“THE RUSH TO KNOWLEDGE”: PERCEPTION AND INTERPRETATION IN SHAKESPEARE’S MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING, OTHELLO AND THE WINTER’S TALE

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In 3.1 of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* the messengers Dion and Cleomenes return from Delphos with the sealed oracle of Apollo. They discuss the upcoming trial of Hermione and the impact that the oracle will have on her fate. Dion says,

The violent carriage of it
Will clear or end the business when the oracle,
Thus by Apollo’s great divine sealed up,
Shall the contents discover; something rare
Even then will rush to knowledge. (17-21)

With these lines Shakespeare implies a kind of movement through which sensory perception becomes knowledge. A thing is made known, or “discovered,” to one through the medium of the senses, is filtered through the mind, and emerges as knowledge. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, and *The Winter’s Tale* Shakespeare investigates this process, focusing on the ways in which we unconsciously influence the construction of knowledge. Because our perceptions are filtered through the unavoidably subjective framework of the mind, knowledge is an inherently subjective concept, representing for each individual a unique perspective on the world around them. This fact becomes especially problematic when considered in the context of intimate human relationships, particularly the relationship between man and wife. In *Much Ado about Nothing* Claudio speaks of marriage as a knitting of souls but, as Shakespeare shows us, the minds of husband and wife cannot be so joined, resulting inevitably in a kind of mental gap where even the most intimate relationship contains a degree of ambiguity. Because we cannot see the soul with which we would be joined,
we must have faith that it is accurately reflected in the appearance and behavior of our loved one. However, in the right circumstances and with the right encouragement this faith can be displaced by suspicion. *Much Ado about Nothing, Othello,* and *The Winter’s Tale* each explore different facets of jealousy all stemming from the same problem; because everyone experiences reality through the filter of their imagination, we can never be certain that we fully understand anyone else’s perspective. Claudio, Othello, and Leontes all attempt to compensate for and protect themselves from this uncertainty by assuming the worst and their conviction that such assumptions are justified leads to disaster. In the heroes of these plays Shakespeare presents his audience with an illustration of man’s dangerous propensity to impose his own interpretation of reality on others in an attempt to escape from the innate ambiguity of human interaction.

When viewed together *Much Ado about Nothing, Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale* form a continuum that reflects the process by which we construct knowledge. Just as our sensory perceptions form the foundation upon which knowledge is built, the central dilemma of *Much Ado about Nothing* focuses on discovering truth through observation but this method is complicated by the characters’ keen awareness of the possibility of deception. In an excellent article called “Spectatorship in/of *Much Ado about Nothing*” Nova Myhill describes a curious tension between seeing and believing in this play. Suggesting that the characters’ fear of deception has created an atmosphere in which eavesdropping is considered to be the surest way of acquiring reliable information, Myhill writes “to see or hear an action and believe yourself to be
unobserved or unrecognized is to see that action as authentic and unstaged. Most characters in *Much Ado* believe that the awareness of audience is what creates “performance”: people cannot act for an audience if they are unaware of it” (296). This belief is demonstrated repeatedly as numerous characters happen to overhear conversations, believing their positions to be privileged by virtue of the fact that they are unobserved. In almost every case this is a mistaken belief; not only is their eavesdropping observed, it is the whole purpose of the conversation and in every instance save one the information gained is misleading.\(^1\) This single exemption is, of course, the providential moment when the men of the Watch overhear Borachio recounting his performance at Hero’s window. As Borachio is genuinely unaware of his audience’s presence, this incident would seem to support the belief that the unobserved spectator has access to reliable truth but, if so, it is the rule that proves the exceptions.

The most obvious of these exceptions is the very event that Borachio describes in which Claudio witnesses Borachio’s wooing of Margaret and assumes that his presence is not known. It is this assumption which allows Claudio to be convinced that the person he witnesses at Hero’s window is the true Hero and that her earlier modesty was simply a front, and yet we know that Claudio was not unobserved during this encounter but was, in fact, expected. Though the audience does not witness the exchange at Hero’s window, we learn of it beforehand from Borachio and so are

\(^1\) Myhill hints at the implications that this holds for the audience, writing “The theater audience’s assumptions of its own privileged position as eavesdropper is undercut by the frequency with which the play’s characters are deceived by their assumptions that eavesdropping offers unproblematic access to truth” (292).
prepared for Hero’s innocence as surely as Claudio is prepared by Don John for her guilt; like Claudio, we are told what to expect only in our case it happens to be the truth.²

What is perhaps most curious about this interaction between Claudio and Don John is the fact that for all his suspicion of performance, Claudio never seems to consider the possibility that Don John’s narrative might itself be a performance. There has been more than one suggestion by this point in the play that Don John’s loyalties have in the recent past been questionable at best. He is said by Conrad to “have of late stood out against” his brother, and by Leonato to have been recently reconciled to Don Pedro (1.3.21). The audience hears of Don John’s predilection toward villainy from his own mouth but that at least some of the play’s characters are also aware is clear from Benedick’s reaction to the accusations against Hero. Agreeing with the Friar that there has been some misunderstanding, Benedick declares, “if their wisdoms be misled in this, / The practice of it lies in John the Bastard, / Whose spirits toil in frame of villainies” (4.1.187-9). Even if we attribute to Don Pedro and Claudio a hopeful, if naive, faith in the sincerity of Don John’s mended ways, there still remains the peculiar fact that this is the second time he has approached Claudio with news that, should it prove true, presents an insurmountable obstacle to Claudio’s intended marriage.

Claudio’s immediate acceptance of Don John’s announcement regarding Don Pedro’s

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² Because the audience does not view this scene we are forced to construct our understanding of it in much the same way that Claudio does. Myhill discusses this briefly, writing that the audience must base its understanding of this absent scene on the multiple and often contradictory narratives describing it that occur throughout the course of the play. This results ultimately in an interpretation of the event that is no more our own than Claudio’s interpretation is his own.
affections toward Hero further supports Myhill’s theories on the concepts of performance and unobserved spectators in the play, but it also suggests a certain innate suspicion in Claudio’s personality. Richard Henze describes this quality in his article “Deception in Much Ado about Nothing,” suggesting “Through Claudio, Much Ado displays the power that malice acquires when it is allowed to operate behind a respectable appearance” (193). It seems a bit incredible, then, that Claudio should never turn his innate suspicion on Don John, a man who is not only known for being untrustworthy but has already provided Claudio with false information. Ultimately, Claudio is far more prone to sexual anxiety than he is to suspicion in general. He is so afraid of being made a fool by or over a woman that he leaves himself dangerously vulnerable to deception from other quarters.

Claudio’s observations in the pivotal but absent scene of Borachio’s wooing are reminiscent of Aristotle’s discussion in Book III of De Anima on the difference between perception and imagination. Aristotle describes the perception of the senses as being free from error, unlike discursive thinking, or judgment, which can produce either truth or fallacy. The eye sees what is presented to it, as it is presented, and it is with the application of judgment in determining what a sensation means that the possibility of error is introduced. When a thing can be perceived clearly and without doubt an accurate and reliable judgment can be made regarding the meaning of that particular visual sensation. Conversely, if an object is viewed from a great distance, or is in some other way indistinct, we inevitably exercise our imagination in the attempt to identify that object. Aristotle writes, “it is not when we are exercising our senses
with precision on the object of perception that we say that this appears to us to be a man, but rather when we do not perceive it distinctly” (3.3). Malcolm Schofield cites this passage in an essay entitled “Aristotle and the Imagination,” writing³

Aristotle is surely pointing out that if we clearly see a man, we do not say: ‘It looks like a man,’ since the caution, doubt or non-committal implied by that form of words is out of place. It is when our eyes let us down that the phainetai becomes an appropriate location; and the judgment we make by employing it is not straightforwardly a report of what we perceive, but a more guarded statement of how what we perceive looks to us, how we interpret it (258).

This distinction between judgment based on unquestionable perception and the need to, as Schofield puts it, “go beyond what I actually perceive,” in other words to fill in gaps left by faulty or incomplete perception, is a distinction that Claudio seems to be woefully unaware of (258). On the most technical level, we know that Claudio cannot have seen Borachio’s performance at Hero’s window very clearly because Borachio himself provides us with details to that effect. In recounting the story to Conrad, Borachio describes Claudio and Don Pedro watching from “afar off” and under cover of “the dark night, which did deceive them” (3.3.151, 157). Yet these deficiencies in his ability to clearly see and interpret the interaction he witnesses are ignored by

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Claudio who has already had any gaps filled in by Don John. In a figurative sense Claudio neither perceives nor interprets the meeting on which he bases his defamation of Hero because both of these tasks have been accomplished for him by Don John’s earlier narrative. Claudio is told both what he will see and what it will mean.

The insufficiency of Claudio’s vision as he observes Borachio and Margaret acts as a symbolic echo of the inevitable distance between individuals. Just as he views Hero, or someone that he believes to be Hero, from a distance and shrouded in darkness, the true Hero exists in a place that Claudio can never fully occupy. In order to bridge this distance Claudio develops his own interpretation of Hero – or, more accurately, Don John’s interpretation – and clings to it as the ultimate expression of whom and what she is. In doing so, he distances himself even farther from the true Hero by imposing this interpretation on all her subsequent behavior. Once Don John’s interpretation is in place, Claudio believes that no other interpretation is possible. When Leonato expresses his amazement over Claudio’s sudden accusation Claudio replies “Leonato, stand I here? Is this the Prince? Is this the Prince’s brother? Is this face Hero’s? Are our eyes our own?” (4.1.69-71). Claudio implies that the accuracy of his accusation is as absolute as his own presence and as the physical identities of Don Pedro and Don John. By identifying the two Princes through sight, Claudio again relies on the face as a representation of self, but this statement holds none of the moral connotations implicit in Claudio’s identification of Hero. While the reference to “the Prince” constitutes a simple statement that this face is synonymous with the man known to be Don Pedro, Claudio sees in Hero’s face not merely her physical identity,
but all of the invisible meanings that he believes are behind it. As Myhill tells us, Claudio’s eyes are emphatically *not* his own at this point, but merely extensions of Don John’s and they are so clouded with Don John’s vision that they see Hero’s guilt as clearly and unequivocally written in her face as her identity.

Myhill discusses the place of expectations such as those which Claudio experiences and suggests that a person’s expectations regarding an event are as implicit in their perception of that event as their actual observations. This is clearly illustrated in Claudio’s conviction that he has witnessed Hero’s infidelity. He has actually witnessed very little, and nothing clearly, but because Don John has conditioned him to interpret in a certain way, he unconsciously manipulates his observations so that they conform to his preconceived expectations. This relationship between expectations and interpretation is again demonstrated in Claudio’s accusation of Hero and his subsequent interpretation of her reaction. In denouncing her Claudio notes her reaction and rages:

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Behold how like a maid she blushes here!
O, what authority and show of truth
Can cunning sin cover itself withal!
Comes not that blood as modest evidence
To witness simple virtue? Would you not swear,
All you that see her, that she were a maid,
By these exterior shows? But she is none:
She knows the heat of a luxurious bed;
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Her blush is guiltiness, not modesty. (4.1.34-42)

This passage encapsulates Claudio’s varying interpretations of Hero up to this point in the play. Her modest blush and apparent innocence are reminiscent of his original opinion of her as “the sweetest lady that ever I look’d on,” but Borachio’s performance has convinced him that there exists within Hero that which falsifies her outward appearance. Though Hero has appeared, and appears still, to be modest and maidenly, Claudio’s vision is clouded by what he believes to be knowledge of her true character and he sees in accordance with that knowledge, interpreting her maidenly blush as guiltiness. For Claudio, Hero’s appearance is inextricably linked to her identity and his changing interpretation of her face reflects how the meaning of that identity has changed for him.

The problem that Shakespeare dramatizes in *Much Ado about Nothing*, as in *Othello* and *The Winter’s Tale*, is the difficulty of finding the truth when everyone, including oneself, is potentially deceptive. This is greatly complicated by the fact that the truths that Claudio, in particular, searches for are moral and emotional and so, cannot be accessed by any physical means of perception. One cannot see honesty or hear fidelity and yet that is exactly what Claudio attempts to do, focusing on Hero’s appearance – specifically on her face – as the emblem of her morality (or lack thereof). In his accusation Claudio begins to refer to two independent Heros; the Hero that she appears to be and the quite opposite Hero that the events of the previous night suggest her to be. He says:

You seem to me as Dian in her orb,
As chaste as is the bud ere it be blown;

But you are more intemperate in your blood

Than Venus, or those pamp’red animals

That rage in savage sensuality. (4.1.57-61)

When she protests her innocence asking, “Who can blot that name [Hero] with any just reproach?” Claudio’s response, “Marry, that can Hero, / Hero itself can blot out Hero’s virtue” suggests these two separate representations and the different meanings that the name has come to hold (4.1.80-2). As Claudio implies, the chaste Hero has been obscured by the revelation of the unchaste and this distinction is echoed in his changing interpretation of her face. What was once indicative of honesty and modesty has become mere disguise and, in the capacity of disguise, evidence of guilt, just as Hero’s denial that she spoke with anyone the previous night is seen as a lie and therefore as proof of her dishonesty.⁴

As there are contradicting representations of Hero, so are there contradicting representatives. Shakespeare balances Claudio’s conviction with the Friar’s equally emphatic defense of Hero’s innocence.⁵ The Friar’s interpretation of Hero is also

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⁴ Richard Henze describes Claudio as the most threatening element of the play, writing “The dangerous one is Claudio, who conceals a huge and active suspicion behind a mask of virtue and fidelity. One can anticipate Don John’s villainy; one does not expect Claudio’s suspicion” (193). However, it is interesting to note that Leonato is just as violent in his condemnation of his daughter and with far less provocation. For instance, when Beatrice admits that she was not Hero’s bedfellow the previous night Leonato takes this as confirmation of Hero’s guilt despite the fact that Beatrice also claims to have been her bedfellow every night except the last for the past year, which calls into question Borachio’s confession to have had “vile encounters” with Hero “a thousand times in secret” (4.1.93-4).

⁵ Richard Henze suggests in “Deception in Much Ado About Nothing,” Studies in English Literature 11.2 (1971): 187-201, that the play as a whole would seem to advocate judgment based on a “combination of intuitive trust and careful observation” and that these qualities are embodied in Beatrice and Friar.
based on her appearance, again specifically on her face, and yet the meaning that he finds there is in direct opposition to Claudio’s interpretation. While Claudio sees in Hero’s blush evidence of guilt, the Friar interprets exactly the same physical reaction as proof of her innocence. It is possible that this divergence of interpretations is simply a result of the fact that the Friar is not personally threatened by Hero’s alleged behavior in the same way that Claudio is, and so is disposed to be trusting. Whatever the reason for his sympathy, the point is that each of these men develops an interpretation of Hero that is influenced not merely by Hero herself, but by qualities and experiences within themselves.

Claudio’s utter conviction that he has seen past Hero’s false exterior spells the demise of his original interpretation of her as honest and chaste and, on the advice of the Friar, this metaphorical death is echoed with the pretense of an actual death. This pretense is, essentially, yet another narrative meant to guide Claudio’s interpretation of Hero. In explaining his proposition, the Friar tells Leonato:

When he shall hear she died upon his words,
Th’ idea of her life shall sweetly creep
Into his study of imagination,
And every lovely organ of her life
Shall come apparell’d in more precious habit,
More moving, delicate, and full of life,

Francis respectively (194). A similar point is made regarding the Friar by T.W. Craik in “Much Ado about Nothing,” Scrutiny, 14 (1953): 315.
Into the eye and prospect of his soul,

Than when she liv’d indeed. (4.1.223-30)

This passage closely parallels one of Claudio’s earliest interpretations of Hero. In the first act he describes to Don Pedro how his “soldier’s eye” has altered and thoughts of war have been displaced by the “soft and delicate desires” of a lover (1.1.298, 303). Just as these desires influenced Claudio’s perception of Hero at the beginning of the play, prompting him to see her as “the sweetest lady,” the pretense of Hero’s death is intended to once again alter the filter through which Claudio interprets by removing the embodiment of Hero’s offense – Hero herself – and replacing it with an interpretation (1.1.187). Of course, this deception is shown to be unnecessary when Hero’s innocence is inadvertently discovered by the watch, but proves successful nonetheless as Claudio ultimately reverts to his first judgment of her saying “Sweet Hero, now thy image doth appear / In the rare semblance that I lov’d it first” (5.1.251-2). As in his accusation of her, Claudio envisions Hero’s innocence as being represented in her appearance and yet we know that that appearance has never changed. As always, Claudio’s interpretation of Hero is ultimately a projection of himself.

Claudio’s tendency to link morality to appearance is destabilized in the play’s final scene as he is forced to accept a bride whose face is hidden from him. The image of the veiled bride in this final scene recalls several layers of meaning from Claudio’s first wedding day and the moment of his accusation against Hero. In focusing so intently on her face as a moral indicator and describing the dishonesty of her “exterior shows,” Claudio implied that he saw Hero as figuratively veiled, hiding her sins
beneath a mask of innocence (4.1.40). Moreover, having witnessed what he believed was evidence of these sins, Claudio was under the impression that he had torn this veil from her face and made her true character visible, to himself if no one else. In reality, he imposed on Hero a false representation and obscured her true character under a veil of slander. Now, when he finds himself met by what is essentially a blank face Claudio is forced to confront the inherent uncertainty of marriage and, possibly against our expectations, he rises to the challenge. Claudio approaches the altar knowing nothing more about his bride than that Leonato has described her as a copy of Hero, but we know that that name has meant different things at different times, and when Claudio declares “I’ll hold my mind were she an Ethiope” the image recalls another offered earlier by Leonato (5.4.38). In his first impassioned reaction to the accusations against Hero Leonato speaks of her as “fall’n / Into a pit of ink, that the wide sea / Hath drops too few to wash her clean again” (4.1.139-41). These images, in addition to the Friar’s description of Hero’s face bearing “a thousand innocent shames / In angel whiteness,” set up a fairly obvious dichotomy of color imagery and lend to Claudio’s statement the implication that he would, in fact, hold his mind were this mysterious bride guilty of the sins which he had falsely attributed to Hero. When Hero comes forward veiled and Claudio asks to see her face, we sense that he may still be a bit uncomfortable with his uncertainty but the fact that he accepts her without seeing her goes some way toward redeeming him for his earlier suspicions.\[6\] This emotional leap

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\[6\] Criticism of Claudio is mixed but most critics, like Henze, seem fall toward the other end of the spectrum, condemning Claudio for the violence of his attack on Hero and judging his eventual happy ending to be entirely unmerited.
of faith is rewarded when he ultimately gets the girl he had always wanted anyway. The image of Hero as chaste and honorable is restored and with her final lines “One Hero died defil’d, but I do live, / And surely as I live, I am a maid” it is the alternative representation of her as false that is finally displaced (5.4.63-4).

The emphasis on sight that plays such an important role in *Much Ado about Nothing* carries over to *Othello* as the hero repeatedly insists on visual evidence of his wife’s transgressions. But much as Claudio’s vision proves unreliable in the earlier play, Othello finds such visual evidence elusive. He repeatedly demands such proof but balks at Iago’s pragmatic description of what that would mean; “Would you, the supervisor, grossly gape on? / Behold her topp’d?” (3.3.395-6). Iago goes on to describe the near impossibility of actually witnessing Desdemona’s infidelity, asking

What shall I say? Where’s satisfaction?

It is impossible you should see this,

Were they as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys,

As salt as wolves in pride, and fools as gross

As ignorance made drunk. (3.3.401-5)

As Iago suggests, the desire to hide the affair would necessitate such a degree of caution as to make witnessing any intimacy between Desdemona and Cassio extremely unlikely, leaving Othello to rely on circumstantial evidence. Accordingly, the primary concern of *Othello* is not perception, but the judgment that we bring to our

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7 On another level, Claudio’s acceptance of a veiled bride undercuts his past reliance on appearance as an indicator of morality by illustrating the unreliability of appearances. Because we cannot see the emotions and character behind a face, essentially every groom approaches the altar with a veiled bride.
perceptions in order to create meaning. Othello tells Iago, “I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove” but it is in the intellectual movement between doubt and the acceptance of Desdemona’s guilt that Othello finds himself trapped (3.3.190).

Just as Claudio develops an interpretation of Hero that has more to do with his own feelings than with Hero herself, Othello’s doubt springs initially from his own insecurities. Though he tells Iago he will not fear Desdemona’s betrayal on the basis of his own “weak merits,” it is the apparent perversity of her preference for him that awakens his suspicions (3.3.187). In deciding that this preference is unnatural and attempting to rationalize it, Othello opens up a space in which to create an alternative interpretation of Desdemona that clarifies her abnormal preference. Iago takes full advantage of this space, declaring that such perversity suggests “a will most rank, / Foul disproportions, thoughts unnatural” and may one day lead Desdemona to compare Othello to her own countrymen and, in the comparison, to regret her choice (3.3.232-3).

Once the possibility of Desdemona’s infidelity has been awakened in Othello’s mind it proves impossible to divorce this idea from his interaction with her. Lamenting his loss of tranquility, Othello says

What sense had I in her stol’n hours of lust?  
I saw’nt not, thought it not; it harm’d not me.  
I slept the next night well, fed well, was free and merry;

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8 Ruth Vanita (“‘Proper’ Men and ‘Fallen’ Women: The Unprotectedness of Wives in Othello,” Studies in English Literature 34: 1994) claims that the play goes to some effort to combat racism by making Othello behave as any other husband but, in this moment at least, he is not like any other husband and reacts accordingly.
I found not Cassio’s kisses on her lips.

He that is robb’d, not wanting what is stol’n,

Let him not know’t, and he’s not robb’d at all.  

(3.3.338-43)

This passage clearly suggests that it is not Desdemona’s alleged disloyalty that has affected Othello so strongly, but his own knowledge of it. As he says soon after, “I had been happy, if the general camp, / Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body, / So I had nothing known” (3.3.345-7). Though Desdemona’s guilt is at this point still nothing more than a possibility, that possibility has so strongly weighed on Othello’s mind that it has begun to affect his interpretation of her. The moment doubt enters his mind it begins to override Othello’s perceptions and obscure the reality of Desdemona beneath the alternative representation of her that Othello has imagined. What is particularly interesting about this passage, however, is that it is followed almost immediately by a violent exchange in which Othello demands that Iago provide visual proof of his slander. Therefore, somewhere in Othello’s mind there still exists an awareness of the fact that these aspersions are exactly that, damaging insinuations that have yet to be proven. Consequently, the possibility of an innocent Desdemona still exists as well. Nevertheless, these unproven suggestions infect Othello’s perspective of Desdemona to the point where proof is essentially irrelevant. He speaks of knowledge as the catalyst for suffering but by his own admission it is doubt and not knowledge that he suffers from. Just as Claudio allows his mind to be molded by Don John for a specific interpretation of an ambiguous event, Othello allows his perception of Desdemona to be informed by the suggestions Iago has made. In each case
suspicion passes for knowledge, but this fact should hardly be surprising to us. Iago tells us early in the play that he suspects Othello of having had a sexual relationship with his wife, Emilia, and though he has no proof of his suspicions he will “do as if for surety” (1.3.390). Claudio and Othello could be said to act in a similar way, though with far less self awareness. Both proceed directly from hearing an accusation to determining the punishment for an offense that they haven’t even witnessed yet. Claudio determines to shame Hero instead of wed her and Othello, after stating that he will not doubt Desdemona until he himself witnesses inappropriate behavior, reflects on Iago’s subtle suggestions with the lament “She’s gone, I am abused, and my relief / Must be to loathe her” (3.3.267-8).

In his search for evidence Othello falls victim to exactly the same kind of deception that Claudio experiences. Iago describes to Othello his plan to speak with Cassio about Desdemona, telling him “I will make him tell the tale anew: / Where, how, how oft, how long ago, and when / He hath, and is again to cope your wife” (4.1.84-6). He then proceeds to orchestrate a conversation which would appear to corroborate his description but, in fact, means something else entirely. Throughout this scene Shakespeare draws our attention to the fact that Othello is unable to hear the discussion. Before the conversation starts Iago tells him to “mark the fleers, the gibes, and notable scorns / That dwell in every region of his face” and as Cassio speaks Othello frequently interjects with what he believes is being said. He is, of course, invariably wide of the mark, as when Cassio laughs with disdain at the suggestion that he marry Bianca and Othello mutters “Do you triumph, Roman? Do you triumph?”
Having demanded that Iago provide him with visual evidence, Othello is satisfied with the appearance of a confession from Cassio, despite the fact that confessions are heard, not seen. In this scene language acts as a symbolic absolute in contrast to deceptive sight, and yet it plays contradicting roles just the same. For Othello, the meaning of the interaction that he witnesses lies in Iago’s description. Truth, therefore, lies not in what he sees but in what he has been told. Simultaneously, the actual meaning of the interaction between Iago and Cassio lies in what they say. Just as Hero’s face formed the basis for opposing interpretations in *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare again presents us with alternatives of interpretation that are directly linked to the interpreter’s expectations.

The one piece of visual evidence in this scene, and by far the most damning, is Othello’s handkerchief which he seems to recognize but then, curiously, has to ask Iago to confirm as his own. In the absence of more substantial evidence, the handkerchief has, with no little encouragement from Iago, come to represent Desdemona’s involvement with Cassio. It is a visual link between the two, belonging to Desdemona (and so to Othello) but in the possession of Cassio. Considering Othello’s desire for visual confirmation, one might expect the appearance of the handkerchief to have a greater impact on him than is suggested by his uncertainty. It is

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9 A.P. Rossiter (*Angel with Horns and Other Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Graham Storey, London: Longmans, 1961) refers to this scene as a clear expression of Othello’s jealousy. He writes “Jealousy has been described as marked by ‘a sense of shame at [the jealous man’s] own feelings, exhibited in a solitary moodiness of humour, and yet from the violence of the passion forced to utter itself, and therefore catching occasions to ease the mind by ambiguities, equivokes, by talking to those who cannot, and are known to be unable to understand what is said to them – in short, by soliloquy in the form of dialogue’” (195).
almost as though he hesitates to accept this visual evidence until it has become a part of Iago’s narrative. As with the scene from *Much Ado*, the meaning of Othello’s observations has been determined for him before those observations are actually made. His interpretation of the scene depends not on what he witnesses but on what he is told beforehand that he will witness and this is true to such an extent that unexpected observations, even when they support the premise on which the interpretation is based, must be incorporated into the narrative before they can take on a distinct meaning.

Like Claudio, Othello must also struggle between two opposing representations of his wife; the virtuous image that she projects and the impure adulteress of Iago’s slanders. To his credit, much of this struggle comes as a result of the fact that he can’t quite seem to let go of the honorable woman he believes he married, as we can see in his conflicted reaction to Cassio’s supposed confession. Upon learning that Cassio has given Desdemona’s token (Othello’s handkerchief) to another woman, he rages “I would have him nine years a-killing. A fine woman! a fair woman! a sweet woman!” (4.1.178-9). Othello expresses his outrage at Cassio’s cavalier treatment of his lover and then immediately contradicts himself, responding to Iago’ encouragement that he forget the pleasing aspects of Desdemona’s character by saying:

> Ay, let her rot, and perish, and be damn’d tonight,

for she shall not live. No, my heart is turn’d to stone; I strike it, and it hurts my hand. O, the world hath not a sweeter creature! She might lie by an emperor’s side and command him tasks. (4.1.181-5)
This struggle between two extremes characterizes much of Othello’s experience throughout the play as he deals with the doubt that Iago’s insinuations have created in his mind. This is one of the major divergences between *Much Ado* and *Othello*, as doubt is an emotion that Claudio never truly has a chance to experience. He goes almost immediately from the suggestion of Hero’s infidelity to the visual confirmation of it, which has already been arranged for his convenience. His perspective of Hero as chaste is almost instantly replaced by an impression of her as unchaste. Claudio’s utter conviction of Hero’s guilt, supported by the visual evidence of Borachio’s performance, provides a very different context in which to explore the subjectivity of reality. Because Claudio actually sees (or thinks he sees) evidence confirming Hero’s guilt, his false interpretation of her is the result of faulty vision and perhaps a bit of self-righteous obstinacy. While Othello privileges vision in the same way that Claudio does, repeatedly demanding visual evidence of Desdemona’s guilt, such evidence proves elusive, leaving Othello in a state of chronic uncertainty. It is as though Othello, like Claudio, finds himself at an altar with the prospect of a veiled bride before him and without the knowledge of Claudio’s former mistake to make him cautious. He could make a leap of faith, as Claudio does, and reject the insinuations that have been made about Desdemona, but as Iago was quick to remind him, Desdemona’s father once had such faith in her and that faith was rewarded with defection in the form of a secret marriage to a man Brabantio considered unsuitable. Besides, even if Othello did choose to accept his wife’s fidelity solely on the basis of his faith in her, the fact that he can never be entirely sure has been brought painfully
home to him, and so the relationship would always include a certain amount of doubt. However, as Shakespeare seems to be suggesting in these plays, such uncertainty is the reality of marriage – or as Othello describes it the “curse of marriage” (3.3.268).

Othello can call his wife his own, yet he can have no certain knowledge of her heart or mind. Because he experiences doubt Othello is faced with a choice that Claudio only vaguely approaches at the end of *Much Ado*. He is confronted with the opposing representations of his wife and invests himself in the certainty of her guilt in order to escape the ambiguity of doubt.

While many elements of the final scene from *Othello* parallel Claudio’s accusation of Hero, a more interesting similarity exists between Hero’s statement of her innocence in the final scene of *Much Ado*, and Desdemona’s brief awakening after Othello has smothered her. Hero’s declaration of “I am a maid” is lent a certain solemnity by the fact that it accompanies her return from a symbolic death but, ultimately, it is unnecessary, as her innocence has already been proven (5.4.64). As a statement of her agency it is somewhat disappointing. In contrast, Desdemona’s return carries the added spiritual weight of preceding an actual death, and unequivocally proves her nobility as she protests not only her own innocence, but

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10 Harry Berger Jr. (‘Against the Sink-a-Pace: Sexual and Family Politics in *Much Ado about Nothing*,’ *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 33.3: 1982) interprets this last exchange between Claudio and Hero in almost exactly the opposite way, suggesting that in her final lines and especially in her ultimate declaration of virginity, Hero denounces Claudio and celebrates the triumph of virtue over slander.
Othello’s as well. Rather than submitting to the imposition of Othello’s imagined reality, Desdemona posits her own and it is based not on doubt, but on faith.11

In *Much Ado about Nothing* and *Othello* Shakespeare depicts the inherent ambiguity of human interaction and presents us with heroes who develop their own interpretations of reality in order to deal with this ambiguity. The French philosopher Michel de Montaigne writes of a similar phenomenon in his essay “Of the force of the imagination.” Taken as a whole, the *Essays* of Montaigne glorify the power and potential of the human mind. It is interesting, then, to see that the author begins this particular essay by describing the danger of the imagination. He writes that, “Everyone feels its impact, but some are overthrown by it,” and goes on to describe the effect that imagination can have on an individual (68). A healthy individual can imagine himself into illness, a sane man into madness; such is the power of the imagination. Much of Montaigne’s discussion centers on the reaction, or lack thereof, to sexual stimuli, but he includes as well descriptions of physical reactions involving fear, hunger, and joy, among others, and speaks of illness and even death as a result of the overly active imagination. He writes, “We drip with sweat, we tremble, we turn pale and turn red at the blows of our imagination; reclining in our feather beds we feel our bodies agitated by their impact, sometimes to the point of expiring” (69). Mental or imaginative activity that is in no way regulated can and does affect our physical

reality, altering what we believe to be true and influencing the way that we interact with the world. As Montaigne says:

It is probable that the principle credit of miracles, visions, enchantments, and such extraordinary occurrences comes from the power of imagination, acting principally upon the minds of the common people, which are softer. Their belief has been so strongly seized that they think they see what they do not see (70).

The implication is that while the mind is necessarily the tool by which we understand reality, we must be cautious in our use of that tool, to ensure that we do not first create our reality and then attempt to interpret our creation. Claudio and Othello both experience this phenomenon first hand, basing their observations on a specific premise that has already been established for them. Instead of founding their perception of reality on observation they construct their observations to conform to a view of reality that is already in place.

The concept of reality is often thought to exist beyond individual experience. It is considered a “truth” invulnerable to human influence; a fact with which we must live - in which we must live - no matter how we may be chaffed by its precincts. However, the far more problematic fact to which Montaigne and Shakespeare call attention is that reality is, in truth, an inherently subjective concept. If we are ever to truly understand the nature of human experience, we must understand that we are capable of forming, or shaping the reality that is the very basis of that experience. To deny this fact is to delude ourselves as to the nature of our experience; to take as indisputable truth images
that we ourselves have created and which are often unique to us. This capacity of the mind to shape our reality is described by Montaigne as both strength and weakness. The ability to essentially alter the very texture of the world around us is indicative of fantastic power and potential. However this ability is inextricably related to a tendency for self-deception, which is, by its very nature, a dangerous and limiting propensity.

Montaigne’s concept of the self-created reality finds its fullest Shakespearian expression in Leontes, the hero of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*. The similarities between Othello and Leontes are widely acknowledged and the two are often compared as portraits of jealousy.\(^\text{12}\) The most significant difference between the two characters is, of course, the absence in Leontes’ case of an Iago, a figure Robert Hunter calls “the calumniator” (160). The absence of this figure is, as Hunter points out, emphasized by Antigonous who suggests his presence, telling Leontes “You are abused, and by some putter-on / That will be damned for’t. Would I knew the villain, / I would land-damn him” (2.1.141-3). Leontes is his own Iago, a fact which causes him to construct knowledge in a way that is significantly different from Othello. While Othello’s certainty of Desdemona’s guilt is filtered through the imagination of Iago, Leontes’ “knowledge” is based on his own observations and those are distinctly insufficient for the conclusions to which he comes. Judging not on the basis of what he sees, but

rather on the possibility of hidden, invisible meanings behind those things, Leontes allows his imagination to overrule his vision and invests himself in false knowledge.

The sudden and violent onset of Leontes’ jealousy has been, over the years, one of the most criticized elements of a much criticized play, and it is worth noting that in representing Leontes’ suspicion in this way Shakespeare is making a deliberate break with his source material. In Robert Greene’s *Pandosto*, the work on which at least the first half of *The Winter’s Tale* is based, the king, Pandosto, has much greater justification for and is far more rational in the development of his suspicions than his Shakespearian counterpart. Robert Hunter briefly explores this divergence in his essay “Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness” writing,

Pandosto’s jealousy, like Leontes’, is without any foundation in the actions or thoughts of his wife and friend, and yet Pandosto’s emotion is not totally irrational. It takes its origin from appearances rather than from reality, but in Greene those appearances are presented as genuinely deceiving (157).

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13 Critics have alternately tried to explain away this improbability by attributing to Leontes a propensity toward jealousy and written it off as an inherent weakness in the construction of the play. Roger Trienens (“The Inception of Leontes’ Jealousy in *The Winter’s Tale*, Shakespeare Quarterly 4.3 1953), however, develops a theory first intimated by John Dover Wilson, suggesting that Leontes' jealousy actually begins before the action of the play commences and that his attempts to persuade Polixenes to extend his visit are merely an effort to confirm his suspicions. Though this is, in some ways, an attractive theory, it precludes what I believe to be a significant tendency toward precipitate reactions that is manifest in Leontes’ decisions over the course of the play.

14 Greene describes the interaction between Pandosto’s wife and friend as follows: “This honest familiarity increased daily more and more betwixt them… there grew such a secret uniting of their affections that the one could not well be without the company of the other, in so much that, when Pandosto was busied with such urgent affairs that he could not be present with his friend Egistus, Bellaria would walk with him into the garden, where they two in private and pleasant devices would pass away the time to both their contents.” This text, prepared by Stanley Wells, is reprinted in the appendices to Stephen Orgel’s 1996 Oxford edition of *The Winter’s Tale*. 
The difference between appearance and reality is a disparity that we know Leontes is aware of. In the very moment that he first expresses his fears over the interaction he sees between his wife and Polixenes he also says, “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” (1.2.111-14). Leontes implies the necessity for interpretation when faced with ambiguity, but the construction of the passage, placing this admission between two statements of guilt, suggests that Leontes’ interpretation is a foregone conclusion. It is as thought the very ambiguity of the behavior that he witnesses is what drives Leontes to interpret it as adulterous.

It is to Camillo that Leontes first entrusts his suspicions and this conversation highlights both the fact that the King’s interpretation of his wife is a unique perspective, not shared by those around him, and the fact that he is unaware of this. Leontes makes enigmatic references to Hermione’s infidelity, expecting Camillo to understand, and finds in Camillo’s remarks double meanings that were never intended. The scene is reminiscent of Othello’s solitary dialogue as he observes Cassio’s confession, in that it presents two opposing layers of meaning that are reflective of two independent interpretations of reality. However, in Othello these two interpretations remain independent of each other. In contrast, Leontes and Camillo’s individual perceptions of reality are in direct communication with each other, attempting to create meaning out of one another even as they are in conflict.

Like Claudio, Leontes believes that there only one possible interpretation of Hermione’s behavior, but he goes a step farther in implying that reaching that
interpretation is as inevitable as interacting with one’s environment. He hears echoes of his own suspicions in Camillo’s casual observances of the friendship between Hermione and Polixenes and imagines the first whispers of rumor, saying “They’re here with me already, whisp’ring, rounding: / ‘Sicilia is a so-forth.’ ‘Tis far gone, / When I shall gust it last” (1.2.217-19). As Leontes questions Camillo he develops a metaphorical image of such rumors spreading throughout the court as conversation might move down a dining table and when Camillo insists upon his ignorance as to what the subject of these rumors might be Leontes declares that only a man completely lacking his senses could be unaware of Hermione’s guilt.

Ha’ not you seen Camillo
(But that’s past doubt; you have, or your eye-glass
Is thicker than a cuckold’s horn), or heard
(For to a vision so apparent rumor
Cannot be mute), or thought (for cogitation
Resides not in that man that does not think)
My wife is slippery? If thou wilt confess,
Or else be impudently negative,
To have nor eyes nor ears nor thought, then say
My wife’s a hobby-horse, deserves a name
As rank as any flax-wench that puts to
Before her troth-plight: say’t and justify’t. (1.2.267-78)
Beginning this passage in the negative, Leontes first suggests the implausibility of Camillo being truly unaware and then explicitly states that implausibility, telling Camillo that he has either seen or cannot see at all. Interestingly, Leontes also seems to be distancing himself from the label “cuckold” by aligning it with the ignorance of a man who cannot see the obvious. Having established that the evidence he himself has been witness to must be equally obvious to Camillo, Leontes goes on to suggest that that which is so obvious cannot fail to be spoken of. Though hearing, being a sense equally vulnerable to deception, can be even less reliable than sight, Leontes now uses it to support his claim that Hermione is visibly “slippery” (1.2.273). He also becomes more extreme in his certainty. As the passage progresses he begins with the implication that this knowledge is obvious to him and so must be to Camillo as well, and eventually concludes that what is so readily apparent to two must be equally obvious to everyone. The statement that “cogitation / Resides not in that man that does not think” is obvious enough and by its syntax would seem to simply suggest that thinking does not occur in anyone who does not possess the ability to think (1.2.271-2). But when read aloud as “cogitation resides not in that man that does not think my wife is slippery” the same statement implies that the only people who do not think Hermione unchaste are those who are incapable of thought. Over the course of this passage Leontes tells Camillo that the only way to deny knowledge of Hermione’s guilt is to falsely and shamelessly deny any ability to perceive the world around you. Ironically, the process that he describes, in which knowledge is a product of sensory
perception and thought, is an exact reversal of the process by which Leontes’ own “knowledge” is acquired.

We see evidence of this in Leontes’ description of his observations. When Camillo protests his accusations against Hermione, Leontes replies:

Is whispering nothing?

Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?

Kissing with inside lip? stopping the career

Of laughter with a sigh (a note infallible

Of breaking honesty)? horsing foot on foot?

Skulking in corners? wishing clocks more swift?

Hours, minutes? noon, midnight? and all eyes

Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,

That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing?

Why then the world and all that’s in’t is nothing,

The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,

My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,

If this be nothing. (1.2.284-95)

Like Claudio, Leontes believes his interpretation of his wife’s behavior to be the only possible interpretation, directly linking his perception of her to universal absolutes such as identity and existence. However, while this passage describes the observations on which Leontes has based his conclusion it also reveals the weakness of his interpretation. The list of offenses begins with behaviors that Leontes may have
actually witnessed and that, in fact, sound not at all unlike the interaction between Hermione and Polixenes that first raised Leontes’ suspicions roughly 150 lines earlier. The whispers and sighs that he speaks of are reminiscent of the “paddling palms and pinching fingers” described in an earlier passage, but Leontes turns suddenly from behavior that he might have witnessed to things that are not visible and so could not possibly have been observed (1.2.115). With “wishing clocks more swift” and “all eyes blind” he imagines and attributes to Hermione and Polixenes emotions that could be expected of people engaged in an illicit relationship and then uses those imagined emotions to justify his certainty of their affair.

When Antigonus questions this certainty and expresses the wish that his king had further considered the matter before pursuing it to this point Leontes is adamant that the evidence at hand more than justifies his position. He says,

Camillo’s flight

Added to their familiarity

(Which was as gross as ever touch’d conjecture,

That lack’d sight only, nought for approbation

But only seeing, all other circumstances

Made up to th’ deed), doth push on this proceeding.           (2.1.174-9)

This tacit admission that he has not actually witnessed familiarity between Hermione and Polixenes makes one wonder exactly what Leontes imagines the evidence at hand to be, but it also leads to questions concerning the difficulty of procuring visual evidence of adultery. This problem is not only exhibited in Shakespeare’s work, but
seems to have been intrinsic to the early modern understanding of adultery. In a study of Consistory Court records, David Turner writes that while the most reliable proof of adultery consisted of “witnesses to the sexual act,” ideally accompanied by a confession from the accused, such straightforward cases were very rare (153). Far more often cases of adultery rested on rumor and various kinds of circumstantial evidence. Turner also suggests that even where witness testimony existed the validity of such testimony could be questioned because “to observe a man and woman apparently performing a sexual act might be misleading since the man might be impotent or the woman frigid” (154). As a result, evidence of adultery was more often theoretical than not.

However, if it was difficult to provide visual evidence of adultery, it was far more difficult to provide visual evidence of innocence, as the experiences of Shakespeare’s heroines will attest. Because, as Iago suggests, the sin of adultery was by its very nature a secret, hidden act, the absence of visual evidence could not be considered to constitute the absence of the sin itself, but was instead seen as contingent on the deception surrounding the adultery. Likewise, any appearance of innocence, or denial of guilt, would seem to be nothing more than an attempt to keep the transgression hidden. For example, implicit in Hermione’s defense of herself is the knowledge that her statements will be taken by her accusers as nothing more than an attempt to hide her guilt. She says,

Since what I am to say must be but that
Which contradicts my accusation, and
The testimony on my part no other
But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me
To say “Not guilty.” Mine integrity,
Being counted falsehood, shall (as I express it)
Be so receiv’d. (3.2.22-7)

Similarly, though Hero is said by the Friar to exhibit in her blushes “a fire / To burn the
errors that these princes hold / Against her maiden truth,” the very same physical
reaction is described by Claudio as nothing more than a cunning disguise (4.1.162-4).
This difficulty in providing satisfactory proof of innocence means that once doubt has
been introduced, it is all but impossible to eradicate.

The one opportunity that does seem to exist by way of which a woman’s
innocence can be visually confirmed speaks to this sense of pervading anxiety. In the
fifth act of The Winter’s Tale Leontes meets Polixenes’ son, Florizel, for the first time
and greets him with a rather surprising choice of words. Leontes says “Your mother
was most true to wedlock, prince, / For she did print your royal father off, / Conceiving
you” (5.1.123-5). Considering that Leontes once believed Polixenes to be the father of
his wife’s illegitimate child, this seems an odd and potentially volatile statement for
anyone in this play to deliberately make. However, a similar occurrence in Much Ado
about Nothing suggests that such references to legitimacy may have generally been
more innocuous than Leontes’ particular circumstances would suggest. After the
arrival of the Prince’s entourage in the first act of *Much Ado*, Don Pedro greets his host, Leonato, and observes Hero standing nearby. There follows a conversation in which Leonato makes a casual allusion to Hero’s birth and a joke at Benedick’s expense:

*D. Pedro.*  I think this is your daughter.

*Leon.*  Her mother hath many times told me so.

*Bene.*  Were you in doubt, sir, that you asked her?

*Leon.*  Signior Benedick, no, for then were you a child.

*D. Pedro.*  You have it full, Benedick. We may guess by this what you are, being a man. Truly the lady fathers herself.

(1.1.104-11)

In an article entitled “Against the Sink-a-Pace,” Harry Berger, Jr. speaks of this conversation as Leontes enjoying “a vapid joke or two” about his daughter’s legitimacy and “his own easy assurance that he is no cuckold” (303). As Don Pedro’s final words suggest, it is the close resemblance between Leonato and his daughter which enables him to enjoy such an assurance. The resemblance between father and child acts as a visual confirmation of a woman’s fidelity to her husband.

We see this idea played out in the early scenes of *The Winter’s Tale* as Leontes simultaneously succumbs to his suspicions regarding his wife and takes some small measure of comfort in the obvious likeness between him and his son. He says,

Thou want’st a rough pash, and the shoots that I have

To be full like me; yet they say we are
Almost as like as eggs—women say so,
That will say anything. But were they false
As o’er-dyed blacks, as wind, as waters, false
As dice are to be wished by one that fixes
No bourn ‘twixt his and mine, yet were it true
To say this boy were like me. (1.2.127-34)

Leontes makes his distrust of women clear in this passage with the bitter “women say so, / That will say anything” (1.2.129-30).\(^{16}\) He implies that women are naturally so dishonest that there is no lie they will hesitate to tell, making their avowal likeness between Leontes and Mamillius entirely untrustworthy.\(^{17}\) Luckily, Leontes does not have to rely on the interpretations of others, but can see this resemblance for himself. While a simple declaration of innocence, such as we eventually see in 2.1, would require an investment of faith, by focusing on his own observations Leontes is able to bypass the question of honesty in others and take comfort in knowledge that is as certain as his own eyes can provide. Unfortunately, there is no such visual marker to legitimate Hermione’s pregnancy in the beginning of the play and by the time such a marker does exist, Leontes has allowed his mind to be clouded by doubt. When

\(^{16}\) It is difficult to say whether this distrust is an inherent part of his personality or is a result of his suspicions regarding Hermione. Though Leontes repeats this sentiment several times in the first three acts, it is always in reference to sexual dishonesty and so relates directly to Hermione’s alleged offense.

\(^{17}\) Stephen Orgel provides an interesting footnote to Leontes “were they false / As o’er-dyed blacks,” stating that the line is generally understood to be a reference to cloth that was weakened through over dyeing. However, he also points out that Leontes’ simile is true on a more basic level, as black cloth was produced by dyeing colors over other colors. The process, then, would result in a product that was visually deceptive, giving the appearance of one quality while masking another below the surface. In light of Orgel’s information, this simile acts as a perfect counterpoint to Leontes’ reliance on surface appearance to provide evidence of invisible truths and a particularly apt description of the dishonesty of women who would both lie about such appearances and belie their own appearances.
Paulina presents him with the infant Perdita and calls his attention to the resemblance between him and the child as proof of her legitimacy and her mother’s fidelity, he ignores this evidence. Paulina points out the irrationality of this rejection, suggesting that if Perdita resembles her father as much in mind as she does in body, she may one day find herself doubting the legitimacy of her own children as a result of her doubts as to their father’s fidelity. Addressing the goddess Nature, Paulina says “if thou hast/
The ordering of the mind too, ‘mongst all colours, / No yellow in’t, lest she suspect, as he does, / Her children not her husband’s” (2.3.104-7). Many consider this a confused passage, but the point is that Perdita, being a woman, will never suffer the uncertainty of a father but (because she herself has given birth to them) will always know that her children are her own. Any infidelity on the part of her husband cannot affect the legitimacy of her own children, only those he might sire with another woman. Thus, barring any infidelity on her part, the legitimacy of her children would be as obvious and unquestionable to a mother as is the resemblance between Leontes and his infant daughter and to doubt that legitimacy would be as irrational as Leontes’ refusal to believe his own eyes. That he persists in this refusal shows how fully his actual perceptions have been sacrificed to his imagination.

Just as Othello was unable to face his wife without finding “Cassio’s kisses on her lips” and Iago’s insinuations ringing in his ears, Leontes finds himself unable to view the world around him without the mental filter of Hermione’s guilt (3.3.341). He describes exactly the same relationship between knowledge and affliction that Othello speaks of, saying that he is blessed with knowledge but “accursed / In being so blest”
(2.1.38-9). He then goes on to speak of his emotional response to this knowledge using the metaphor of a spider in a cup.

There may be in the cup
A spider steep’d, and one may drink; depart,
And yet partake no venom (for his knowledge
Is not infected), but if one present
Th’ abhor’d ingredient to his eye, make known
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.    (2.1.39-45)

Stephen Orgel, editor of the Oxford edition, cites a contemporary parallel for this passage in Thomas Middleton’s *No Wit, No Help like a Woman’s*. In Middleton’s work a rich widow, having discovered her fiancé’s apparent disloyalty, speaks of her good fortune in having seen the spider in her cup in time to prevent drinking from it and thus being poisoned.¹⁸ For Leontes, however, danger lies not in the presence of the spider, but in his knowledge of it. In other words, illness does not simply occur as a result of the consumption of poison, but rather the expectation of infection.

Interestingly, this metaphorical infection that Leontes endures produces a physical reaction as well. We learn shortly before Hermione’s trial that he is unable to sleep and attributes this weakness to the fact that the queen still lives, believing that he will recover once she has been punished for her treason. Othello suffers a similar kind of

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¹⁸ Orgel’s quotation of the passage reads: “Have I so happily found / What many a widow has with sorrow tasted, / Even when my lip touched the contracting cup, / Even then to see the spider?” (2.1.390-3).
torment, falling into an epileptic fit when his mind becomes overpowered by the thought of Desdemona and Cassio together. While Leontes seems to have some understanding of his illness as a psychosomatic condition, supposing it to spring from the knowledge that Hermione goes, thus far, unpunished, Othello takes his physical response as additional proof of Iago’s intimations. He claims “Nature would not invest herself in such shadowing passion without some instruction. It is not words that shakes me thus,” implying that Nature is expressing a hidden truth through his physical distress (4.1.39-42).

Othello’s belief that this infirmity is a sign of the truth of Iago’s slander calls to mind yet another of Aristotle’s characteristics of the imagination. Expanding his discussion of the relationship between perception, judgment, and imagination, Aristotle declares that while the perception of something which the mind judges as frightening or hopeful inevitably produces an emotional reaction, the act of imagining such a thing leaves one “as unaffected as persons who are looking at a painting of some dreadful or encouraging scene” (3.3). Othello would agree that the mere idea of Desdemona’s guilt should not have the power to so move him. Therefore, his physical suffering must be a metaphysical manifestation of the reality of those ideas. However, we who have been privy to Iago’s scheming know that Othello is wrong to believe this. Desdemona is innocent and Othello’s fits are produced not by some cosmic expression of truth, but by the continued insinuations of Iago and the images that those suggestions create in his mind. In much the same way that Leontes creates images based on his suspicions and then uses them to justify those suspicions, Othello’s
imagination usurps the role of his senses, producing evidence out of doubt and speculation.

Of the three plays, *The Winter's Tale* depicts the greatest tension between the hero’s interpretation of reality and the perceptions of those around him, and this is at least partly due to the extent to which Leontes attempts to impose his interpretation on others. Antigonus is pronounced either “most ignorant by age” or “born a fool” as a result of his hesitancy to believe Hermione unchaste. Likewise, Camillo’s declaration that Leontes’ accusation cannot be true provokes the almost childish response “It is – you lie, you lie! / I say thou liest, Camillo, and I hate thee” (1.2.296-7). Leontes determines Camillo to be “a gross lout, a mindless slave, / Or else a hovering temporizer that / Canst with thine eyes at once see good and evil” (1.2.298-300). Just as Polixenes is transformed in Leontes’ eyes from dearest friend to traitor, Camillo becomes a conspirator through his rejection of the King’s suspicions and the flight of both is interpreted by Leontes as proof of Hermione’s guilt. In interpreting Hermione as unfaithful, Leontes rewrites not only his wife, but also the members of his court who fail to conform to his interpretation. In her steadfast, though admittedly hopeless, denial of any wrongdoing, it is Hermione herself who most emphatically rejects Leontes’ interpretations and in the trial scene Shakespeare presents us with the clearest example of individual perceptions of reality in conflict. Throughout the scene Hermione’s eloquence and resignation form a distinct contrast to Leontes’ tedious single-mindedness. As he persists in his increasingly extreme and unfounded accusations Hermione declares “You speak a language that I understand not, / My life
stands in the level of your dreams” (3.2.78-9). Leontes’ response, “Your actions are
my dreams,” is not only a perversely accurate statement, it also suggests the
imaginative gap between two individual perceptions of the same events (3.2.80). The
experiences that constitute Hermione’s reality are, at best, only dimly reflected in
Leontes’ own perception of reality and are given new meaning in the context of his
subjectivity.

Shakespeare’s audience experiences this same gap when watching the play. The
shocking revelation of Leontes’ suspicions at a moment when all had seemed to be
well, and his persistent belief in what seem to be unfounded accusations causes the
audience to second guess their initial interpretation in much the same way that Claudio
and Othello experience evolving perceptions of their wives. There is a sense in which
the audience assumes the role earlier occupied by Claudio and Othello, being presented
with a narrative of the heroine’s guilt, and Leontes acts as not only his own Iago, but
ours as well. However, where Claudio and Othello were confounded by the absence of
authentic visual observations, we are given a visual narrative to weigh against Leontes’
interpretations. Though he does remind the audience of the possibility of deception in
appearances – saying, for example, “many a man there is (even at this present, / Now,
while I speak this) holds his wife by th’ arm, / That little thinks she has been sluic’d in
’s absence” – Leontes so strongly emphasizes sight as the medium through which he
has discovered Hermione’s transgression that, in considering our own observations, we
can only conclude that Leontes has assigned different meanings to those observations.
Considering the emphasis placed on sight, and more specifically on the importance of seeing for oneself, it is interesting that the audience is not permitted to view Hermione’s death. After the announcement of Mamillius’ death Paulina declares, “This news is mortal to the Queen – look down / And see what death is doing” and the importance of the visual aspect of Hermione’s condition is stressed by her directive that we “look” and “see,” but before we can do so she is removed from the stage (3.2.146-7). When Paulina returns and announces Hermione’s death she responds to the exclamations of dismay with a description of sensory evidence, declaring:

I say she’s dead – I’ll swear’t. If word nor oath
Prevail not, go and see; if you can bring
Tincture or luster in her lip, her eye,
Heat outwardly or breath within, I’ll serve you
As I would do the gods. (3.2.201-5)

Sight is presented as the surest way of confirming her death and moreover, it is one’s own sight and not the testimony of others that is implied as being most reliable.

This is a sentiment that Antigonus seems to share as he admits in the next scene to having heard reports that “the spirits o’th’ dead / May walk again” but not believing such stories until he himself was faced with such an apparition (3.3.15-16). He explains that a vision of Hermione has appeared to him, requesting that her infant, who is to be abandoned, be called Perdita and left on the shores of Bohemia. Ironically, Antigonus proves that even direct observation does not ensure accurate interpretation as he proceeds to grossly misinterpret his vision, believing that
Hermione’s appearance indicates that she has been proven guilty and wishes for Perdita to be left in the home of her true father, Polixenes. It is in the attempt to assign meaning that Antigonus’ sight becomes unreliable.

The dual nature of sight, as both vulnerable to dangerous misinterpretation and the most reliable source of knowledge, is carried through to the play’s final scene in which Hermione, like Hero and Desdemona before her, returns from the dead to reassume her true identity as honest and chaste wife. The very same physical characteristics by which Paulina described her death become in this scene indicative of life. Observing the statue, Polixenes remarks in awe “Masterly done! / The very life seems warm upon her lip” (5.3.65-66). Leontes describes the apparent motion of her eyes and the way that the statue seems to breathe, saying “methinks / There is an air comes from her. What fine chisel / Could ever yet cut breath?” (5.3.77-9). Finally, when the transformation is complete, and Hermione has stepped down from her pedestal, she joins hands with Leontes who exclaims “O, she’s warm!” (5.3.109). Having once, in the development of his suspicion, surrendered his perceptions to the will of his imagination, Leontes now finds himself actually experiencing the evolution of his knowledge. Significantly, this evolution takes place without the aid of his imagination and the new reality that is built around him, a reality in which Hermione is miraculously alive, is built upon a foundation of simple perception. In his essay on the imagination Montaigne suggests that while it is primarily through the imagination that we form our reality, it is with the body that we experience that reality. Because our physical responses are essentially the same, because we all feel pain when injured,
because we all shiver from cold and sweat in the heat, there remains a portion of our experience of reality that is not dictated by the imagination and we are spared from an entirely subjective reaction to our environment. The physical symptoms that signify Hermione’s return to life have an indelible meaning for Leontes because he shares them and by connecting with his wife on a purely sensory level, he accesses a kind of automatic knowledge of her that forms an ironic contrast to the automatic knowledge he believed he had found in her interaction with Polixenes. Consequently, it is not an interpretation of reality that Leontes experiences now, but the thing itself. In this new intimacy between husband and wife we can see both a happily inverted reflection of the physical intimacy that Leontes feared between Hermione and Polixenes and the beginning of an answer to the inevitable distance between individuals. Before Hermione’s awakening Paulina tells Leontes “It is requir’d / You do awake your faith” (5.3.94-5). In Much Ado about Nothing it is Claudio’s leap of faith in accepting a veiled bride that ultimately rewards him with the hand of the virtuous Hero, and in Othello it is Desdemona’s profession of faith in the existence of a more noble Othello than the one presented to her that cements her own nobility and provides her with some small triumph even in death. Now in The Winter’s Tale it is Leontes’ concession of a reality deeper than his own subjective interpretations that allows him to finally bridge the chasm he has created between him and his wife.

However, there are somber notes in this final scene which suggest that Leontes may not be quite through imagining. In the midst of the happy reunions, Paulina reminds us of the losses incurred as a result of Leontes’ actions. Expressing grief over
the loss of her husband, Antigonus, she says “I, an old turtle, / Will wing me to some wither’d bough, and there / My mate (that’s never to be found again) / Lament till I am lost” (5.3.132-5). With fantastic compassion and sensitivity, Leontes replies “O, peace, Paulina!” and informs her that just as she claimed the right to select his next bride, he will provide her with a husband (5.3.135). He announces that a match will be made between Paulina and Camillo, despite the fact that, as far as we know, these two characters have not seen each other for 16 years and have had only the most minimal interaction throughout the play. Even more telling is Leontes’ utter obliviousness to the other, more poignant loss that has been sustained. In the play’s final passage he expresses his amazement that Hermione should be alive, telling Paulina, “Thou hast found mine, / But how, is to be question’d; for I saw her / (As I thought) dead; and have (in vain) said many / A prayer upon her grave” (5.3.138-41). In this moment of rejoicing, Leontes seems to have forgotten his order that Hermione and Mamillius be entombed together. Any prayers said over that grave could not have been in vain because they were intended to be atonement for both deaths and there has been no miraculous restoration of Mamillius.

Ironically, it is the announcement of Mamillius’ death during the trial scene that both cements the existence of a concrete reality beyond human interpretation and awakens Leontes to his own ignorance. When the oracle is read it reveals not only what has been but what will be, rejecting Leontes’ accusations and declaring that “the King shall / live without an heir if that which is lost be not / found’ (3.2.132-4). “That which is lost” is clearly a reference to the infant Perdita, who has been turned over to
Antigonus with orders for abandonment. But in the moment that the oracle is read, for all we know Leontes still has an heir in the person of his son. It is only upon his rejection of the oracle that Mamillius’ death is revealed. There was some hint earlier in the play that the child was ill, so this could simply be convenient and extremely suggestive timing, but Leontes immediately interprets this death as punishment for his injustice. The presence of the oracle in the play, and the foreknowledge that it exhibits, suggests a kind of ultimate truth existing beneath the imposition of human interpretation. In his abrupt reversal of opinion and his sudden acceptance of the oracle Leontes seems to be aware of this and yet Mamillius’ death, which through its connection to the oracle is emblematic of this knowledge, is completely overlooked by him in the play’s conclusion. This is a gaping absence in the final scene that illustrates both the destructive power of Leontes self deception and his imaginative ability to absolve himself by simply discarding the most lasting consequence of that deception. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Othello*, and *The Winter’s Tale* Shakespeare explores the complex relationship between perception and knowledge in order to illustrate the subjectivity of reality. He suggests that because we perceive the world around us through the extremely subjective filter of our imagination we are in constant danger of believing, as Leontes does, too much in our own suspicions and accepting as concrete “reality” information or knowledge that exists only within our own minds. In the end, it is only through a combination of self-effacement and faith in our loved ones that we can hope to achieve any sense of a shared reality. While Leontes does seem to have acquired this faith he continues to see things as he wants them to be, allowing his mind
to make him happy in the play’s final scene through very much the same process that it made him miserable in the beginning. In the character of Leontes Shakespeare shows that self-deception is potentially far more damaging that any deception that can be exercised over us by others and it is a tendency to which, by our very nature, we are hopelessly prone.
Works Cited


---. *Othello*. Evans 1198-1248.

