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The Mind's Eye: Seeing Things in Shakespeare

Roger Holdsworth

This essay discusses Shakespeare's fascination with delusion, particularly the kind of stubborn self-delusion which results from the habit, famously described by Bacon, of 'submitting the shows of things to the desires of the mind'. Treated initially as a subject for comedy, the rearrangements and distortions of reality this tendency precipitates, and the sense of self-entrapment it brings with them, took on darker and less tractable forms in the plays Shakespeare wrote from the late 1590s onwards, and made inevitable his switch to tragedy as the genre where this subject matter could be more searchingly treated. A late attempt, in *The Winter's Tale*, to include a self-deluded protagonist whose paranoia equals that of Othello or Macbeth, and yet to rescue him for comedy in the play's finale, is only partially successful.

Keywords: delusion, hallucination, invisibility, paranoia, *Hamlet*, *The Winter's Tale*

One of the reasons Hamlet gives for delaying his revenge is that he is perhaps being tricked by the devil into murdering an innocent man. As he explains:

> The spirit that I have seen
> May be the devil, and the devil hath power
> T'assume a pleasing shape; yea, and perhaps,
> Out of my weakness and my melancholy –
> As he is very potent with such spirits –
> Abuses me to damn me. (II.ii.575-80)[1]

Hamlet is talking like an orthodox protestant here. The protestant church denied the existence of ghosts: no one came back from the dead. If you thought you saw a ghost, even if it seemed entirely unthreatening (the ghost of a loved one, for example), it was either an

1 Shakespeare quotations and references follow Greenblatt ed. 2008.

illusion created by some mental trauma of your own (grief, for instance) or, much worse, it was a demonic agent whose one purpose was to tempt you into sin. Indeed, if you were depressed, a visit by the devil was always a more likely explanation of what you saw, since the devil knew that mentally distressed people tended not to think or behave rationally, and were therefore more impressionable, and more open to entrapment. It is typical of *Hamlet*, a play which notoriously seems to cultivate uncertainty of interpretation as a deliberate strategy, that Shakespeare injects this idea of demonic manipulation into the text, and gives it some plausibility. This is, after all, a very destructive ghost, whose demand for revenge causes the deaths of eight people, including two entire families. He is also antichristian, since he urges his son to violate the biblical injunction that private revenge was wicked and must be left to God. On the other hand, he is telling the truth (something the devil never likes to do), since not much later Claudius confesses, in a soliloquy, that he has indeed murdered the king.

A related uncertainty concerns the Ghost's shifting epistemological status. Horatio and the palace guards see him, so he cannot be regarded, at least in Act 1, as a projection of Hamlet's tormented consciousness, and not objectively real at all. But only Hamlet hears him speak, and in his next appearance two acts later only Hamlet can see or hear him. Gertrude is present, but she sees and hears nothing. It is as if the Ghost's independent existence were being progressively eroded. And when Hamlet in his "To be or not to be" soliloquy describes death as an undiscovered country from whose borders no traveller returns (III.i.81-82), he may again be talking like a good protestant, but he is in a play where just such a traveller seems actually to have returned, and he has met him. For a moment it is as though the Ghost's objective existence has been eroded altogether[2].

Is *Hamlet* a case study in psychosis as much as, or more than, it is a revenge play? The protagonist's admission that he suffers from melancholy certainly points this way. In modern use the term signifies a gentle sadness or state of mild depression, but in Shakespeare's time it usually denoted extreme forms of neurotic disturbance, including

2 Stanley Wells (1991, 64) suggests that the Ghost in *Hamlet* becomes progressively "internalized".

madness. And note the ambiguity of "my melancholy", in which Hamlet could be confessing to a settled and permanent quality of character, rather than a temporary mood brought on by his father's death.

Why did melancholy and its symptoms exert such a strong grip on the early modern imagination? No doubt in a society where you were not free to think for yourself, or at least to express your thoughts without risking lethal consequences, a chronic condition which demonstrated the mind's ability to override what the eye saw, and to fashion a quite separate idea of what was to count as reality, offered a kind of escape. But for Shakespeare there was a more immediate source of interest. Sufferers from melancholy, as described by contemporary theorists, match the behaviour of many of the characters of both tragedy and comedy by taking fantasy for fact, and by clinging to their delusions, however much pain this causes. They are also skilled in the arts of fiction, in devising a world which is internally consistent, and centred on a single great theme, themselves. Summaries of the symptoms of melancholy regularly use the language of literary invention, as in the following, which might be descriptions of Macbeth or Timon:

> The melancholic humour counterfeiteth terrible objects to the fantasy, causing it without external occasion to forge monstrous fictions. […] Fantasy forgeth disguised shapes, which give great terror unto the heart, delivering but fables instead of true report. (Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholy*, 102-05)

> The melancholike man […] maketh himselfe a terrour unto himselfe […] suspicious, solitarie, enemie to the Sunne, and one whom nothing can please, but only discontentment, which forgeth unto it selfe a thousand false and vaine imaginations. (Du Laurens, *The Preservation of the Sight*, 82)

Shakespeare may have read these or some of the period's many other studies of melancholy, for like them he makes use of the double sense of *forge*, to counterfeit, but also to make something hard and durable, as in the forging of metal. Both senses are present when Titania dismisses Oberon's accusation that her relationship with the Indian boy is sexual: "These are the forgeries of jealousy!" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, II.i.81). Jealousy gives rise to false ideas, forgeries in that sense; but these ideas tend to be powerfully forged by the mind, and therefore hard to change or dispel. Similarly, Lucrece is unable to wake up from her nightmare because it is a prod-

uct of the "forgeries" of her brain (*The Rape of Lucrece*, 459), and the Chorus in *Henry V* urges the audience to recreate the action of the play in their heads, using "the quick forge and working-house of thought" (Chor., V.23).

Forge was the standard term to describe the visual delusions caused by melancholy: it gradually gave way to *hallucinate*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* first records in 1604. But even then the word meant merely to trick or deceive; it is not found in its modern sense of "the apparent perceiving of an external object not actually present" until the 1650s. *Hallucinate* thus shifts from being a transitive verb, meaning to trick or deceive someone else, to being a reflexive one; by hallucinating you are tricking yourself, your own mind is deceiving you.

That change of meaning could have been predicted, given the Renaissance fascination with the power and autonomy of the human mind, and the interest this generated in the nature and mechanics of sight. Throughout Shakespeare's lifetime and beyond treatise after treatise appeared which sought to combine the science of optics with studies of the workings of the mind, always with the aim of explaining the phenomenon of false perception, of seeing what is not there. The most substantial and ambitious are these:

1572 Ludvig Lavater, *Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night*
1586 Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholy*
1587 Jacques Guillemeau, *A Worthy Treatise of the Eyes*
1594 Thomas Nashe, *The Terrors of the Night or, A Discourse of Apparitions*
1599 André Du Laurens, *A Discourse of the Preservation of the Sight*
1601 (expanded 1604) Thomas Wright, *The Passions of the Mind in General*
1603 Samuel Harsnett, *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*
1605 Pierre Le Loyer, *A Treatise of Specters or Strange Sights, Visions and Apparitions Appearing Sensibly unto Men*
1608 George Hakewill, *The Vanity of the Eye*
1621 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*

It is surely not a coincidence that the highest concentration of these studies falls in the period 1599 to 1610, just when Shakespeare was creating a new kind of protagonist. In *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *The Winter's Tale* he moves away from the drama of action towards the drama of character, exploring cases of obsessive, guilt-ridden, or otherwise afflicted consciousness. The altered emphasis on interiority meant finding the means by which internal trau-

ma could be dramatised. Hallucinations, sometimes made visible to the audience, sometimes not, were one of them.

Shakespeare's characters are often prey to delusions about themselves or others, but few hallucinate in the absolute sense of seeing something which to everyone else, including the audience, is invisible. Why is this? He may simply have been responding to the fact that drama is primarily a visual form: one can have a play without words, or sounds of any kind, but not one where there is nothing to see but an empty stage. In addition, he may have been reluctant to deny the audience visual involvement in a moment of high psychological tension, even when the visual phenomenon in question was to be thought of as not objectively real, but entirely generated by the excited mental state of the hallucinating character. When Shakespeare does make an hallucination visible to the audience, it is usually because the practicalities of theatre render it advisable that he does so.

The hazards of total, or all but total, invisibility are illustrated by John Philip Kemble's omission of Banquo's ghost from his *Macbeth* of 1786. The Folio's call for a physical ghost is precise: "*Enter the Ghost of Banquo, and sits in Macbeths place*" (III.iv.36). Kemble discovered that having Macbeth shout at an empty chair made him seem merely insane, while members of the audience who did not know the play were apt to the same mistake about Macbeth's behaviour as his dinner guests, who, with no instructions from the spoken text to the contrary, could assume he is talking about the murdered Duncan. Here at least, whether or not we believe we are being given private access to a mental event occurring in Macbeth's mind, it seems important that the audience share the hallucination with the protagonist, so that we are drawn to identify with him, not with his bewildered guests. We see the horror through his eyes, they do not. We also get a stronger sense of Macbeth's isolation: he is alone with his guilt; no one can share it. Kemble took note of audiences' reactions and restored a visible ghost to later performances. He was also restoring Shakespeare's original staging, for a review survives of a 1611 production of *Macbeth* at the Globe which describes the ghost's entry[3].

3 On this and other aspects of Kemble's production, see Sprague 1945, 256-57, and Clark and Mason eds. 2015, 99; 104. On the original staging of Banquo, see Holdsworth 1990, 204-05.

As suggested earlier, Shakespeare's treatment of the nature, origin and consequences of delusion underwent a definite shift at the end of the 1590s, that is about half-way through his career. In the first phase he is as ready as he was later on to dramatize the mind's tendency to embrace and rationalise its own fantasies, but the line of separation between falsehood and reality is always firmly drawn. When Hippolyta remarks that "in the night, imagining some fear, / How easy is a bush supposed a bear!" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, V.i.21-22), she distinguishes the true image, a bush, from the false one, a bear, even as she suggests that they might be confused. (It might look like a bear, but it is really a bush.) We are similarly situated as detached observers and arbiters of truth in *The Taming of the Shrew*, when Petruccio, thinking he will give Katherine a lesson in wifely obedience, insists that she agree that the object in the sky is not the sun but the moon, and a person they meet is not an old man but a young woman. She must see what he tells her she sees. She pretends to agree, asking Petruccio to pardon her "mistaking eyes" (IV.v.46), but we know she does not really accept Petruchio's instruction, any more than we do. Or to take a more substantial example which involves genuine psychological pain: everyone "wanders in illusions" in *The Comedy of Errors* (IV.iii.39), a play which is entirely composed of misinterpretations. But no one mistakes what they are looking at with more excruciating consequences than Antipholus of Ephesus, who interprets what he sees as proof that he is a cuckold, and proves endlessly resourceful in creating his own tragic drama of treachery and lust, in which every detail contributes, and everyone is assigned a role. "Are these your customers?", he demands of his wife (IV.iv.58), finding his neighbours crowding around his door but himself debarred from entry. Clearly his house is a brothel, with a queue of clients awaiting his wife's services. But we know none of this is real, any more than the other twin is being stalked by "Dark working sorcerers who change the mind" (I.ii.99). We also know exactly what is needed, and how little is needed, to sweep the illusions away, so there is no question of our being in doubt about what we are seeing, or of the characters' anxieties and perplexities being felt by us.

Shakespeare takes this relatively uncomplicated and ultimately reassuring form of visual confusion about as far as it can be taken in *1Henry IV*, a play of the late 1590s, where he makes both characters

and audience uncertain about what they are seeing, but without any suggestion of real hallucination or mental trauma. The climax of the play, the battle between the royal army and the rebels, consists of a series of one-to-one combats in which Shakespeare deliberately encourages the audience to misinterpret what they see. As the action and dialogue relevant to the present discussion are spread across V.iii and V.iv, and are interspersed with encounters, verbal and physical, between other combatants, I quote here a heavily abridged version of the two scenes which identifies the key exchanges.

> *Enter Douglas, and Sir Walter Blunt dressed as the King.*
> DOUGLAS. Some tell me that thou art a king.
> BLUNT. They tell thee true.
> *They fight. Douglas kills Blunt. Then enter Hotspur.*
> DOUGLAS. Here breathless lies the King.
> HOTSPUR. This, Douglas? His name was Blunt,
> Semblably furnished like the King himself.
> The King hath many marching in his coats.
> DOUGLAS. I will kill all his coats!
> I'll murder all his wardrobe, piece by piece,
> Until I meet the King.
> *Alarum. Excursions. Enter the King.*
> DOUGLAS. Another king! They grow like Hydra's heads. What art thou
> That counterfeit'st the person of a king?
> KING HENRY. The King himself. Many of his shadows thou hast met, and not the very King.
> DOUGLAS. I fear thou art another counterfeit;
> And yet, in faith, thou bear'st thee like a king. (V.iii.1-28; V.iv.1-35)

The main point to grasp here is that the actor playing Blunt would have entered wearing a tunic in the king's colours over full armour, which would have included a metal headpiece and visor which made his face invisible. The stage direction might say "*Enter Blunt dressed as the King*", but theatre audiences do not have access to stage directions. So, until Hotspur removes Blunt's visor and identifies him, how does the audience know that this is *not* "the very King", or that they have not just watched the King being killed? And when a second royal look-alike enters, dressed as the King, how are they to tell that this is not "another counterfeit" like the last one? The visual uncertainties are not just for the sake of dramatic tension. By having Douglas say that to kill the King he needs to murder his wardrobe, or that his

second adversary might also be counterfeiting the person of a king, Shakespeare is inviting us to consider that this is exactly what "being" a king might amount to: a wardrobe of royal regalia, and skill in impersonation, the ability to "bear" oneself "like a king". When Douglas demands "what art thou that counterfeit'st the person of a king?" note the ambiguity of Henry's reply: "the King himself". There is a suggestion that all kings are counterfeit kings; there is no secret (or sacred) ingredient which makes one king "the very King" and another an impostor. Appearance is everything: what is needed is the ability to construct, in the words of the future Henry V, "a fantasy that plays upon our eyesight" (5.4.132), and to make it sufficiently compelling.

Just after *1Henry IV*, at the end of the decade, there is a major change. Whether delusional, obsessive, guilt-ridden, or mentally tormented in some other way, the afflicted individual is relocated from comedy or history into tragedy, and displays symptoms, including a loss of the mind's ability to distinguish what is real from what is not, that the theorists of melancholy would immediately have recognised. An example of the shift is the contrast between Petruccio's forcing Katherine to say she sees the moon not the sun, and Iago's pressuring of Roderigo into seeing proof of Desdemona's sexual availability in *Othello*, when there is nothing to see. In the early comedy Katherine agrees she sees the moon because she wants relief from Petruccio's bullying, not because her mind has been invaded, or her eyesight taken prisoner. In the later tragedy Roderigo's lustful fixation has already lured him into a fantasy world where Othello's wife is his for the taking, and his desperate need to believe his own delusion allows Iago to become Roderigo's eyes, to do his seeing for him, as they watch Desdemona chatting innocently with Cassio:

> Iago. Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand? Didst not mark that?
> Roderigo. Yes, that I did. (II.i.245-47)

Despite the two men's claims to the contrary, it is important that in the theatre there should be complete absence of physical contact between Cassio and Desdemona. What is then demonstrated is Roderigo's almost pitiable hallucinatory compliance with his own clamorous desires. This little exchange then becomes a kind of dress rehearsal for Iago's masterpiece, his reduction of Othello to the same state of

helpless suggestibility. "Make me to see it!" Othello demands of Iago, and Iago obliges, conjuring images in Othello's head of Desdemona's "stolen hours of lust'" which should "satisfy" him, even though he cannot (with good reason) "Behold her topped" (III.iii.369-401).

Desdemona's supposed palm-paddling comes from *Hamlet*, where Hamlet, for whom Gertrude is the personification of lust, pictures Claudius "paddling in your neck with his damned fingers" (III.iv.169); and it is passed on to *The Winter's Tale*, where Leontes sees Hermione and Polixenes "paddling palms and pinching fingers, / As now they are" (I.ii.117-18). In each of these moments the woman exists only as a fantasy object produced by the voyeurism and misogyny of a male commentator. Leontes' "As now they are" should have discouraged a critical consensus from forming which assumes that what he observes is in some measure really occurring. Why does he need to give this assurance, if the palm-stroking is visible to everyone? His four-word redundant comment is better read as an instruction to the actor: he should face out towards the audience as he speaks, while behind him we see that Leontes' wife and his friend are simply *not* doing what he describes.

In other tragedies from this period supernatural (or quasi-supernatural) elements complicate our response to the protagonist's mental turmoil. We are made to ask how much he is being coerced by external forces, and how much of what he sees has no independent existence at all, and is to be understood as a projection of his troubled consciousness. *Julius Caesar* offers a particularly problematic case. Brutus is in his tent before the battle of Philippi, his servants fall asleep, and he takes up a book and begins reading; then, according to the Folio stage direction, "*the Ghost of Caesar*" enters. Book-reading is a traditional sign of melancholy (compare *Hamlet*, II.ii.169, "look where sadly the poor wretch comes reading"), and since in Plutarch, Shakespeare's source, Brutus does not read a book but is merely 'thinking of weighty matters', it seems that with this change the play is pushing us towards melancholy as the explanation of what we see; in other words that the ghost, though visible to us as well as to Brutus, is no more than one of the horrible but insubstantial visions that melancholy persons are prone to. In the play the servants' insistence that they have seen and heard nothing supports this idea, as does Brutus's own reaction: he blames the encounter on "the weakness of mine eyes". On the other hand, there are hints that the ghost is real: the candle suddenly burns

dim, a standard announcement of a supernatural arrival, and the ghost recognises Brutus, who speaks to it, and it speaks back.

Is Brutus being haunted by a real ghost, or is the guilt he feels for his past actions causing him to haunt himself? The question is made impossible to answer, both in the source and in the play, by Plutarch's and Shakespeare's failure to say clearly who or what the visitor is. Plutarch's account in his *Life of Marcus Brutus* is this:

> Casting his eye towards the door of his tent, he saw a wonderful strange and monstrous shape of a body coming towards him, [which] said never a word. So Brutus boldly asked what he was, a god or a man, and what cause brought him hither. The spirit answered him: "I am thy evil spirit, Brutus; and thou shalt see me by the city of Philippes". (Spencer 1964, 149)

And this is Shakespeare's:

> BRUTUS. Let me see, let me see, is not the leaf turned down
> Where I left reading? Here it is, I think.
> *Enter the Ghost of Caesar*.
> How ill this taper burns! Ha! Who comes here?
> I think it is the weakness of mine eyes
> That shapes this monstrous apparition.
> It comes upon me. Art thou any thing?
> Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
> That mak'st my blood cold and my hair to stare?
> Speak to me what thou art.
> GHOST. Thy evil spirit, Brutus.
> BRUTUS. Why com'st thou?
> GHOST. To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi. (IV.ii.324-35)

What did Shakespeare, who would surely have noticed the omission, expect to gain from following his source in failing to name Brutus's monstrous visitor? A Folio stage direction declares him to be Caesar's ghost, and critics go along with this, calling the identification "clear" and "unequivocal", and theatre directors support it by making the apparition not "monstrous" at all, but recognisable as the character last seen being murdered in the previous Act[4]. Such certainty seems misplaced. Audiences do not see stage directions, and those of the text of *Julius Caesar* are not wholly reliable as clues to Shakespeare's

4 For the de-monstering of the Ghost, see, for example, Jump 1970, 347-48, and Wells 1991, 57.

intentions for the acted play, as they show signs of having undergone annotation and revision some time in the 23 years between the acting of the play and its publication[5]. As it stands, the dialogue leaves open the idea that the monster who confronts Brutus is not Caesar but Brutus's vision of himself, the Brutus who is a traitor to Rome and the murderer of his adoptive father. Hence perhaps the startling claim of kinship ("*thy* evil spirit"), as though Brutus were being made to recognise a new presence in his own consciousness from which he will never be separated; and hence the ambiguity of "Let me see, let me see", which can be read as a plea for true insight, for the clarity of self-understanding which has so far eluded him.

The tragedies which follow *Julius Caesar* are marked by an increasing move into subjectivity whenever hallucinatory moments are dramatized. The first complete, unambiguous hallucination in Shakespeare occurs in his next tragedy, *Hamlet*, when the grief-stricken prince sees his dead father in his "mind's eye":

> Hamlet. My father – methinks I see my father.
> Horatio. O where, my lord?
> Hamlet. In my mind's eye, Horatio.
> Horatio. I saw him once. A was a goodly king.
> Hamlet. A was a man. Take him for all in all,
> I shall not look upon his like again. (I.ii.183-87)

This is a private, internal moment of vision which no one else shares, and typical of a play which everywhere emphasises the subjectivity of experience, the solipsistic nature of perception. To some people, Hamlet remarks, the world is a place of wonder and beauty; to him it is a "sterile promontory", a plague-pit, "foul and pestilent" (2.2.290-93). In this play even something as apparently substantial and unsubjective as the Ghost does not fully pass the test of independence. As early as its second, wordless appearance it begins to lose solidity:

> *Enter the Ghost*.
> Horatio. But soft, behold – lo where it comes gain!
> I'll cross it though it blast me. – Stay, illusion.
> *It spreads his arms.*
> If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
> Speak to me. (I.i.107-10)

5 See Wells and Taylor 1987, 386-88.

If "this thing", as Horatio calls it, is an "illusion", there is no point in telling it to "stay", as though it might be responsive to instructions. The confusion seems to affect the accompanying stage direction, printed thus in Q2. Is the Ghost best thought of as an "it" or a "he"?

As the play proceeds, Hamlet's traumatised and obsessive consciousness becomes more and more its dominant focus. One consequence of this is that despite – but also because of – his frequent soliloquies, the character seems ever more remote, less knowable: as though a private play, to which we have only intermittent access, is all the time taking place in his head. A striking instance of this retreat into interiority occurs in the so-called closet scene, when Hamlet's diatribe against his mother is interrupted by the Ghost (III.iv.8ff.). Only Hamlet sees and hears him. Gertrude, as she repeatedly points out, sees and hears nothing at all. The effect, as with Banquo's appearance to Macbeth which mystifies everyone else, is to insist on the hero's isolation: he is alone with his perceptions.

Only Hamlet sees the Ghost here, but what exactly does he see? The Folio and Q2 have simply "*Enter Ghost*", but Q1, which seems to offer a garbled version of the play put together by its first actors, adds a striking visual detail: "*Enter the ghost in his night gowne*". Is Q1's direction a memory of the earliest staging of *Hamlet*, one which preserves Shakespeare's desire to humanise the Ghost by dressing him in domestic attire, in contrast to his previous appearances in armour on the castle battlements? The direction, if it is authentic, would also indicate that the Ghost, however subjective it was meant to be taken to be, was visible to the play's first audience. Why else specify what the Ghost was to wear, if no one was to see him?

Its visibility aside, interpreters have used the detail of the nightgown to push the play into more contentious territory. Post Freud there has been a tendency to eroticise Gertrude, to portray her as emitting a sexual magnetism fatal to the three men (Old Hamlet, Hamlet, Claudius) who compete for her attention. But the evidence is weak. Hamlet's interview with his mother is repeatedly said to take place in her "closet". The word is taken to mean "bedroom", and on the strength of this a large double bed often occupies much of the stage, on which Hamlet lies with, and sometimes on, his mother. But "closet" did not mean this: it meant a private room in a house, used

as a study or for sewing[6]. Similarly, Q1's "nightgown" is glossed as "nightshirt", in order to imply that Old Hamlet, game to the last, and indeed beyond the last, enters undressed for bed, as though expecting to sleep with Gertrude. But at this date a nightgown was simply "an informal robe worn by men", in contrast to more formal attire worn in the day. It is not found meaning "a loose garment for wearing in bed" until 1824[7].

The impression of mental seclusion created here by Hamlet's solitary dealing with the Ghost is prepared for earlier in the scene, when Hamlet attempts to do Gertrude's seeing for her by showing her two images, one of his father, the other of his uncle, and demanding that she acknowledge the hideous difference between them:

> Look here upon this picture, and on this,
> The counterfeit presentment of two brothers.
> See what a grace was seated on this brow –
> Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
> An eye like Mars, to threaten or command,
> A station like the herald Mercury
> New lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;
> A combination and a form indeed
> Where every god did seem to set his seal
> To give the world assurance of a man.
> This *was* your husband. Look you now what follows.
> Here *is* your husband, like a mildewed ear
> Blasting his wholesome brother. Have you eyes?
> Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed,
> And batten on this moor? Ha, have you eyes?
> …what judgement
> Would step from this to this? (III.iv.52-70)

How should this episode be staged? If we imagine two portraits on the theatre wall, big enough for the audience to make out the details of their subjects, should they offer a visual version of the contrast Hamlet describes, one portrait depicting a figure of godlike beauty and authority, the other a twisted, ugly creature whose evil nature is stamped on his appearance? Distinguishing the portraits in this

6 This and subsequent definitions are taken from the *OED*.

7 On the sexualising of Gertrude, see Levin 2008, 305-26.

way makes Hamlet's valuation of the two men seem objective and reasonable, but it augments the misogyny of the play by failing to explain why Gertrude has transferred her affections to such a grotesquely inferior new partner. Worse still, it could be taken to endorse the Ghost's claim that women are slaves to their own appetites and prefer garbage to healthy food (I.v.55-57).

A better solution might be to have Hamlet produce two miniatures, or even (as is sometimes done) two coins, bearing images of the last and the present king. But this, too, raises questions, as the audience will now be unable to see the versions of the two men Hamlet is showing Gertrude. With only his verbal assessments to judge from, we can suspect, if we wish to, that the violence of his hyperbole (his father is four gods in one, a mountain, his manhood underwritten by heaven; his uncle a single diseased ear of corn) points to the constructed nature of the comparison, and its rhetorical aim of justifying Hamlet's inner feelings of revulsion and betrayal. Viewed thus, each picture might indeed be called a "counterfeit presentment", given that at this date *counterfeit* could mean either simply "imitated" or, negatively, "fake". A way to match this uncertainty of effect might be to display two full-size pictures on the stage wall for us to look at while Hamlet speaks, but to make the two brothers appear equally heroic and imposing, with nothing to choose between them; so it is only Hamlet who sees the extraordinary differences he describes[8].

Macbeth, written five years after *Hamlet*, contains Shakespeare's boldest use, at least in tragedy, of a self- or internally generated hallucination, visible to no one but the perceiver, and described to the audience but not shown to them:

> Is this a dagger which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
> I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
> Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
> To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but

8 The fullest survey of the use of portable versus full-length portraits on the stage at this date is by Jenkins 1982, 516-19. Jenkins complains that the choice of size has excited "much unnecessary controversy" among *Hamlet* critics, but fails to note the interpretative consequences for the acted play of choosing one size rather than the other.

> A dagger of the mind, a false creation
> Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
> I see thee yet, in form as palpable
> As this which now I draw.
> Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
> And such an instrument I was to use. (II.i.33-43)

The vision of the spectral dagger lasts only eight lines before Macbeth matches it with a real one ("As this which now I draw"), perhaps another sign of Shakespeare's reluctance to ask a theatre audience to accept complete invisibility for more than a few moments; but the episode nevertheless powerfully renders the protagonist's fatalism and alienation. The offer of a dagger as an invitation to commit suicide was conventional: Mephostophiles offers Faustus one as he makes this suggestion in *Doctor Faustus*, and the incestuously motivated Ferdinand leaves one in his sister's bedroom in Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*. But no external agent, such as a demonic tempter, is needed here, as the ambiguity of 'dagger of the mind' makes clear. Macbeth's is a dagger created by the mind, by his mind, but it is also a dagger *in* the mind which will cause its destruction, since, as he will discover, in this play regicide is a form of suicide. The doubleness of meaning continues with "Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going": this applies not only to the path to Duncan's bedchamber, but to what Macbeth will later call his "way of life", the whole trajectory of his future, and the destination to which he is irrefusably drawn.

The metaphor of a journey which cannot be abandoned or turned back from is appropriate: as Macbeth notes, "I am in blood stepped in so far, / Returning were as tedious" as going on (III.iv.134-36). Yet the journey is at the same time strangely static: like Hamlet, who all the time sees his father in his mind's eye, and Othello, endlessly imagining his wife's lustful copulation with Cassio, Macbeth is in a state of mental arrest, permanently detained before the spectacle of the slaughtered Duncan, whose body acquires the fixity of a holy icon made from precious metal: "His silver skin [is] laced with his golden blood" (III.iii.113). Lady Macbeth, too, cannot free herself of the image of the dead king in the bedchamber, an image which it is important we never see (since what we might be shown could never match the destructive force of the spectacle locked in

the minds of the murderers). She thinks of Duncan and she sees her father: "he resembled my father as he slept", she remembers (II.ii.13); and in almost her last words in the play she is still picturing the corpse: "who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (V.i.40).

Shakespeare's interest in the mesmeric power of images, their ability to offer a refuge to the seer but also to unhinge him and drive him to calamity, reaches its apex in *The Winter's Tale*. Othello and Macbeth surrender to the false versions of reality that eventually destroy them, but their delusions begin, or at least take active shape, no earlier than the start of their plays. Leontes enters his play already convinced that his friend and his wife are lovers. That it is too late to save him from his suspicions is established in the opening scene, where two courtiers discuss the closeness of the two royal friends. From infancy, one courtier tells the other, "there rooted betwixt them such an affection which cannot choose but branch now" (I.i.19-21). The triple pun on *branch* is ominously predictive. The friendship may (and will) eventually "branch" (grow, flourish), but it will also "branch" by dividing, going in different directions. Worse, the division will result from a branching, a cuckolding, as one friend imagines the other has equipped him with cuckold's horns. Critics have missed this meaning, but around the date of *The Winter's Tale* it was common; among many examples, compare Marston's *The Insatiate Countess*, performed *circa* 1608: "Strumpet his wife, branch my false seeming friend" (I.i.453).

The pun is particularly important, as it not only associates Leontes with a charge of adultery before he enters the play, but hints that its origin lies in the early intimacy of the two men. As Polixenes tells Hermione in the following scene, the boys were once "twinned lambs", but when she "crossed the eyes of my young playfellow" (note the play on *cross*, pass across, but also block, frustrate) their "innocence" was lost, and "stronger blood" propelled each of them to a separate, heterosexual future (I.ii.69-81). Hermione took Leontes away from Polixenes then, and now Leontes fantasizes a version of the same separation being repeated. Hence the bitter ambiguity of his question, "Is he won yet?" (I.ii.88). His real meaning, audible only to himself, is not "Have you persuaded him yet?" but "Have you seduced him yet?", or perhaps more precisely (since his jealousy is

focused not on his wife's infidelity but the loss of his friend), "Have you stolen him from me yet?"[9].

Leontes begins an inner monologue of hidden meanings, at once accusatory and self-tormenting, as soon as he enters. As with Othello, this draws him into coarser and coarser fantasies of misogynistic loathing, in which he figures as both victim and facilitator. He is "the allowing husband" (I.ii.184), implicated in the depravity he denounces. His first words to his friend, "Stay your thanks a while, / And pay them when you part" (I.ii.9-10) are a veiled threat. Invoking the proverb "Praise at parting", they imply, banteringly on the surface, that Polixenes should spare his expressions of gratitude until he is on the point of leaving, as he may regret being so effusive. Broad sexual innuendoes follow. To Polixenes' suggestion that he has outworn his welcome Leontes replies, "We are tougher, brother, / Than you can put us to't" (I.ii.15-16), which glances at *put to it*, "subject to sexual intercourse". When Middleton's Harebrain, for example, vowing to keep a strict eye on his wife, declares "I'll put her hard to't" (*A Mad World*, *My Masters*, I.ii.69), he plays inadvertently on the phrase's bawdy sense, indeed he helps to actualise it, since his jealousy drives her into an adulterous affair. Leontes gets away with his crude play on words through his apparent employment of the royal we, so he seems to be referring only to himself (though understanding him in that way makes the reference homoerotic, which has its own relevance). If we take his "we" and "us" as normal plurals the covert meaning includes Hermione: she will have sex with Polixenes as much as he likes, and still be ready for more.

Leontes then turns his fire on Hermione, abruptly demanding that she ask Polixenes to stay: "Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you" (I.ii.27). The full impact of this line will only be registered if we remember not only that Hermione has been standing silent and ignored until this moment, but her existence was suppressed in the previous opening scene as well. There we hear two male courtiers discussing two male friends and their two male offspring, and no women, wives or otherwise, are mentioned. It is as if the play were briefly restoring

9 Shakespeare is fond of this ominous use of *win*, as in *Hamlet*, I.v.45, "won to his shameful lust", and *Macbeth*, I.iii.121-23, "win us to our harm … Win us with honest trifles". For the double sense in *The Winter's Tale* (persuade / captivate sexually), see *Measure for Measure*, II.ii.128, "Pray heaven she win him".

the all-male paradise of their boyhood which Leontes and Polixenes hanker for, as well as granting the ultimate wish – complete female absence – of misogynist thought. "Well had it been for the world if there had never been an Eve", Richard Brathwaite (1640, 5; 1) suggested, taking further the advice of St Paul: "they that have wives be as though they had none" (Corinthians 7:29).

The play brings Hermione into existence with her entrance at the start of the next scene. It does not identify her, however, or involve her in the opening exchanges, which consist entirely of the two men speaking to and about one another. Is she the wife of one of the men? She is heavily pregnant, but if one of them is the father, which one is it? Polixenes' opening references to his nine-month stay, the 'burden' of royalty, and the fact that '*we* have left *our* throne' (Shakespeare is again exploiting the potential ambiguity of the royal we) seem to identify him as the husband and father-to-be, so for a moment we make the same mistake as Leontes as to the paternity of the child in Hermione's womb, and share his false vision of the truth. Shakespeare then maximises the shock when she is finally included in the dialogue and her identity is established, for it is in terms which simultaneously brand her as a whore, and which do indeed link her with Polixenes, but not in the way we had supposed. Leontes' "Tongue-tied, our queen?" establishes that she is his wife after all, and there is an innocent cover to his words, since he seems simply to be asking (though aggressively enough) "Why are you silent?" But he is again cultivating a double language. "Tongue-tied" can suggest the hiding of a guilty secret: compare, "tongue-tied in their guiltiness" in *Julius Caesar*, I.i.61. Much more than this, Leontes' oddly formal 'our queen' (affectionate talk between intimates is hardly an occasion on which to employ the royal we) enables him to dwell privately on what he takes the situation to be: Hermione is not only Leontes' queen but "our quean", the treacherous whore whom he and his supposed friend are sharing. Again a crude sexual meaning is concealed behind an innocuous one. Since Polixenes and Hermione can only judge from what they hear, and *queen* and *quean* were pronounced identically, Leontes has the perfect cover[10].

10 Did Shakespeare find Leontes' jibe in John Marston? Compare *The Fawn* (*circa* 1605), 2.1.224-28, where Zuccone, another imaginary cuckold, insists that his wife be called "our lady", with the same suggestion of shared sexual ownership.

There is yet more poison concealed in Leontes' question. As a quean Hermione ought not to be tongue-tied, hence his feigned surprise at her silence: queans use their tongues all the time, because they are loud and talkative, and because they are skilled at employing them as part of their trade. As Robert Tofte puts it, "Queanes of their Tongue, are most Queanes of their Taile" (Tofte 1615, sig. F2r). Richard of Gloucester means more than Mistress Shore's singing ability when he credits her with "a passing pleasing tongue" (*Richard III*, I.i.95), and note Iago's salacious joke about Emilia: "her tongue she oft bestows on me" (*Othello*, II.i.104). Leontes will later deny any double sense to the *queen*/*quean* homonym, hearing and intending only "quean" when he scoffingly agrees that Hermione is a "Good queen" (II.iii.59).

Although we have nominally returned to the generic conventions of comedy, Leontes' paranoia and the sex-hatred it precipitates exceed even Othello's. Critics greatly underestimate the severity and duration of his symptoms, led, one suspects, by their knowledge that he is due to regain his sanity in the play's second half, admit his mistake, and be restored to family life. If he can be thought of as not wholly responsible for the murderous jealousy which grips him – seen instead as the victim of an illness, for example, or as being goaded into jealousy by the careless actions of someone else – the more likely we are to accept and approve his second-half redemption. Accordingly, we learn that Leontes' culpability is no greater than that of "people doomed by voodoo or black magic" (Barton 1980, 133); that he is "diseased as if by a plague-bearing planet" (Kermode 1963, xxix); that his delusions are the result of "a fatal short circuit between bowels and eye" (Del Sapio 2010, 136-37); that his jealousy "is like the god-sent lunacies of Greek drama […] Its nature is that of an earthquake or the loss of the Titanic" (Tillyard 1938, 41). If explanations along these lines – Leontes is ill, or his madness comes out of the blue, and has no source – is not convincing (and the melodramatic nature of these comparisons suggests that at some level their authors suspect they may not be on the right track), a further solution is offered by commentators who look disapprovingly at Hermione's efforts to persuade Polixenes to prolong his stay. The manoeuvre adopted here is to claim that she does it in a tactlessly flirtatious way. We learn that "the unguarded freedom of her chatter […] poisons Leontes' sense of

her motives" (Draper 1985, 16); that she is guilty of "insistence" and "overzealousness" (Wells 2010, 193); even of "a touch of sexual openness" (Pitcher 2010, 33), caused by the fact that she is "pregnant and charged with sensual energy" (Frey 1980, 122). In 1767 arguments opting for this approach could martial visual support, for in that year Edward Capell's edition of Shakespeare's plays supplemented Hermione's spoken attempts to persuade Leontes' friend to extend his visit by adding the stage direction "*giving her hand to Polixenes*" (I.ii.110), a shockingly indecorous action not directed by the Folio, not required by the context, and with nothing to match it in Shakespeare or elsewhere, but inserted in every edition of *The Winter's Tale* ever since. Capell creates an origin for Leontes' jealousy which at least partly exonerates him: the wife "gives" something of herself to a man other than her husband in a way the husband does not like. R. A. Foakes tells us what we must imagine: "Hermione takes Polixenes' hand and then his arm and leads him offstage to the garden. Her actions here provoke a sudden, shocking change in Leontes" (Foakes 2003, 261). So it turns out to be the woman's fault after all.

These claims are vulnerable even on their own terms. Capell's direction is a flagrant sophistication of the text which threatens to reduce *The Winter's Tale* to a problem drama about marital etiquette. It has also licensed a lazy tendency to build on it rather than examine its plausibility. Notice, for example, how Foakes casually turns Capell's "giving" into "takes" then "leads", endowing Hermione with an Eve-like boldness as she and Polixenes depart for their garden stroll. Some sharing of Leontes' misogyny is also apparent. Does Hermione noticeably "chatter", or is it just that chattering is what women do? Are pregnant women "charged with sensual energy" more than non-pregnant ones? In the play it is Leontes who says so: "'tis Polixenes / Has made thee swell thus", he tells Hermione (II.i.63-64). His merging of several senses of *swell*, "be visibly pregnant", but also "swell with pride or arrogance", "get above yourself", and "swell with sexual passion" (a favourite Shakespearean usage denoting female arousal) implies that it is Hermione's physical state, the unmissable fact of her femaleness, by which he feels most threatened[11].

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11 On Shakespeare's distinctive use of *swell*, see Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen eds. 2007, 271.

As with Othello, whose language becomes more turbulent and obscure as he veers between revulsion, self-pity, and vindictive rage, Leontes' increasingly lurid images say more about him than he intends or understands. An example is his memory of courting Hermione: "Three crabbed months had soured themselves to death / Ere I could make thee open thy white hand / And clap thyself my love" (I.ii.104-106). This is obviously alienated and embittered, to the point where it seems odd that Leontes' hearers do not react; but what is the force of "clap thyself my love"? Leontes is again disguising his meaning. Outwardly he seems to be using *clap* in the sense of *OED*, v.1.7.a, "To strike hands reciprocally in token of a bargain" (as in *Henry V*, V.ii.128, "clap hands and a bargain", also said of a betrothal), although his phrasing is odd, and cannot be matched elsewhere. Alternatively, he may want his hearers to understand *clap*, v.1.17.a, "to name or call" (by confusion with *clepe*), which is less strained, but was not a common usage. Either way, Leontes is putting up a smokescreen. He is relieving (and aggravating) his feelings with a further sense of *clap*, designed for his ears only, "To infect with venereal disease" (v.2). *OED* cites no example before 1658, but in fact there are many from early in the previous century onwards[12]. Leontes' pun contrives to make bonding in marriage synonymous with pollution. Is the charge specifically against Hermione, who "clapped herself" when she accepted him because, having a whorish disposition, she was bound to betray her marriage vow? Or was the "clapping" inevitable because Leontes is already coming to the view that all sex is base and contaminating, and the moral probity of either partner is irrelevant? Later he will describe the penis, which the "gates" of the vagina will "let in and out", as "the enemy" (I.ii.206). He is thinking primarily of the penis of Polixenes, but "the enemy" (rather than "my enemy") extends the reference to all owners of a penis, including Leontes, whose aroused member has propelled him irrefusably towards the sin of sex. He will also lament that the effect of Hermione's adultery has been to "Sully the purity and whiteness of my sheets, / Which to pre-

12 See Skelton's *Magnificence* (1515, 2273-74): "Ye shall be clapt with a collop [prostitute] / That will make you halt and hop". Lording Barry plays on venereal versus matrimonial "clappings" in *Ram Alley*, performed in the same year as *The Winter's Tale* (Barry 1611, F2v).

serve is sleep, which being spotted / Is goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps" (I.ii.329-31). The only way to preserve the "pure" whiteness and unspottedness of sheets is to ensure that they play host to no sex at all, married, adulterous, or otherwise[13].

Rescuing Leontes from his delusions and making him fit for comedy raises questions about his emotional alignment which are not fully resolved, partly because Shakespeare sets himself challenges which his source avoids. In Robert Greene's novel *Pandosto*: *The Triumph of Time* Pandosto (Leontes) becomes jealous within the story, and his jealousy is accounted for: after a happy prelude, he begins to suspect his wife's frequent, though innocent, visits to his friend's bedchamber, and is racked by a "melancholy passion" and "doubtful thoughts". Though he later admits his mistake, he is the same violent and volatile figure at the end, succumbing to "sudden passion", "a melancholy fit", and "desperate thoughts" before killing himself (*Pandosto*, 408, 444-45). Leontes is less easily brought into focus. He enters already gripped by his jealous mania, and no clear explanation of what has caused it is provided; and since we have no prior acquaintance with a sane Leontes to whom we can feel the mad one could return, we seem invited to regard his paranoia as a permanent personality trait, rather than a passing fit amenable to cure. On top of this, Shakespeare has reconceived Greene's tragic tale as a comedy, so a transformed Leontes is needed in order to make credible the joyful reconciliations the new genre requires.

The play works hard to counter the idea that Leontes is displaying a fixed condition of mind. He is said to be "in rebellion with himself" (I.ii.351), as though an unauthorised, disorderly self were seeking to supplant the legitimate one. A medical explanation is also offered. Leontes' jealousy is a disease (I.ii.299; 386), a sickness (I.ii.384; 398).

13 On the penis as enemy, see Sharpham, *Cupid's Whirligig* (1607), where the jealous Sir Timothy "doubts most lest the gates should be opened, and his enemy let in" (I.iv.26-27). On its malign hold over its owner, see Montaigne 1603, 516: "The Gods (saith *Plato*) have furnished man with a disobedient, skittish, and tyrannicall member; which like an untamed furious beast, attempteth by the violence of his appetite, to bring all things under his beck [command]". For further discussion of sexual anxiety in the play, see Holdsworth 2009, 185-202, and Holdsworth 2022, 20-23. Part of the latter discussion is reprinted here, in a revised form, with the permission of the board of *Early Modern Literary Studies*.

Polixenes calls it an "ill-ta'en suspicion" (I.ii.460), and a contrite Leontes "my ill suspicion" (V.iii.150), the double sense of *ill* encouraging the idea that jealousy is an illness as well as simply evil. Appointing herself Leontes' "physician", Paulina undertakes "to purge him" of the "humour" that distempers him (II.iii.38; 54), which again traces his paranoia to a bodily cause.

Tentative as they seem when set against the extraordinary convulsive force of his jealous tirades, these hints at a curable Leontes are enough to convince commentators that the play's older generation contribute to its themes of healing and renewal as straightforwardly as do the younger. The proof offered is the arrival of the real Leontes. Initially "a stranger to his true self", with the shock of his son's death he is "returned to his proper state of mind" and "regenerated", assuming once again his roles of husband and father (Schanzer 1969, 25; Frye 1963, 109; Pyle 1969, 153). "Restored fully to himself in the arms of Hermione", he achieves "new integration in the worlds of marriage, family, and child-rearing" (Wheeler 1981, 166; Novy 1984, 172). An ophthalmic reading of the play is also enlisted: "purged of his evil humours", Leontes is "restored to a perspectival, sanitized gaze" (Del Sapio 2011, 153).

The larger meaning critics attach to this regeneration is a journey into adulthood and heterosexuality, which are held to be the same thing. In the unregenerate Leontes Shakespeare portrays "the pathology of the immature male", in retreat from "his mature sexuality, his manliness", and clinging to a same-sex friendship which he should have outgrown (Pitcher 2010, 37; Kahn 1981, 215). His 16-year penance is to be understood as a "painful and prolonged education about sexual maturity", after which he "recognizes and accepts his sexuality and his relationship to women" (Colley 1983, 43; Kahn 1981, 220).

This reading of *The Winter's Tale*'s main story agrees perfectly well with the heterosexual bias of early modern comedy, where, in general, "grown-up reality […] means married love" (Rose 1988, 36). But as soon as it is applied to the detail of the play it runs into trouble. The bond between Leontes and Polixenes does not have to be broken or downgraded before the relationships the play finds appropriate can be celebrated; on the contrary, it *is* one of those relationships. Nor is this an accidental effect produced by Shakespeare's unconscious homosocial (or homosexual) sympathies, since he consistently modifies

the source story in order to foreground the intensity of feeling which marks the two men's friendship. They repeatedly affirm their intimacy by calling each other "brother", a word Greene's *Pandosto* never uses, and their loss of one another's "society, / Amity too" (V.i.134-35) afflicts them both. Leontes, but not his equivalent in Greene, says he wants to stay alive only in the hope of once more seeing his friend (V.i.135-37), and his wish is granted in the finale, where the friend joins him, while in Greene the friend is absent. Together once more, Shakespeare's friends are "a pair of kings" (V.iii.147), as though recovering a version of the shared identity they formed in childhood, when "two lads" fused into "boy eternal" (I.ii.64-66).

The heterosexual side of Leontes' redemption is less certainly registered. In his long speech of contrition (III.ii.151-70) he thinks first of his friend ("I'll reconcile me to Polixenes"), spares Hermione four words ("New woo my queen" – could he not have used her name, or at least said "my wife"?), and then speaks only of the wrong his jealousy has done to "My friend Polixenes" and "the good Camillo". The sense of distance between husband and wife this bias creates persists in the finale (V.iii.136-56), where the resurrected Hermione says nothing at all to Leontes, and he says nothing to her, apart from introducing new male relatives ("This is your son-in-law / And son unto the king"), and telling her to acknowledge his friend in a way that calls attention to the two men's closeness ("What, look upon my brother"). Freudian critics ignore the continuance of this male bonding, preferring to confine it to what they regard as Leontes' "immature" phase, so that it can also be used to explain his delusion of being cuckolded. According to Coppélia Kahn, "the hero's belief that his wife loves his best friend is his way of defending against the horrified realization that he too still loves that friend" (215). But the text affords no evidence at all that Leontes' feelings for his friend horrify him. By including Polixenes in the final celebrations, and reporting that at "the meeting of the two kings […] their joy waded in tears" (V.ii.36-41), it implies the opposite: that to complete the turn from tragedy to comedy recovery of the friend was if anything more important than recovery of the wife. Viewed thus, the conflict of attachments invites a quite different explanation of Leontes' traumatized response to his supposed cuckolding. Hermione's seduction (Latin *seducere*, to lead away) of

the friend becomes a nightmare fulfilment of the threat to the men's friendship that her mere existence as Leontes' wife has always posed. As in Shakespeare's Sonnet 42, where Leontes' worst fears are closely anticipated, his friend's betrayal "touches" him "more nearly" (more deeply, more intimately) than does hers. It inflicts "a loss in love" which the woman's disloyalty cannot equal.

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