" What fine chisel could ever yet cut breath?": The Technology of Character in Shakespeare's

***The Winter's Tale* (1611)**

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Justin Kolb

PhD Candidate, University of Wisconsin-Madison

jbkolb@wisc.edu

Shakespeare's stage was a space swarming with performing objects, and only a minority of them were human actors. In *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties[1],* Frances Teague's nearly exhaustive catalog of all the hand props used in Shakespeare's plays, it is estimated that the average play used 34 significant properties, and maybe a dozen actors. In his *Diary*, theatrical impresario Philip Henslowe places more value on the sumptuous costumes he acquired than the scripts he owned or actors he employed. Embedded in a cultural context in which playmaking was considered more technology than art—a prudential enterprise more akin to carpentry than rhetoric—the Jacobean theater was as concerned with the effective combination and display of significant properties—Yorick's skull from *Hamlet* and Desdemona's handkerchief from *Othello* are two of the most famous examples—as it was with poetic language.

   This paper examines the heroines of *The Winter's Tale,* the lost princess Perdita, who is initially played not by an actor, but by a collection of stage properties, and her mother Hermione, whose miraculous return at the end of the play requires her to *become* a stage property, the statue with which she is consubstantial. The play is, to paraphrase Bacon's *Novum Organum,* a

[1] Frances Teague, *Shakespeare's Speaking Properties* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1991).

chronicle of the "putting together and putting asunder [of] natural bodies,"[2] as Hermione and Perdita are broken down into their constituent parts and reassembled once more. The play thus tropes the technical and quasi-scientific process of character creation in the period's plays, as text, properties, and actor were combined in theatrical space to create an automaton, a complex artifact that performs humanity.

The plot of *The Winter's Tale* is built around the breaking apart and eventual reassembly of Hermione's character, and the parallel assembly of Perdita from a heterogeneous set of components. The play moves forward, in fits and starts, as a series of dispersals and gatherings, as the assemblies that compose the characters are broken up, and then, tentatively, reconvened through the actions, both deliberate and inadvertent, of various authors within the text. Keep in mind that in this era, authors were those agents which, according to the *OED*, "originate or give existence to anything [...] the inventors, instructors or founders [...] of things material [...] who authorize or instigate [...] who beget, or father" (*OED*). All of these definitions are contemporaneous with the play and position it in a cultural discourse that contains many potential locations for authorship, placing on a level plain all the persons, causes, and processes that combine to make a thing possible and bring it into existence, all of the things that make up a thing. Early modern drama lies within what Jeffrey Masten describes as "an era in English culture, extending well into the seventeenth century, when *author* carried with it several strands of meaning only beginning to separate—or rather, only beginning to form *as strands.*"[3]

Through this proliferation of authority, the production of identity is revealed to be constructed and contingent in its "piedness" (4.4.87). Hermione and Perdita function as "quasi-objects," to borrow a term from French sociologist of science Bruno Latour, who describes

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[2] Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, 1620, (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Library of Liberal Arts, 1960) Aphorism iv, 39.
[3] Jeffrey Masten, *Textual Intercourse: Collaboration, Authorship, and Sexualities in English Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 66.

quasi-objects as hybrids of nature and culture that "are much more social, much more fabricated, much more collective that the 'hard' parts of nature, but are in no way the arbitrary receptacles of a full-fledged society."[4] In his book *We Have Never Been Modern,* Latour recasts modernity as "The Modern Settlement," a powerful but paradoxical state of affairs which consists of a world that is, on the one hand, structured around ontologically distinct and pure dichotomies of human/nonhuman, living/nonliving, nature/culture, mind/body, art/technology. On the other hand, the space between these dichotomies is swarming with "quasi-objects," "hybrids of nature and culture" that mediate the division between dichotomies and allow technological and epistemological mastery of the world. I would like to read Hermione and Perdita as quasi-objects, as quasi-*humans* who mediate between ontological poles of human and nonhuman, natural creature and complex artifact, life and death, autonomous creation and extension of an author. The women in the play become examples of "how objects construct the subject"[5] as assemblages of objects, both conscientious and contingent, metamorphose into queen and princess.

In the process, the play creates a homology between the conception and raising of children, the creation of dramatic characters, and practice of various forms of art and technology. All of these processes are linked by barely differentiated forms of making, and their products are defined as various artifacts and assemblies. Death becomes consubstantial with the breaking apart of the artifact, as once unified quasi-humans are reduced to their constituent things, and with proliferation, as the pieces are scattered and recombined into new things. (Re)Birth is figured as (re)assembly, the combination of elements to create an entity with a narrative of personhood, a subject-machine.

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[4] Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern,* trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 55.
[5] Latour, 82.

This homology between making people and making machines is central to models of literary creation in early modern England, which was to use Henry Turner's phrase, "essentially compatible with ethical, poetic, and technical modes of reasoning."[6] In a similar fashion to *author,* dramatic terms like *plot* (or *plat*) could simultaneously mean the ground-plan of a house, the lay of the land on a battlefield, a surveyor's measurements, any sort of plan or diagram, a sketch of a literary work, a design or device, an intrigue or scheme (*OED*). The theater thus sat in a social matrix alongside practical and quasi-scientific forms of *techne,* ranging from soldiery to surveying to construction.

This technical and collaborative model of authorship was in tension with the idea of unitary author, a concept just beginning to individuate itself in drama. These tensions played out in another of the constitutive parts of the literary quasi-human, the homology between paternity and authorship. John Florio's 1603 translation of Michel de Montaigne's *Essais* addresses these anxieties in "Of the Affection of Fathers to their Children" (2.8):

> I believe, that in that, which *Herodotus* reporteth of a certaine province of *Libia,* there often followeth much error and mistaking. He saith, that men doe indifferently use, and as it were in common frequent women; And that the child as soone as he is able to goe, comming to any solemne meetings and great assemblies, led by a natural instinct, findeth out his owne father: where being turned loose in the middest of the multitude, looke what man the childe doth first address his steps unto, and then goe to him, the same is ever afterward reputed to be his right father.[7]

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[6] Henry Turner, "Plotting Early Modernity," *The Culture of Capital: Property, Cities, and Knowledge in Early Modern England*, ed. Henry Turner (New York: Routledge, 2002) 105.
[7] Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, *The Essayes of Montaigne* (1603), trans. John Florio, intro. J. I. M. Stewart, (New York: The Modern Library, 1933) 353.

Here we see male anxiety about cuckoldry and bastardry, but also anxiety about the larger problem of distributing authority and responsibility over made things, be they children or artifacts, which circulate among so many potential authors and causes.

This anxiety is troped by Leontes' suspicion of his wife. The Old English word for Florio's "solemne meetings and great assemblies" is, of course, "thing" (*OED*), which makes paranoid Leontes' exclamation of "O thou thing!" (2.1.82), a particularly evocative epithet for Hermione. The word *thing* was a term in transition in Shakespeare's time. Shades of its old meaning, "a public assembly, meeting, parliament, council […] a deliberative or judicial meeting, a court," may have persisted. But in the Jacobean period "thing" hovered between being "That with which one is concerned (in action, speech, or thought)" and the contemporary sense of "That which exists individually […] a being, an entity" (*OED*). The *OED* contains citations from Shakespeare for both of these senses. The thing had become what was being judged, not what was doing the judging, but its status as a matter of fact or matter of concern remained unsettled.

Leontes' suspicion forces Hermione from one sense of "thing" to another, taking an object, an entity, and making it into a question to be interrogated. In this, Shakespeare reverses the etymological development of "thing," taking it back toward its original sense of collective deliberation. Hermione's trial enacts the process described by Michel Serres in his accounts of early modern scientific demonstrations, serving as a "tribunal [that] stages the very identity of cause and thing, of word and object, or the passage of one to the other by substitution. A thing emerges there."[8] Leontes, acting as author and king, identifies Hermione with his accusations of infidelity. He takes her apart, reducing her to a pile of observations and inferences.

> 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

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[8] Serres, Michel, *Statues* (Paris: Francois Bourin, 1987), 111.

> Of breaking honesty)? horsing foot on foot?
> Skulking in corners? wishing clocks more swift?
> Hours, minutes? noon, midnight?
> […]
> 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)

In the king's dreams, Hermione has become a *thing,* the nexus of the connections and influences that intrude upon his desire for absolute authority. Her bond with Mamillius, her friendship with Polixenes, her separate realm among Paulina and her attendant women, all of this must be curtailed in order to impose a unitary authority over the Sicilian court.

Ultimately, Leontes succeeds in being the sole author of his own tragedy. The "conceit and fear" (3.2.144) he stirs up in his son is sufficient to slay him offstage; Mamilius cannot function as a mere extension of his father's will. Likewise, Hermione collapses in front of her husband and Paulina immediately declares that "This news is mortal to the Queen. Look down / And see what death is doing" (3.2.149-50). Leontes has broken the plot, scattering its pieces and characters far and wide, and setting in motion their reassembly at the hands of more authors than existed in even his wildest dreams.

One reconstruction begins in Sicilia, the moment Hermione swoons and Paulina pronounces her dead. Another takes place on the seacoast of Bohemia, where Antigonus stands with the infant. By this point we can consider Leontes' exclusive authority to be thoroughly shattered and disseminated, as it is now his courtier Antigonus who authors the future by identifying Hermione with *his* dreams. He tells the child (or, physically, the doll or bundle of rags in his arms on stage) that "thy mother / Appear'd to me last night; for ne'er was dream so like a waking" (3.3.17-19). The apparition, clad in white "Like very sanctity" (3.3.23), bows, gasps,

weeps, and finally orders Antigonus to name the child Perdita, warning him that he will never see his wife again before vanishing, shrieking, into the air.

It remains unclear exactly what this "creature" (3.3.19) is. Hermione's eventual resurrection has traditionally led critics, assuming a more stable ontological status for Shakespearean characters than the play warrants, to conclude that she is alive all along and to categorize her appearance here as simply a dream, an emanation of Antigonus' guilty conscience. I tend to agree with Stephen Greenblatt when he says that "though the audience is amply warned not to credit the ghost of Hermione, it is at the same time strongly induced to do so."[9] The vividness of the ghost's apparition and its orders' consequences for the rest of the play make dismissing it as mere dream unsatisfying. Antigonus did indeed dream Hermione back into being, but this dream existence is what she has been reduced to. Hermione can, for now, be only memory and dream, a shade "gasping to begin some speech" (3.3.25) and enter the world again. Antigonus, consorting with this furious muse, engages in an act of authorship more productive than Leontes' abortive attempt. He becomes Perdita's second father, giving her a name and, more importantly, placing on the strand the material artifacts, the "immutable mobiles"[10] that will preserve her connection to Sicilia and allow her eventual return. Soon after setting the child down, saying, "Blossom, speed thee well!" (3.3.46), he plants the real seeds of her eventual flourishing; "There lie, and there thy character, and there these" (3.3.47). Doll, scroll, and chest jewels lay arranged on the beach, and the prop-infant, earlier described as a printed text, is homologous to the artifacts on either side of it. These three items are the initial and essential material components of "what to her adheres" (4.1.28) in the Shepherd's household, of the assembly that will come into being as Perdita. The props will become the person.

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[9] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) 202.

[10] Bruno Latour, "Drawing Things Together," *Representation in Scientific Practice,* ed. Michael Lynch and Steve Woolgar (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990) 26.

Antigonus' initial act of distributed authorship opens a path for numerous other parents to contribute to Perdita's invention. Antigonus, realizing that his role is played and he is "gone forever," "*Exit*[*s*] *pursued by a bear*" (3.3.58). Perdita begins existence as scanty assembly of artifacts, and Antigonus ends in the same fashion, the bear tearing out his bones and disassembling him into limbs his "letters [...] which they know to be his character" (5.2.34-35), just enough to confirm his fate in Sicilia sixteen years later. At this point, the "things dying" and "things new-born" (4.1.113-14) on the beach have the same status. Each is merely a collection of pieces, waiting to assembled and brought to life, or some semblance.

The pieces of Perdita begin to reassemble at the sheep-sheering festival, where Polixenes' suspicions prompt her flight to Sicilia with her lover. When Leontes asks the fugitive Florizel where his wife is from, the prince tells him "from Libya" (5.1.157). Perdita, the product of at least three fathers and two incarnations of her mother, as well as meaning-rich tokens and capricious fortune, is indeed a Libyan in Florio and Montaigne's sense, a child wandering among an assembly of possible parents, drawn by circumstance toward the mother and father she will recognize as her own. She is identified through a quasi-scientific "unity in the proofs" (5.2.32), the scroll and jewels Antigonus left and the Shepherd kept, but she is no more Leontes' daughter than she is Antigonus' or the Shepherd's. The immutable mobiles of the scroll and jewelry, the prophecy of Apollo, and her physical resemblance to Hermione combine to make her Leontes' daughter, but he cannot claim sole authorship of her. Fortunately for all involved, the chastened king has accepted a more distributed model of authority, ceding to Paulina the task of memorializing his departed wife.

This new embrace of collaboration, and the partial renewal it brings, comes to fruition in Paulina's temple, where the fantastic statue of Hermione is unveiled. As with the ghost, the

ontological status of the statue is ambiguous. While logic pushes toward seeing Hermione as

simply in hiding all this time, we are nevertheless strongly compelled to see Hermione's return

as a miraculous metamorphosis. She is now a thing that really does come to life, an assembly of

Julio Romano's statue, the carefully constructed alcove, music, stagecraft, the king's humbling

and the prophecy's fulfillment. The king concedes authority to Paulina and the never-present

Romano. He believes "The fixture of her eye has motion in't, / As we are mock'd with art"

(5.3.67-68). When the statue comes to life, even this sense of imitation is displaced, as

Hermione becomes consubstantial with the artifact that portrayed her. This scene has been

read as Shakespeare's defense of the unitary dramatic author's art, a magic "Lawful as eating"

(5.3.105), but the very complexity of Paulina's tableau, and the various human and artificial

instruments it requires, undercuts such a reading. Paulina the dramatist creates nothing new

(even the statue is actually Hermione herself) but rather manages and assembles various

objects—her audience positioned as carefully as her props—into an assembly that will allow

Hermione to live again. Inside a carefully crafted dramatic machine, Hermione is not resurrected

so much as she is rebuilt, and the dramatic author is less a poet than an engineer who combines

given materials into ingenious new devices, like a remade Queen, reunited family, and restored

kingdom.

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