



PROJECT MUSE®

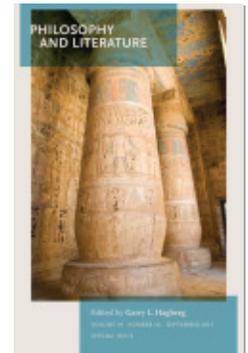
---

## Hermione's Sophism: Ordinariness and Theatricality in *The Winter's Tale*

Judith Wolfe

*Philosophy and Literature*, Volume 39, Number 1A, September 2015, pp.  
A83-A105 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/phl.2015.0038](https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2015.0038)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/612840>

JUDITH WOLFE

HERMIONE'S SOPHISM: ORDINARINESS AND  
THEATRICALITY IN *THE WINTER'S TALE*

**Abstract.** This essay queries and extends Stanley Cavell's reading of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* by a close investigation of the character and language of Hermione. Far from being merely a passive victim of Leontes's madness (or, in Cavellian terms, "skepticism"), I argue, Hermione is an active contributor to the disintegration of their relationship by "sophistically" refusing to distinguish between language as conversation and language as mere play. The play's conspicuously metatheatrical engagement with Hermione's (as Leontes's) repudiation of vulnerability shows that the threat of "theatricalization" or sophism cannot (as Cavell or Rush Rhees might wish) simply be excised but must be integrated in ordinary relationships.

FOR BOTH RUSH RHEES and Stanley Cavell, Wittgenstein's late investigations into language and language games are caught up with a profound underlying concern about the possibility of discourse itself. Rhees and Cavell isolate two such conditions, which are closely related.

The first, emphasized by Cavell, is what he calls "acknowledgment." In his seminal essay "Knowing and Acknowledging" (1969), Cavell engages traditional skeptical arguments against the possibility of knowing other minds. Unlike most philosophers, however, Cavell does not attempt to repudiate the skeptic's concerns by devising a proof of the existence of other minds or a method for knowing them with certainty. Any such proof, he argues, would merely perpetuate the skeptic's fundamental mistake that it is indeed *knowledge* that is called for in this context. But the skeptic is absolutely right in complaining that we cannot know other

minds; his error lies in analyzing this problem as an “intellectual lack” rather than as what it really is, namely a “metaphysical finitude”: the fact that humans are irremediably separate.<sup>1</sup> In Cavell’s analysis, the skeptic’s wish to cast this separation as a limitation of knowledge is a symptom of the more general human wish to escape the full impact of human finitude: the unbridgeable gap between us and those we love, the inability to hold the world as a stable possession.

It is to register this difference between intellectual and existential or “metaphysical” limitation that Cavell introduces the concept of acknowledgment as the form or inflection of knowledge proper to the case of knowing other minds. It underscores two things. One, knowledge of others is not automatic, but rather involves an element of openness and choice, and so also of unavoidable risk: it is always susceptible to dissembling, misunderstanding, and loss. Two, because every person is already situated within the human community, a refusal to “know” others is never an autonomous and therefore authoritative decision, but to some extent a failure to fulfill one’s responsibility toward others—in other words, a denial of acknowledgment.<sup>2</sup> To refuse such acknowledgment is to exile oneself from the only environment in which thinking, discourse, and understanding are possible; conversely, to *exact* such acknowledgment from someone is to misunderstand the voluntary and precarious nature of the community of speakers in which our language and our understanding have their life.

This appeal to community and acknowledgment, however, depends on a recognition of the unity of what we call the ordinary. Accordingly, the second condition for the possibility of discourse, which is the particular concern of Rush Rhees, is the fundamental *unity* of discourse—the unity not of a calculus but of a conversation. Rhees’s account of this unity arises from a query of certain aspects of Wittgenstein’s concept of “language games,” first articulated in Rhees’s influential essay “Wittgenstein’s Builders.” *Pace* Wittgenstein’s (supposed) claim that the abbreviated orders “Slab!” and “Brick!” shouted by one builder to another could in theory constitute the entire language of a tribe, Rhees here argues that no language game could exist in isolation. Without being situated in a surrounding life—the common project of building a house, the homecoming after a day of work, the future residents’ anticipation of the completion of the project—the builders’ orders and the reactions they elicit would not constitute genuine human responses but merely behavioral reflexes. Therefore, they could not be called language at all. Underlying this argument is the assumption that language is, at its

most essential, *conversation*, and that the meaning of language depends on the meaningfulness of life as a whole. As Rhees repeatedly writes, "Understanding makes sense if living makes sense."<sup>3</sup>

On this construal, understanding consists not (primarily) in the mastery of facts but in the ability to discern the meaning of a specific utterance made by a specific person in a specific context, and to consider and evaluate possible responses to that utterance. This ability does not exclude but rather depends on a deployment of one's own subjectivity. It is in this sense that, as Cavell also emphasizes, genuine conversation both depends on and elicits self-knowledge.

This, however, means that the heuristic description of language as a set of games is potentially misleading. Unlike a game, an individual discursive situation or practice cannot be divorced from its participants or its larger context—the peripheral situations and circumstances that come to bear on it—without losing its specifically human character. Consequently, learning to converse is precisely *unlike* "mastering [the] techniques and skills" of a game.<sup>4</sup> Engaging in genuine conversation requires consideration of the relational and practical contexts that bear on the present situation; it demands that one allow oneself to be implicated in one's words, to realize that they imply commitments (both past and future) that extend beyond the present context.

## I

Stanley Cavell's reading of *The Winter's Tale*, "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses," situates Leontes's jealousy within the account of skepticism and acknowledgment sketched above. He reads Leontes's jealous rage in acts 1 to 3 as a violent overcompensation for the radical skepticism that overcomes him when he finds himself unable to control or even decipher the behavior of his wife. This experience of paralysis, according to Cavell, leads Leontes to a perceived inability to say *anything* with certainty, which he can alleviate only by violently "theatricalizing" his wife; that is, by objectifying her as a character on a "stage," completely present or transparent to the observer, who himself remains unseen.<sup>5</sup> The underlying hamartia here is the typical failing of the skeptic, namely a demand for knowledge at a level where only acknowledgment will do; where what is needful is an acceptance of the enduring freedom and partial inscrutability of those he loves, and with it his own inability to control those loved ones' actions and attitudes, particularly toward himself.

Cavell's subtle reading focuses principally on Leontes, king of Sicilia and husband to Hermione, largely because Cavell sees skepticism as a peculiarly male predicament. Hermione, in this as in most accounts, is primarily a sufferer and, in her final restoration to life, a source of healing or redemption. The first task of the present essay is to supplement this account by a reading of Hermione, via Rhee, as complicit in her husband's repudiation of the conditions of human discourse. For if Leontes refuses the first condition sketched above, Hermione rejects the second. She helps to bring about Leontes's theatricalization of her by what, in parallel to Leontes's (anti)skepticism, might be called her sophism: her refusal to distinguish between rhetorical effectiveness and genuine conversation.<sup>6</sup>

The second task of this essay is to demonstrate that while Rhee's work is thus capable of illuminating the concerns of *The Winter's Tale* in unexpected ways, the play also complicates both Cavell's and Rhee's accounts of the possibility of discourse. It does so, specifically, by the pervasive and complex importance of what may be summarized as "theatricality"—role-playing, pretense, and mutual casting in roles—in the play. The summaries of Cavell and Rhee above already hint at the difficult, ambiguous, or suppressed status of "theatricality" within their accounts of the human conversation. One consequence of Cavell's insight that acknowledgment must be extended without firm or complete knowledge or guarantee is that such acknowledgment is always vulnerable to deception. If there are no criteria to guard against "pretending," then exposure to pretense cannot simply be banished from ordinary life. Rather, in Cavell's view, we can only put aside the tendency to protect ourselves by role-playing and pretense "time after time, place by place."<sup>7</sup>

Rhee's account of the unity of discourse, in turn, seems to depend on the casual assumption of an obvious (and therefore unformulated) difference between playacting and sincerity.<sup>8</sup> However, just as Leontes is rattled by the unbanishable threat of pretense, Hermione unsettles the casually assumed distinction between playacting and sincerity; and although the play presents both of these attitudes as deeply problematic, it refuses to extract itself entirely from the questions thrown up by its protagonists. This is true on a thematic as well as a formal level. In its thematic juxtaposition of Sicilia and Bohemia, and above all in its constant formal reflection on itself as theater, *The Winter's Tale* reminds us of the inescapable involvement of ordinary action with "theatricality" and offers an example of how such theatricality is to be integrated rather than excised.

## II

Within a Rhesian-Wittgensteinian framework, the first long scene of *The Winter's Tale* (1.2) represents an extreme example of a conception of language as a self-contained game rather than as part of a larger and interrelated dialogue. The three protagonists—Leontes, Hermione, and King Polixenes of Bohemia, Leontes's childhood friend—are engaged in a playful dispute about a possible extension of Polixenes's stay at the Sicilian court. The playfulness of this exchange is accentuated by the sporting terminology with which the friends self-reflexively comment on their "moves," and by the fact that arguments are weighed by their rhetorical dexterity rather than their sincerity. When Leontes fails to convince Polixenes to stay, Hermione comments on his rhetorical mistakes, and demonstrates in fencing terminology that with a more advantageous move, he could "beat [Polixenes] from his best ward" (1.2.33). Considering what strategy Polixenes might in turn employ to strengthen his position, she concludes that his strongest move would be to appeal to his desire to see his son (1.2.34).

Throughout, Hermione regards Polixenes's affection for his family purely as an argument he might deploy to his advantage in the present game. However, Polixenes's plea "I may not, verily" (1.2.45) unsettles this casually assumed game context. Insisting on the *veracity* of his argument, Polixenes attempts to emphasize that his petition to leave is no mere element of a courtly game but a genuine appeal to an external exigency. Hermione, however, violently repudiates this possibility, and transposes Polixenes's appeal to truthfulness itself into the parameters of the game, where "verily" becomes a mere word of power that she can use equally validly and—in her position of authority as his hostess—to greater advantage:

Verily?

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." Verily,  
 You shall not go—a lady's "verily"'s  
 As potent as a lord's. Will you go yet?  
 Force me to keep you as a prisoner,  
 Not like a guest; so you shall pay your fees  
 When you depart, and save your thanks. How say you?  
 My prisoner or my guest? By your dread "verily,"  
 One of them you shall be. (1.2.45–55)

Here, it becomes clear that Hermione regards conversation precisely as a game in which success depends on “mastering techniques and skills,” and in which, ultimately, nothing new is or can be said, because the game cannot be said to be “about” anything but itself.<sup>9</sup> By thus denying the subjective and contingent aspect of the exchange, Hermione shuts out any possibility of understanding Polixenes’s appeal to external exigencies, and (even more so) the claim these exigencies have on their game, and thus on her. While her speech succeeds in its aim, it also implies, ominously, that this success is only achieved by the game’s usurpation of reality, and by the possible coercion, rather than willing participation, of its players. Hermione will herself feel the consequences of this fact when her failure adequately to demarcate the boundary between play and sincerity ultimately results in her own arrest in the “play” scripted and imposed on her by her husband.

The immediate consequence of Hermione’s disregard for the contingency of their game is that the casual assumption of an obvious (and therefore unformulated) difference between playacting and sincerity, which usually regulates role-playing and games like the one at hand, is unsettled. When Leontes returns and praises her for her successful persuasion of Polixenes, Hermione exuberantly urges him to tell her whether she has ever spoken “to better purpose” (1.2.89), pleading: “cram’s with praise, and make’s / As fat as tame things . . . / Our praises are our wages. You may ride’s / With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs” (1.2.90–94). Here, she continues to refract her relationships through her success as a rhetorician or actress by implicitly associating Leontes’s recognition for her rhetorical skills with her sexual satisfaction (1.2.93–94), her pregnancy (1.2.90–91), and her livelihood (1.2.93). Leontes gently tries to steer her away from this association, invoking a different meaning of “good speech” by tenderly recounting how Hermione consented to marry him:

Three crabbèd months had soured themselves to death  
 Ere I could make thee open thy white hand  
 And clap thyself my love; then didst thou utter  
 “I am yours for ever.” (1.2.101–4)

Hermione, however, chooses to ignore the dimension of sincerity and dedication that distinguishes this occasion from her recent success. Emphasizing the element of achievement rather than the importance of self-dedication in forming a successful relationship, she places her

declaration of love for Leontes on the same rhetorical level as her playful persuasion of Polixenes: “Why, lo you now, I have spoke to th’purpose twice. / The one for ever earned a royal husband, / Th’other, for some while a friend” (1.2.105–7).

### III

Despite the evident warmheartedness of Hermione’s reply, its more sinister implications are precisely and overpoweringly registered by Leontes. Unsettling the unquestioned assumption of his wife’s sincerity (grounded in, though not guaranteed by, their personal relationship), her remarks elicit a radical awareness of his inability to *know* whether her seemingly casual interaction with Polixenes is indeed casual or whether it is contrived, concealing illicit affection. This distinction, as Leontes’s ensuing speech confirms, cannot be reaffirmed by reference to an objective criterion, because contrived behavior and natural behavior *look* exactly alike.

Too hot, too hot!

To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.  
 I have *tremor cordis* on me; my heart dances,  
 But not for joy, not joy. This entertainment  
 May a free face put on, derive a liberty  
 From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom,  
 And well become the agent—’t may, I grant.  
 But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers,  
 As now they are, and making practised smiles  
 As in a looking-glass, and then to sigh, as ’twere  
 The mort o’th’deer—O, that is entertainment  
 My bosom likes not, nor my brows. (1.2.107–18)

Hermione’s behavior is here centrally described as an “entertainment,” with its pertinent double meaning as “pastime” and “performance.” What may be “liberty,” flowing from “heartiness” and “bounty,” may equally be a display of “practised smiles” and affected sighs. Only a subjective arbitration differentiates the one from the other: Leontes’s “but” introduces not a counterargument but only an alternative description of the same actions.

At the sight of young Mamillius, Leontes realizes that the question whether his wife is faithful also entails the question whether his son is legitimate (“Art thou my boy?” [1.2.119]). This further question expresses

itself as the realization that his inability to interpret his wife affects him not only indirectly but also directly: it extends to his own issue. Mamillius, Leontes realizes, does not necessarily spring from Leontes's own will and intention; the boy is not "his" in any absolute sense.<sup>10</sup>

This destabilization of the relation between intention and issue begins to infect Leontes's very language: in what he intends to be a casual conversation with his son, the meanings of his words multiply in a way that cannot conveniently be termed either intentional or fortuitous. He wants his son's nose to be "neat" (1.2.122), but corrects the word to "cleanly" when he remembers that "neat" refers to horned cattle.<sup>11</sup> This reference, in turn, prompts the image of a wanton calf, where "wanton" means both playful and sexually licentious, and "calf" suggests both offspring and a horned cuckold.

Leontes's sense of the unreliability of intention now escalates. Overwhelmed by the instability of his words, he immediately insists on the unreliability of speech in general: "women . . . will say anything" (1.2.129). Initially, he attempts to neutralize this uncertainty by appealing to the contrasting reliability of eyesight: "but were they false / As o'er-dyed blacks . . . yet were it true / To say this boy were like me" (1.2.129–30, 133–34). However, the attempt fails when he remembers his wife, and is again startled by the possibility that her behavior "may . . . be/ Affection" (I quote from the First Folio):

sweet Villaine,  
Most dear'st, my Collop: Can thy Dam, may't be  
Affection? thy Intention stabs the Center.  
Thou do'st make possible things not so held,  
Communicat'st with Dreames (how can this be?)  
With what's vnreall: thou coactiue art,  
And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent,  
Thou may'st co-ioyne with something, and thou do'st,  
(And that beyond Commission) and I find it,  
(And that to the infection of my Braines,  
And hardning of my Browes.) (1.2.136–45)

This notoriously convoluted passage, lamenting the unstable relation between intention and meaning, itself enacts this instability through the ambiguity of the terms *affection* ("love" or "affectation") and *intention* ("meaning" or "purpose")—an ambiguity compounded by the uncertainty of the speech's subject. While Leontes *intends* to describe Hermione's behavior (saying that her "affection" has unsettled the

“center” of his certainty by crossing the boundary between the real and the unreal), the erroneousness of his accusations subtly undermines this intention and creates a rebound effect, a secondary stratum of meaning in which the subject of the speech is Leontes himself. The core of the speech, on this subsidiary reading, is the (inadvertent) confession that the king’s skepticism has made him unable to distinguish between the possible and the impossible, and enclosed him in his own “dreams.” In other words, here, as in the later “Is whispering nothing?” speech, doubt about his wife’s sincerity manifests itself, on more than one level, as “the inability to say what exists; to say whether, so to speak, language applies to anything.”<sup>12</sup>

This is Leontes’s breaking point. He abruptly terminates his thought by declaring, “Then ’tis very credent / Thou mayst co-join with something, *and thou dost*, / And that beyond commission” (1.2.141–43, emphasis added). In other words, he violently banishes his doubt by declaring with (false) authority that Hermione *has* transgressed her “commission”—that is, behaved contrary to his intention and the law. However, as he tacitly registers in the following lines, the consequence of such a claim to a definitive interpretation is the “infection of [his] brains / And hard’ning of [his] brows” (1.2.144–45)—a disease that demands not refutation, but healing.

For Stanley Cavell, this radical antiskepticism is a predominantly male predicament. Similar to Cordelia in *King Lear*, Hermione is, for Cavell, an entirely innocent victim of her husband’s “skeptical” mania. In the present reading, by contrast, Hermione is by no means so uncomplicated a victim. Leontes’s impulse to theatricalize her is, rather, partly incited by her own refusal to acknowledge that if she will not be implicated in her words, her words will nonetheless implicate her—precisely by making her into an actress. And the parallel goes even deeper. Hermione’s refusal to acknowledge the wider implications of her actions, to use language as more than a game in which she knows all the right moves, is, in its way, a failure almost as great as Leontes’s to acknowledge others in their freedom and inscrutability: rather than offering herself as a wife, friend, and mother—risking rejection, disappointment, and solitude—she attempts to earn the affection of Leontes and command those of Polixenes (1.2.45–55) and Mamillius (2.1.22–23, 27, 29, 31). The consequences of both her and her husband’s “theatricalizations” escalate tragically in the ensuing trial, and both will be healed only by the “theatrical miracle” wrought in the final scene. Hermione’s assurance to her ladies, in being escorted to prison, that “this action I now

go on / Is for my better grace" (2.1.121–22) heralds not the vindication she predicts but the grace of that miracle.

#### IV

The trial scene (3.2), thematically and structurally the pivotal scene of *The Winter's Tale*, shows the disastrous consequences of both Hermione's and (more radically) Leontes's refusals of the ordinary. At the same time, it makes painfully clear that the challenges to ordinary human conversation raised by the antiskeptical and the sophist cannot easily be escaped, least of all in the context of a theatrical play.

Hermione's earlier deployment of "verily" as a word of power now comes to haunt her when Leontes, as king, arrogates the same right to himself, publicly confining her to a role within a play of his own devising whose boundaries are indeterminate. Hermione verbalizes this metatheatrical dimension of her predicament through her theatrical language. She acquiesces in her arrest with the sardonic pun, "the King's will be performed" (2.1.115), recognizing that a factual defense is useless since (as she incisively observes) "mine integrity, / Being counted falsehood, shall, as I express it, / Be so received" (3.2.24–27). Her only hope, she realizes, is to plead the *insufficiency* of the role in which her husband has imprisoned her: "You, my lord, best know, / . . . my past life / Hath been as continent, as chaste, as true / As I am now unhappy, which is more / Than history can pattern, though devised / And played to take spectators" (3.2.31–36).

But Leontes immediately folds this plea back into his theatricalization of his wife, identifying it with the typical subterfuges of the Vice character in a morality play: "I ne'er heard yet / That any of these bolder vices wanted / Less impudence to gainsay what they did / Than to perform it first" (3.2.53–56).<sup>13</sup> Hermione now recognizes that Leontes's totalizing narrative cannot be outstripped; its insistence on absoluteness will not tolerate boundaries, and Hermione's only escape is death. "My life stands in the level of your dreams," she capitulates, "which I'll lay down" (3.2.79–80).

It is indeed only death—the announced death of Mamillius—that rouses Leontes to the emotional recognition that he has "too much believed in [his] own suspicion" (3.2.149). But if this is anagnorisis, it fails to have the purifying effect we would expect. Like Lear's recognition of Cordelia (*King Lear* 4.7) and Prospero's abjuration of his magic (*The Tempest* 5.1), Leontes's renunciation of his totalizing power results

not in genuine release for his fellow human beings but merely in the construction of a new incarcerating narrative. Lear gleefully consigns himself and Cordelia to prison, to dwell aloof from the affairs of ordinary life as “God’s spies” (5.3). Prospero never solicits or verifies but merely announces his brother’s “penitence” (5.1.28), and so slips into the role of magnanimous pardoner the moment he relinquishes that of all-powerful avenger.<sup>14</sup> Leontes, too, though he surrenders all accusations against his wife, immediately reaches for a new narrative in which Hermione is not a traitress but a spotless saint whose death brings upon him “shame perpetual” (3.2.236), driving him to “shut . . . himself up” (4.1.19) for sixteen years in unremitting penance. And Hermione, too, finds not release but merely a new role: she is now consigned to playing a dead woman. As is typical of Shakespeare’s late work, the climactic sequence of anagnorisis and catastrophe brings not catharsis but only a further twist to increasingly intractable problems.

Shakespeare strains this strategy almost to breaking point by compounding the horrors of the scene by a metatheatrical dimension that directly involves the audience in the problems they are witnessing. As far as one can speak of a “natural response” to the action so far, the natural response of the audience to the perceived disproportion of Leontes’s accusations is to take Hermione’s side, repudiating (i.e., rejecting as a possibility in their own lives) the violent skepticism into which Leontes has fallen. However, this natural response is to some extent predicated on ignoring or denying the close parallel that in fact obtains between Leontes’s perspective and their own. While the spectators are suspicious of Leontes’s accusations of dissembling, what they see on stage is in fact exactly what he sees: a display in which spontaneous affection cannot unproblematically be distinguished from theatrical craftsmanship. This foregrounding of the theatricality of *The Winter’s Tale* problematizes the “suspension of disbelief” on which the work of a dramatic performance traditionally depends—the audience’s casual construal of the actors’ performances as the spontaneous behavior of fictional characters.

Furthermore, although the spectators may wish for Hermione’s exoneration and liberation, the very conditions of their sympathetic witness contribute to making this impossible. If the audience is to engage with her at all, it is by observing and being, to a certain extent, entertained by her: she is, to us, ultimately a figure in a play. This enforced complicity of the audience in Leontes’s tyranny escalates (along with everything else) in the trial scene. If audience members have, in an oft-reported response to Leontes’s progressing insanity, been plagued by a mounting

sense of paralysis in being unable to “set him right,” the trial scene clarifies and sharpens the source of this paralysis. Hermione’s protest that her grief is deeper than “history” (a narrative “of any sort, . . . including drama”<sup>15</sup>) “can pattern” makes it clear that not only her husband but also the spectators are trapping her in a role. This suggestion swells into a lament of her exposure, not only to the court but also as an actress to a theater audience:

For behold me,  
 A fellow of the royal bed, which owe  
 A moiety of the throne; a great king’s daughter,  
 The mother to a hopeful prince, here standing  
 To prate and talk for life and honour fore  
 Who please to come and hear. (3.2.36–41)

In his 2002 production of the play for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), Matthew Warchus used the arena-like stage of the London Roundhouse to dramatize this metatheatrical dimension. The queen, tied center stage and overseen from a balcony by Leontes, was surrounded by closely grouped promenaders on a level with the actress. The director incorporated the promenaders into the scene as guards, surrounding the defendant’s platform holding a line of thick red rope. They were thus made to watch Hermione’s pathetic plea for release in full awareness both of her relative innocence and of the fact that they themselves (physically as well as figuratively) contributed to her detention; they are voyeurs as much as spectators. What is more, this condition could not and cannot be cured by the mere interruption of the action, the mere refusal to be an audience; such a refusal (as Cavell notes) would merely make the characters vanish, and the condition of both the characters (as “captives”) and the audience (as “perpetrators”) would be perpetuated rather than healed.<sup>16</sup> What the audience, as much as Leontes and Hermione, needs is a working through rather than a repudiation of theatricality.

## V

The Bohemia sequence in act 4—characterized by the carnival mood of a festival, incessant changes of roles and costumes, and the outrageous fictions of its “master of ceremonies,” Autolycus—is a necessary step toward this resolution.

The anarchy or “unlawful” levity of the imagination is an object of fear to Leontes, and Bohemia may be interpreted as a product of Leontes’s mind that, like earlier “issues” of his imagination, eludes or exceeds the control of its creator.<sup>17</sup> In act 1, Leontes had painted a pastoral picture of his youth, only to find its idyllic innocence threatened by a dagger that must be kept muzzled “lest it should bite its master and so prove, / As ornaments often do, too dangerous” (1.2.50–57). Now, Shakespeare presents Bohemia as another anarchic issue of Leontes’s imagination by reversing the locations of the story as given in his source, Greene’s *Pandosto*.<sup>18</sup> This reversal exploits the fact that the pastoral genre originated in Sicily: the pastoral Bohemia, bordering on a fictitious sea, is literally a product of the Sicilian court. This also makes it a fitting home for the central pastoral figure, Perdita, another issue of the Sicilian king. These lines of origin link the Bohemia sequence inseparably to the problems of origination and theatricalization explored earlier, hinting that the conspicuous theatricality of this sequence must be confronted and integrated to work through these problems.

Many recent productions have responded to the intuitive recognition that act 4 treats the same difficult subjects as the first acts, and to the detection of a certain “unlawfulness” in its trivialization of these subjects by dark or ponderous interpretations of the Bohemia scenes, usually centering on a menacing Autolycus.<sup>19</sup> The error of these interpretations lies in the assumption that the affinity of act 4 to the preceding acts signals a threatening subtext that must be brought out in performance. In fact, however, the “unlawfulness” of these scenes consists precisely in their *resistance* to weighty interpretations, and in their light and conventional character. The transgressiveness of this frivolity is foregrounded from the beginning in Time’s entreaty to “impute it not a crime / To me or my swift passage that I slide / O’er sixteen years, and leave the growth untried / Of that wide gap” (3.3.4–7). Here, we hear a first foreshadowing of Paulina’s admonition, before rousing Hermione’s statue, that “those that think it unlawful business / I am about, let them depart” (5.3.95–96).

These entreaties also remind us that this potentially improper or unlawful action must be licensed or at least condoned by the audience. Shakespeare justifies the time gap between acts 3 and 4 by invoking the authority of “time.” However, the farcically conventional representation of Time as an old man with wings and an hourglass exposes this justification as a mere theatrical ruse, whose real authorization must be the imaginative assent of the spectators.<sup>20</sup> Throughout, Time solicits

the audience's imaginative participation, for example, with the quibble "let me pass" (4.1.9), which requests the double imaginative effort of "letting time pass" and "letting me (the actor) pass as Time."

The main justification Time offers for his transgression of the boundary between reality and fantasy, as well as of the classical unities of time, space, and action, is the entertainment value of his story (see 4.1.29–32). This is also what accounts for the "theatrical perversity"<sup>21</sup> of the appearance of a bear at the end of act 3—a conventional device, according to Horace, to maintain audience attention "in the middle of a play."<sup>22</sup> Both Time and the experienced playwright, then, openly admit that the stage action, including the tragic happenings of the previous acts, are first of all devices to entertain the audience. This raises the reverse question of that raised in the first half of the play: not how to alleviate the weight of witnessing this drama, but how to deal with the unbearable lightness, the seeming insignificance, of the spectacle that has touched us so deeply.

This question echoes throughout the Bohemia sequence, which openly trivializes the problems of bastardry, sexual license, disguise, the impenetrability of performance, and the paralysis of the audience. The tone of this treatment is set by the old shepherd's discovery of Perdita. The shepherd does not doubt that "this has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door work" (3.3.71–72), but decides to "take it up for pity" (3.3.74) anyway. (Is it this easy? we ask.) Then his son enters and reports a shipwreck and a bear's attack, emphasizing the immediacy of the events: "the men are not yet cold under water, nor the bear half dined on the gentleman—he's at it now" (3.3.101–2). His report, however, elicits a mere pro forma acknowledgment of the tragedy from his father (3.3.108–10). (What about the anguish caused by the spectators' inability to act in the trial scene? we ask.) This carnivalization is epitomized in Autolycus's equally outrageous and gullibly accepted claims that the fantastic texts of his ballads are true:

AUTOLYCUS. Here's one to a very doleful tune, how a usurer's wife was brought to bed of twenty money-bags at a burden, and how she longed to eat adders' heads and toads carbonadoed.

MOPSA. Is it true, think you?

AUTOLYCUS. Very true, and but a month old. (4.4.260–5)

But if the levity of the imagination can be a cause of unease, it is also tremendously liberating, and the Bohemia scenes, at their best, are an exuberant and delightful theatrical spectacle.<sup>23</sup> This sense of liberation is rooted in the suggestion, repeated throughout the sequence, that role-playing (or -casting) can be a means not only of concealing one's identity or fixing that of another person but also of finding one's identity or giving another person the imaginative space to find it. The most articulate exponent of this view, as we will see in a moment, is Florizel.

The persistent tension between "unlawfulness" as transgression of and exemption from the limits or laws of identity and origin escalates in the final scenes of the Bohemia sequence, with their threat of disownment and violent death, sparking a firework of disguises and implausible journeys. These scenes, leading the Bohemian pastorals back to their place of origin in Sicilia, recall characters and spectators to the claim that such origins have on that world, and of the eventual need to integrate the two.

The most eloquent advocate of the liberating power of role-playing in the Bohemia sequence is Florizel. Before the feast begins, Perdita appears garlanded with flowers, and the prince (himself in disguise) praises the costume for underlining and creatively accounting for the girl's native nobility, which remains unexplained by her (supposed) origin:

These your unusual weeds to each part of you  
Does give a life; no shepherdess, but Flora  
Peering in April's front. This your sheep-shearing  
Is as a meeting of the petty gods,  
And you the queen on't. (4.4.1-5)

Perdita, by contrast, diffidently dissociates herself from her role; it is only the conventions of this festival that foist it on her and avert the otherwise unbearable embarrassment of having claimed a place (and beauty) not her own (4.4.10-14).

When Perdita voices her concern about an expected reproach by Florizel's father, he comforts her by invoking the precedent of the gods, who, like him, have assumed disguises for the sake of love:

Apprehend  
Nothing but jollity. The gods themselves,  
Humbling their deities to love, have taken  
The shapes of beasts upon them. Jupiter  
Became a bull and bellowed; the green Neptune

A ram and bleated; and the fire-robed god,  
 Golden Apollo, a poor humble swain,  
 As I seem now. (4.4.24–31)

This deployment of (pastoral) myths is markedly different from that of the courtiers in act 1 (1.1.20–30; 1.2.61–74; 1.2.152–57). While Polixenes and Leontes attempted to freeze the Edenic image of their childhood into a myth of origin unassailable by the threats of sexuality and the imagination encountered as adults, Florizel does not invoke mythology in order to achieve distance and invulnerability but to create a space in which the native nobility he perceives in Perdita is imaginatively accounted for, and in which he can give himself to her: “or I’ll be thine, my fair, / Or not my father’s. For I cannot be / Mine own nor anything to any if / I be not thine. To this I am most constant, / Though destiny say no” (4.4.41–46).

Florizel’s own disguise as a shepherd expresses as well as serves this desire. It embodies his readiness to surrender himself and his princely position to Perdita, and allows him to be truthful in a way that his usual identity bars. A. D. Nuttall comments on this paradox:

Florizel . . . means what he says. But were he an artful rhetorician of the court, Perdita could not help but doubt him. As it is, his pastoral pretense has lifted him out of the self-consuming prison of rhetoric into the possibility of truthfulness. Throughout the scene, playing-acting [sic] is a means of revelation, not of concealment.<sup>24</sup>

Apart from an explicit allusion to the Ovidian gods, there is also an implicit parallel to Christ, who, for the love of his people, “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:7), and who often described himself as the “good shepherd” (John 10:1–16). This parallel reinforces the idea of self-surrender, and of the assumption of a role not to augment but to empty one’s proper self.

However, disguise is only a “means of revelation” as long as it merely suspends, but does not downright *deny*, the origin or antecedent identity of the actor, and insists on being a complete and sufficient condition for presence. In *The Winter’s Tale*, the consequence of such a claim (i.e., that one’s disguise is not accountable to an antecedent identity) is inversely parallel to that of the claim that knowledge of origins is a sufficient condition for presence (i.e., that such knowledge is not relativized by the partial theatricality of all presence). Both lead to the formation of

a fiction of absolute access to identity, which disallows the person to whom it is imputed to emancipate him- or herself from a fixed narrative and experience genuine encounters.

This is most forcefully demonstrated in Perdita's repeated denials of the theatrical origin of her pastoral identity. When Polixenes questions her about the absence of carnations and streaked gillyvors in her garden, she replies that she dislikes them, since "there is an art which in their piedness shares / With great creating nature" (4.4.87–88). Polixenes challenges her denunciation of grafting, but Perdita insists that she will not "set one slip of them; / No more than, were [she] painted, [she] would wish / This youth should say 'twere well, and only therefore / Desire to breed by [her]" (4.4.100–3). By construing authenticity as "naturalness" and claiming that she is exempt from the intervention of art or artifice, Perdita denies the truth that her own identity as a shepherd's daughter is already an illusion and less true to her real station than her role as queen of the feast. In other words, she locks herself into a nostalgic fiction of unstained purity akin to that of Leontes in act 1, and thus inadvertently confirms her descent from him.

Similarly, by using pastoral conventions without awareness of their literary context, she unwittingly forces Florizel into the role of a deceased Arcadian youth mourned by a shepherdess. She laments her lack of spring flowers (presented in a mythically inflected catalogue) to make garlands for the shepherdesses and for her "sweet friend, / To strew him o'er and o'er." Florizel provocatively replies: "what, like a corpse?" (4.4.128–30), pointing out both that her remark implies that he is dead, as pastoral youths strewn with flowers usually are, and that she is unwittingly turning him into a fictional *persona*, similar to how Leontes has theatricalized Hermione. Her reply to this provocative suggestion confirms this association, but also enigmatically points beyond itself to Hermione's later revival. Rather than denying Florizel's conclusion, Perdita affirms that *insofar* as he is her lover, he is also a corpse, and what is more, a living corpse: "not like a corpse; *or if*, not to be buried, / But *quick*, and in mine arms" (4.4.131–32, emphasis added).

The consequences of refusing accountability to one's antecedent identity are enacted in Florizel's encounter with his father. Polixenes has joined the feast in disguise to observe his son. He is enticed by the spectacle and its hostess, and is ready to admit that "nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, / Too noble for this place" (4.4.157–59). Furthermore, his examination of the sincerity of his son's affection (4.4.340–64) and repeated appeal to Florizel to

inform his father of his intended marriage (4.4.386–99) suggest that he may be willing to authenticate Perdita's seeming nobility by raising her to the position of Florizel's wife, provided that his son admits his and her true identity to the father and solicits his permission for the marriage.

Florizel, however, stubbornly refuses to do so, thus effectively divorcing himself from his father and therewith the possibility of integrating his diverging identities. The father's violent response reflects this radical self-alienation:

Mark your divorce, young sir,  
 Whom son I dare not call—thou art too base  
 To be acknowledged, thou a scepter's heir,  
 That thus affects a sheep-hook!  
 . . . And thou fresh piece  
 Of excellent witchcraft, whom of force must know  
 The royal food thou cop'st with . . .  
 I'll have thy beauty scratched with briars and made  
 More homely than thy state. (4.4.414–23)

The Bohemia scenes end in a state of divorce and self-alienation similar to that in which the Sicilia scenes conclude.

## VI

If the attempt to escape one's impulse to "theatricalize" by violently repudiating one's own formerly assumed knowledge of the other leads merely to the converse, namely the idolization of the other as a figure of purity beyond one's own reach, then how *is* theatricalization to be overcome? Not by an assessment of knowledge but by an admission of desire. This is the work of the statue scene (5.3). In this culminating scene, Leontes perceives himself as facing the same threat as in the trial scene: the threat of "believing too much in his own suspicion." Paulina actively fosters this conviction that it is merely his own fancy that believes the statue to be alive, warning him, "No longer shall you gaze on't, lest your fancy / May think anon it moves" (5.3.60–61). Leontes's response is not an insistence on knowledge or ignorance but a confession of desire that the statue may precisely be *more* than what it seems to him, that it may have a life of its own—indeed, a recognition that his own life depends on the object of this desire, while he has no power to enforce it. In other words, for Leontes, integration requires more than

a mere renunciation of the claim that he can authoritatively decipher Hermione's behavior, just as for Prospero in the near-contemporaneous *Tempest*, reintegration into human society necessitates more than the mere abjuration of his magic.<sup>25</sup>

Prospero's final insight into his own condition as a theatrical figure in the epilogue of *The Tempest* becomes a solitary plea for acknowledgment, placed in the hands of the audience who must affirm their unbridgeable separation from him by the very expression of their sympathy, applause.<sup>26</sup> Leontes's acknowledgment of his condition, by contrast, is not made in isolation but precisely in and through an identification with Hermione as she has become through his guilt: "I am ashamed. Does not the stone rebuke me / For being more stone than it?" (5.3.37–38). By accepting Hermione's death-like rigidity as his own, Leontes fastens his own life to the hope that she lives: "would I were dead, but that methinks already" she moves (5.3.62). Unable to enforce this hope, however, he can only be "content to look on" what Paulina "can make her do" (5.3.91–92). The faith in Hermione (and Paulina) expressed by this self-surrender releases his wife from her imprisonment and allows her to be herself again.

But the "theatrical miracle" wrought here is not only Hermione's release from the totalizing grasp of her husband but also her own recovery. In allowing herself to be presented as a statue, Hermione acknowledges that the role of actress was not merely unjustly imposed on her but also existentially implicates her, and that in two ways. The first and more obvious is that she has helped to bring it about by what I have called her sophism: her refusal to distinguish between rhetorical effectiveness and genuine relationship, to integrate her discourse (and with it herself) within a wider communal whole. She has made herself into an actress, and her transformation from a statue to a woman is, among other things, an act of relinquishing this aloofness from ordinary human life and accepting her own vulnerable humanity. She must *choose* to come down from the pedestal.

The second is related to the first but is perhaps even more difficult and delicate. Leontes's tyrannous grasp existentially implicates Hermione because, as Leontes's wife, she is not a fully autonomous being but partly dependent for her own identity on her partner's acknowledgment or withdrawal. This is one of the persistent strains of the late plays. Florizel first sounds it in *The Winter's Tale* when he confesses to Perdita: "I cannot be / Mine own nor anything to any if / I be not thine" (4.4.41–46). It is echoed at the climax of each of the late plays. Gonzalo remarks with

wonder just before the return to Milan at the close of *The Tempest* how “all of us [found] ourselves / When no man was his own” (5.1.205–13). Marina, at the close of *Pericles*, offers her story, and with it her identity, to the king to be acknowledged or rejected. The aged king, conversely, is reborn in the recognition of his daughter: “thou that begett’st him that did thee beget” (21.182). If this is a version of Christ’s “whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it” (Luke 17:33), it inflects that exhortation with the inescapable relationality of the self—its dependence on the love and recognition of others.

In the excruciating hundred lines of stillness before her “resurrection,” Hermione bears the silence to which her sophistic chatter in the first scenes has reduced her. Rather than attempting to coerce or cajole, she offers herself to her husband in silence, making herself completely dependent on his response. Cavell describes the statue scene as a “new sacrament . . . of marriage.”<sup>27</sup> “In [Genesis],” he writes, “the origin of marriage is presented as the creation of the woman from the man,” suggesting that the “ceremony of union takes the form of a ceremony of separation”: two can only become one because one has first become two.<sup>28</sup> “It is *separation* that Leontes’ participation in parturition grants—that Hermione has . . . a life beyond his, and that she can create a life beyond his and hers. . . .”<sup>29</sup> But if Leontes needs to learn true separateness, Hermione needs to learn true relatedness. While separation has only to be acknowledged, union has to be offered and received—and it is this second step that constitutes the miracle of this scene.

The restoration achieved in the statue scene also extends to the audience. Hermione’s resurrection demonstrates that the dexterity of the imagination does not necessarily imply frivolity, but rather involves real risk and accomplishes real work. Paulina’s exhortation, “it is required you do awake your faith” (5.3.94–95), is addressed to the audience as well as to Leontes: it is by their imaginative consent that the spectacle on stage can take place. Thus, by contrast to the trial scene, spectatorship is now construed not as voyeurism, but as creative “work.” At the same time, Paulina makes it clear that the audience must “awake their faith” not in a religious but in a theatrical sense; that is, they must suspend their disbelief. This means that the very act of restoring Hermione also distances the audience from her: only by admitting that she is a theatrical figure can they bring her to life at all. Thus, the scene at once awakes longing for full encounter and enacts the impossibility of such fullness in the present context. In this way, it leads the audience back to the ordinary. Leontes spells it out when he leads his friends away in order

that “each one [may] demand and answer to his part / Performed in this wide gap of time since first / We were dissevered” (5.3.153–55). The play has not only introduced but also dissevered them from themselves, and healing can only take place if it is brought to an end.

UNIVERSITY OF ST. ANDREWS

*My very warm thanks to David Egan and Erik Tønning for their valuable comments on various drafts of this essay.*

1. Stanley Cavell, “Knowing and Acknowledging,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* pp. 238–66 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 263.
2. Cavell, “Knowing,” p. 263. For a fuller philosophical-theological assessment of Cavell’s concepts of acknowledgment and skepticism, see Judith Wolfe, “Acknowledging a Hidden God: A Theological Critique of Stanley Cavell on Scepticism,” *Heythrop Journal* 48, no. 3 (2007): 384–405 (as Judith Tønning).
3. Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), p. 2. See also Stephen Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007).
4. Rhees, *Wittgenstein*, p. 6.
5. See Cavell, “The Avoidance of Love,” in *Must We Mean What We Say?* pp. 267–355 (pp. 333–34).
6. For a more general discussion of sophism in the context of a Wittgensteinian-Rheesian conception of philosophy, see Mulhall, *The Conversation of Humanity*, esp. pp. 30–37.
7. Stanley Cavell, “The Division of Talent,” *Critical Inquiry* 11, no. 4 (1985): 519–53 (p. 531). See also Cavell, *A Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), pp. 92–93.
8. Important texts in this tradition are J. L. Austin’s “A Plea for Excuses” (1956) and “Pretending” (1958), published in *Philosophical Papers*, ed. James O. Urmson and Geoffrey J. James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), pp. 123–52 and 201–19. Jacques Derrida critiques these texts in ways relevant to the present context in “Signature Event Context,” *Limited Inc.*, ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Samuel Weber and Jeffrey Mehlman (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 1–24. For a philosophical analysis of Derrida’s and Cavell’s competing interpretations of Austin’s thought on this subject, complementary to the literary analysis offered here, see Judith Wolfe, “‘The Ordinary’ in Stanley Cavell and Jacques Derrida,” *Minerva: An Open Access Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2013).
9. Rhees, *Wittgenstein*, pp. 6, 12.
10. This fear of illicit proliferation also surfaces in the romances’ preoccupation with incest: both incest and drama threaten the identity of the father or author, who becomes

a product or child of his issue just as much as its creator or procreator. It is characteristic of the romances that they do not attempt to neutralize but to redeem this threat, especially the transformation of the incestuous relationship at the beginning of *Pericles* into the king's recognition of his daughter as "thou that begett'st him that did thee beget" (21.182) and the assimilation of the "false" recognitions and emotions in *Cymbeline* (the princes' lament for a dead boy who is actually a drugged girl, Innogen's extreme grief over the headless corpse of her husband that is actually the corpse of her enemy, and so forth) into the conspicuously theatrical recognition scene at the end of the play. For a discussion of this problematic in *The Tempest*, see Judith Wolfe, "'Like This Insubstantial Pageant, Faded': Eschatology and Theatricality in *The Tempest*," *Literature & Theology* 18, no. 4 (2004): 371–82 (as Judith Tonnig).

11. Stephen Orgel's note to the line, *The Winter's Tale* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 101.

12. Stanley Cavell, "Recounting Gains, Showing Losses," in *Disowning Knowledge in Seven Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 193–222 (p. 197).

13. This association is noted in Thomas Van Laan, *Role-playing in Shakespeare* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1978), p. 230.

14. See Wolfe, "Insubstantial Pageant," p. 378.

15. Orgel's definition in the note to 3.2.35, *The Winter's Tale*, p. 144.

16. Compare Cavell's comment on the joke about the Southern yokel who tries to save Desdemona from "the black man" by trying to stop Othello: "that farthest extremity has not touched Othello; he has vanished. It has merely interrupted an evening's work. Quiet the house, pick up the thread again, and Othello will reappear, as near and as deaf to us as ever" ("The Avoidance of Love," p. 101).

17. Compare to the masque Prospero devises in act 5 of *The Tempest*, which erupts into similar anarchy; see Wolfe, "Insubstantial Pageant," p. 375.

18. Robert Greene, *Pandosto* (London, 1588; 4th ed., 1607).

19. A typical example is Peter Hall's interpretation of Autolycus in his production for the National Theatre in 1988. Hall described Autolycus as "a figure of anarchy, preying upon the rural community" and encouraged his actor Ken Stott to see "how far [he could] push the audience towards hating Autolycus, disturbing them." Roger Warren describes the effect of this choice: "After initial (rather nervous) laughter, [Stott's] approach froze audience response, and this had an unfortunate effect on this section of the play, for the part is simply too long to maintain attention in an audience which has been alienated" (Roger Warren, *Staging Shakespeare's Late Plays* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990], p. 132).

20. See also the similar need for audience compensation elicited by the mechanics' farcical representation of "Wall" and "Moonshine" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. When Hippolyta remarks on their ineptitude, Theseus responds: "The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing. / Our sport shall be to take what they mistake, / And what poor duty cannot do, / Noble respect takes it in might, not merit" (5.1.89–92).

21. Orgel's description in *The Winter's Tale*, p. 37.

22. In *Epistles* 2.1.185–86, he complains about audiences who “call in the middle of a play for a bear or for boxers”; cited in Orgel, *The Winter’s Tale*, p. 37.
23. Theodor Fontane describes the pastoral sequence in Charles Keans’s production at the Princess’s Theatre in London (1856) as “the most . . . delightful” spectacle he has ever seen: “Nothing disturbed the magic of this delightful pastoral scene. . . . One sees an ideal world, and one believes in it” (diary entry for August 20, 1856, trans. Russell Jackson; repr. in Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare in the Theatre: An Anthology of Criticism* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000], p. 98). Similarly, Warchus’s production for the RSC, employing an onstage country music band and inviting the promenaders to join in the dance of the shepherds, created an intense festive atmosphere that temporarily obliterated the dark ambience of the preceding scenes entirely.
24. Nuttall, *Shakespeare*, p. 43.
25. See Wolfe, “Insubstantial Pageant,” pp. 377–79.
26. See Wolfe, “Insubstantial Pageant,” pp. 377–79.
27. Cavell, “Introduction,” *Disowning Knowledge*, pp. 1–38 (p. 18).
28. Cavell, “Counting Gains,” p. 220.
29. Cavell, “Counting Gains,” p. 220 (emphasis added).