation. To recognize in Prospero a type of the culture's emerging analytic individual is to discover the play's deep involvement in our culture's most insistent discursive structures. Thus students can begin to

ask the true price that the scholar's study, his pursuit of power, has exacted in terms of social and spiritual alienation; they can begin to recognize the deeper significations of that "state" to which his search for knowledge had made him stranger. In short, triangulating Bacon with *The Tempest* and the other works clarifies the presence within the text of a central issue of the culture: its incipient adoption of a new ground of discursive practice in the assumption of an implicitly idealized human rationality.

The secondary readings help to undermine, as we return our attention to the dramatic text, the habitual modern dichotomy between "art" and "reality" that students take for granted. To what extent do Raleigh's excursions presume the learning that Bacon fosters? To what extent is Bacon's pursuit of "pure" knowledge implicated in the less abstract motives of Prospero and Raleigh? To what extent does Prospero finally recognize and renounce such motives as the price of his reconciliation?

By this time, then, we have been through a preliminary dialectic, having complicated an original assumption of Prospero as a beneficent mage with a second perception preoccupied with his darker and more self-serving side. For the last two classes we pursue the complexity of Prospero's characterization, and especially the implications of his ultimate reconciliation, in the new context of plural interpretations demanding choices and critical debate. The epilogue bears on these concerns, for there we discover once again that strategy of audience engagement already observed in *The Winter's Tale*. Prospero's address to his audience is too complex to abide simplification for long, and whether a student focuses on its thematic import or dramatic presentation, she or he is now capable of addressing its significance in complex, critical terms. Whether the speech is approached thematically as a Neoplatonic fusion of mage and dramatist or as a renunciation of power that critiques the conception of knowledge as power; whether it is approached dramatically as ironic affirmation or as direct subversion of the emerging objectivity of the Renaissance audience, the course ends with every student challenged to begin to face the openness, the contingency of meaning in Shakespeare, in literature, in the world. If we have begun to understand the meanings of *The Tempest* in terms that follow from the practices of the culture and if we have equally been returned to culture with a perception altered by the practices of the play, then we have begun to appreciate the material and historical implications of Shakespeare's metacritical art.