Ovidianism, Myth and Emotion in *The Winter’s Tale*

The “New Ovidianism” in studies of the Renaissance has coincided with the “affective turn,” the widespread attention to emotion that has swept the social and cognitive sciences in the last two decades and has reframed and initiated new kinds of research in literary studies and across the humanities. More recently, we are witnessing a focus on positive affect or a “happiness turn,” as the bias toward accounting for negative affects like fear and sadness has given way to more complex theorizations and categorizations of “positive” emotions as well. In this draft section of a larger essay, I explore how the Ovidianism of *The Winter’s Tale* produces positive affective states (awe, comfort, solace, joy) through intertextuality. These fictional representations of positive emotions are explicitly defined by their reliance on previous myths and literary works, and I trace the ways such narratives function as intertextual emotion scripts. The cognitive and social sciences have provided ever finer evidence that narrative is a foundational patterning principle of our experience of emotions. Patrick Colm Hogan, for example, has outlined the privileged role of stories and storymaking in the processes of encoding and elaborating the lived experience of emotion. As a scholar of literature I am interested in pursuing this intertextual nature of emotion itself. In the larger work from which this is an excerpt, I situate *The Winter’s Tale* in a broader examination of positive emotions as they are constituted in Shakespeare’s works. I focus on the plays not solely as documents of social history, but also as participating structures in the continuous work of defining and evaluating the lived experience of emotion. My work traces how positive emotions including happiness and well-being are codified in these works in their original staging and across time and cultures as the plays are continually reproduced.

When Paulina famously pauses in the final scene of *The Winter’s Tale* before she reveals that the statue of Hermione is Hermione herself, she tells her on-stage and off-stage audience, “It is required / You do awake your faith” (5.3.94-5). She externalizes and elaborates the play’s affective purpose and its dependence on the imaginative narrative generosity of her audience, as they are obliged to embrace the effect that viewing the metamorphic statue will have on them. This powerful moment of artistic self-consciousness is an answer to the play’s pervasive questioning of the nature and value of art, and it may suggest on the one hand that the Ovidian pagan myth of the lost daughter Proserpina that has been shadowing the action of the play is being overwritten in the final moments by the central Christian myth of redemption and grace [a reading both supported and troubled by the threatening religious language surrounding Paulina, as Leontes calls her a “mankind witch” (2.3.68), potentially a heretic (2.3.115), and then she assures us that she will not be performing the transformation with “wicked powers” (5.3.91)]. The primary meaning of “faith” in the period, however, was “the quality of
fulfilling one’s trust or promise; faithfulness, loyalty, fidelity, trustworthiness.” Faith, therefore, is contractual. When Paulina asks her audience to awake their faith, she is preparing them for the destabilizing social experience of awe and wonder that will be facilitated by the metamorphosis of Hermione’s statue from stone to flesh, an intertextually overdetermined moment of Ovidianism that recalls the Pygmalion myth (as well as Euripides’ Alcestis). She suggests that they must have faith both in her as the commissioner of the statue and by extension the playwright as creator of this unconventional and unexpected narrative closure. The scene dramatizes the experience of awe to produce awe, and in its Ovidian reference emphasizes the metamorphic qualities of awe itself.6

According to social psychologists Michelle Shiota et al., awe is usually defined by the experience of “perceptual vastness” and the need for cognitive accommodation. The experience of awe, unlike the experience of most other positive emotions, moves the individual toward changes in their cognitive schema.7 Awe is an affective state that encourages thinking and produces rational reflection, and in the play this moment of awe and wonder allows the fictional world to critique itself, forcing the audience to accommodate new understandings of the constructed community that is broken and partially amended over the course of the play. In this scene, the vastness of time is the most emphasized cognitive challenge, as well as perhaps the recognition of the human lifespan in the reunion of Perdita with her mother. The intensity of awe as an emotion is ultimately replaced by reconciliation and emphases on joy and comfort, but the scene is characteristically tragicomic, highlighting both pain and pleasure. Leontes says “this affliction has a taste as sweet / as any cordial comfort” (5.3.75). In its final moments, it also returns to the pervasive melancholy that characterizes the play even in its “happy” resolution, as Paulina announces that she will “wing me to some withered bough, and there / My mate, that’s never to be found again, lament till I am lost” (5.3.134-6). Although she is married off in the final decree by Leontes, Paulina’s actual silence resonates more than this forced social silencing, and so it is her lament, her grief, that brings the play to a close.

The Winter’s Tale shares with Shakespeare’s other romances an interest in narrative structure and the boundaries of its tragicomic genre as well as a self-consciousness about its literary artistry. It is explicitly intertextual, retelling Robert Greene’s Pandosto (1588) by imbuing that tale with a deliberate Ovidianism created through allusions primarily to Ovid’s Proserpina and Pygmalion. As it moves from the “winter” world of Sicilia to the “summer” world of Bohemia through the highly self-conscious device of the allegorical Time who moves the plot forward sixteen years, the play also draws attention to its status as myth. Its primary mythic source is the Proserpina tale of the abducted daughter who must reside with Hades during the winter until she is reunited with her mother, Ceres, in the spring. Northrup Frye calls it a “solstitial” play (117), and Jonathan Bate points out that “The Winter’s Tale is Shakespeare’s most overtly mythic play title. It announces a link between characters and their emotions on the one hand, and the seasons on the other” (220).8 In many critical discussions of this most “mythic” of Shakespeare’s plays, the definition of a myth as a narrative structuring of human experience is assumed, but in fact there is disagreement about what a myth is. It is useful, for instance, to return to Rene
Girard’s insistence that all myths are generated by a communal act of violence. In the case of The Winter’s Tale, this mythic violence is directed primarily at Hermione and her children, and the exposure of Perdita to death that is ordered by Leontes and performed by Antigonus stands in for Hades’ abduction of Proserpina in the underlying myth. The myth that structures the play, then, also structures its violence, and this explains in part the bizarre development of Leontes’ unfounded jealousy and rage at the beginning of the play. As it is deployed here, the Proserpina myth is not just about the death and regeneration that accompany the seasons, but the violence to women that is generative of that myth itself and the grief that is its feminized response. The awe demanded at the end of the play requires the accommodation of a new perspective on the misogynistic narrative of adultery that resulted in Hermione’s sixteen-year death. It exposes the violence at the heart of the play’s intertexts, and then provokes thinking on the consequences for the community of such narratives.

From the start, Hermione’s character is defined by her resistance to the cuckold narrative that has been set loose in the play to incriminate her. At her trial, Hermione challenges Leontes to compare the chaste truth of her life before his accusation to her present unhappiness as the target of his spectacular jealousy:

You, my lord, best know—
Who least will seem to do so—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 (3.2.30-35).

In this moment of crisis in the play, Hermione has been brought forth to trial shortly after giving birth (and against all cultural health practices), had her infant sent to death, and seems destined to be tortured and killed for treason for an adultery that she has not committed. She is unhappy indeed, as “unhappy” in this period meant primarily “unfortunate” or “unlucky” rather than sad, and her present misery is defined in contrast to her happy past.

In Shakespeare’s primary and closely contemporary source for the play, Robert Greene’s Pandosto or The Triumph of Time (1588), the happiness of the characters is framed as a function of Fortune’s fickle influence on human affairs. At the start, the king and queen of Bohemia, Pandosto and Bellaria, are happy because fortune allows them to be so:

They had not been married long, but Fortune (willing to increase their happiness) lent them a son, so adorned with the gifts of nature, as the perfection of the child greatly augmented the love of the parents and the joys of their commons; in so much that the Bohemians to show their inward joys by outward actions made bonfires and triumphs throughout all the kingdom, appointing jousts and tourneys for the honor of their young prince.  

Fortune first allows such a multiplication of joys, but quickly the romance plot is set in motion when “Fortune, envious of such happy success, willing to show some sign of her
inconstancy, turned her wheel and darkened their bright sun of prosperity with the misty clouds of mishap and misery.” The personified Fortune in this romance is envious and it is her fickle will that generates joy or sorrow.

Revising Pandosto (in which the queen dies and is not reborn and her daughter narrowly escapes the incestuous advances of her father), Shakespeare also redefines happiness. Rather than focusing on the difficult journey that is the main matter of Green’s romance, the play elaborates on the intense emotional interactions that are produced by Leontes’ jealousy and dilates on this pivotal trial scene. Hermione’s description of her present state as unhappy both points to Pandosto’s characterization of happiness as dependent on fortune, but also suggests a more modern notion of happiness as a state of joy or contentedness. Hermione articulates happiness as an emotional category under strain: happiness is an emotion transitioning from one primary structure of feeling to another. Her unhappiness is not just a lack of fortune, it is also contrasted to the continence, chastity and truth of her life so far, and all of these are conditions not determined by fate, but by her own agency, her choice to be restrained, sexually delimited, and honest (monogamous). Her unhappy state is set in contrast to her happier past, a past that she defines as one marked by the exercise of her will to restrain her choices and desires. That restraint, it is implied, is also happiness itself. To be happy is to be fortunate, but it is also to be careful, restrained, and pure, if that purity is read in terms of bodily or even humoral containment. This is a quiet kind of happiness. Not joy or merriness, this kind of positive emotion is defined by its lack of action and its reserve. It is the kind of happiness that can coexist with the sad (meaning mainly “serious” tale), and it is remarkable in that it is moving away from a residual understanding of happiness as dependent on fortune and toward a modern sense of it as defined by freewill.

Happiness and unhappiness are also defined in the trial scene in relation to story (history) and playmaking. Hermione claims that her unhappiness surpasses the ability of fiction and narrative to capture it, but in doing so, she draws attention precisely to ways it is being captured on a stage at that very moment. Through this irony the play highlights the ways happiness and unhappiness are culturally constructed through these very narratives.

Returning to the final statue scene, the Pygmalion story operates as a new intertextual resource in the play for the production of awe, but it also draws attention in its explicit rewriting to the overthrow of the ungenerative misogyny that killed Mamillius and almost killed Hermione and Perdita. In Ovid’s representation of the myth in Metamorphoses, Pygmalion chooses to carve his ivory girl as a response to witnessing the activities of the first prostitutes, the Propoetides, who are turned to promiscuity and then stone as a punishment for their denial of Venus’ divinity (X. 234-9). Their stoniness is similar to the stoniness of Pygmalion’s statue, and it suggests that both the Propoetides and the statue-girl are removed from human sensory and emotional life. Pygmalion’s statue, however, is highly eroticized by both Pygmalion and the narrator: “with many a touch he tries it? Is it flesh / Or ivory?” (X. 254-5). This eroticization works to emphasize the “creaturliness” or the “liveliness” of the stone even before Venus acquiesces to giving it life, and when she does reward Pygmalion’s misogynistic artistry, “his heart was torn with wonder and misgiving, / Delight and terror that it was not true!” (X. 288-90). Ovid’s
tale defines the mythic violence of misogyny underlying the play and it is also a pattern for the conflicting feelings of pain and pleasure that characterize the experience of the scene of re-animation for Paulina’s on-stage audience. The Pygmalion story is one of the few “happy” endings in Metamorphoses, one of the few tales in which a god intervenes to improve rather than destroy a mortal life. Included in Book X as one of many representations of potentially transgressive desires that are accommodated by Ovid’s amoral narration, it serves to evoke a kind of even-handed sympathy for the man who loves the statue, even though this union will produce the line that leads directly in the next tale to Cinyras and Myrrha’s incest. Pygmalion’s story operates here as an intertext to codify and elaborate the complexly tragicomic happiness of the moment when misogyny is temporarily and partially defeated and Perdita is restored. The Ovidianism of the scene patterns its emotional content, concluding on a tragicomic note of restrained joy and persistent grief.

In his adaptation of Greene’s Pandosto, Shakespeare redefines happiness as a state created not through the interventions of fortune’s wheel but through an active structuring of experience by myth and art and the awe they can produce. The vastness evoked in the final scene of wonder generates a conscious expansion of self-awareness to include larger scales of time: the human lifespan and even geologic time as implied by the focus on stone. This turn toward wider time frames for understanding human experience is suggested by Pandosto’s “triumph of time” but is transmuted through Ovidianism from meaning simply that time will reveal truth to suggesting that time will allow for symbolic re-metamorphosis, for the animation of stone perceived as inanimate. The play grounds both its structuring myth of loss and reconciliation as well as its central representational climax in the previous narratives of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, and it reveals the ways Renaissance Ovidianism was implicated in articulating particular emotional states that did cultural work in patterning the lived experience of emotion.

6 This scene has been brilliantly explicated by many scholars attentive to its Renaissance Ovidianism, including Martin Mueller [“Hermione’s Wrinkles or Ovid Transformed: An Essay on The Winter’s Tale” Comparative Drama 5.3 (Fall 1971): 226-239], Leonard Barkan (The Gods Made Flesh: Metamorphosis and the Pursuit of Paganism. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990), Tom Bishop (Shakespeare and the Theater of
Wonder. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), Lynn Enterline (The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge, 2000), and Lori Humphrey Newcomb [“If that which is lost be not found”: Monumental Bodies, Spectacular Bodies in The Winter’s Tale.” Ovid and the Renaissance Body. Ed. Goran Stanivukovic. Toronto: U of Toronto P (2001): 239-259]. In a reading particularly compatible with my own, Tom Bishop comments on the way the final scene’s overdetermined Ovidianism serves to highlight the relation between psychological complexity of character and poetic invention: “There is therefore no question of a final, workable distinction between art and life. Where Ovid declares Pygmalion’s artistry in creating Galatea one in which ‘ars adeo latet arte sua’—a formulation that had become a Renaissance touchstone—Shakespeare’s scene of vivification insists on deliberately displaying its intimate investment in and by works of art” (173).


