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SYMBOLIC IMAGES OF MIMESIS, *TROMP L'OEIL* AND A VEIL IN SHAKESPEARE'S *THE WINTER'S TALE*

The Winter's Tale abounds in allusions to nature, reality and seeming reality, which is a feature that is present in a number of Shakespeare's comedies. It plays with interpretations of a particular theme people have dealt with for centuries – the question of whether we are able to surpass nature in our efforts to imitate it. The aim of this article is to provide another interpretation of *The Winter's Tale* with regard to a particular scene – the last scene of the fifth act. There are also other parts in the play that should be taken into consideration when dealing with the theme of how reality is represented. However, I would like to emphasize the vital importance of the final dialogue between Paulina and Leontes.

When we look at Paulina's reaction towards Leontes, who is thus exposed to the most important decision he has to make, Paulina begins, standing in front of a veiled Hermione:

> Good, my lord, forbear:
> The ruddiness upon her lip is wet;
> You'll mar it if you kiss it, stain your own
> With oily painting. Shall I draw the curtain?
> (5.3.80–83)

When we connect this utterance with the plot, it seems obvious that Paulina is referring to a statue or rather to the image of Hermione in front of them, shrouded with a veil. Paulina plays a trick on both Leontes and the audience by not clearly stating whether the standing figure is an illusion or a real person. The "contact" with the audience is constantly present in Shakespeare's late comedies. The role of prologues, epilogues and Chorus speeches is to create a bridge between reality and illusion. As Righter claims: "A sense of contact with the audience still had to be maintained, a means of relating the play world with that reality upon which plays are built" (Righter 55). But in this play the contact is somehow disrupted and we cannot clearly state whether the devices for communicating with the audi-

ence are so obviously used here. The fact is that we are unsure about reality from the beginning and the ending does not offer us a conclusion by means of God's intervention (as in *Cymbeline*), nor do such devices.

Thus we get to the problem of what is genuine and what is false, which is again present from the beginning of the play. In my view, the veil or curtain could be understood as a hidden reference to a *tromp l'oeil* in painting. Consequently, I will try to support this idea by making clear what role the *tromp l'oeil* played in the history of art, how it is connected with the symbolic veil and why this image was so frequent in the Renaissance period. I will also try to elaborate on the "paragone" allusion which in my view constructs a vital part of Renaissance thinking.

Firstly, speculation about art and its relation to nature is constantly present in the play. In the history of art, one of the first treatments of the competition between art and nature is a work by Vitruvius called *On Architecture*. Vitruvius mentions a famous painter Agatharcos, who created the first illusionist painting in the form of stage scenery to serve as a backdrop for a tragedy by Aeschylus. We are in this case faced with a mock curtain that begins to play one of the crucial roles in the *trompe l'oeil* painting. The ancient world deliberately used an illusion to express their art. Other examples of ancient illusionism are anecdotes mentioned by Pliny in his *Historia Naturalis*. One of them concerns a story of a bet between the two most honoured painters at that time, Parrhasios and Zeuxis. Zeuxis, a Greek painter living in Athens, competed with Parrhasios to depict the most realistic painting they were capable of – a painting which would master even nature itself. Zeuxis made a still life with a bunch of grapes, at which, it is said, birds began to peck at them, believing the grapes to be genuine. Parrhasios, having seen this event, decided to paint a picture of a veil, which looked so real that poor Zeuxis asked his opponent to draw it. The pleasure of such anecdotes indicates the enormous popularity of paintings which could create optical illusion and be mistaken for reality and truth. The painters themselves were by this means indicating the high quality of their work because they had won a competition with nature itself. We can understand it as a kind of *mimesis* which I will mention later on.

Paintings that were trying to create an optical illusion had been an alluring theme since antiquity. However, it achieved its exceptional popularity in the Renaissance, which looked back to an ancient heritage. There used to be a special term for such kinds of paintings in the antiquity – *xenion*. Those *xenis* played an important role in ancient Egyptian funeral painting. They were the images of food offerings to the dead, painted on the walls of funerary chambers. X*enis* appeared in two forms of still-lifes: a niche divided into two zones by a shelf, or a display of objects which foreshadowed the "cabinet de curiosité" *trompe l'oeil* theme of the sixteenth century. The ancient artists were highly skilled in depicting plastic elements, which emphasized the sculptural elegance. The Renaissance masters such as Giulio Romano, who will be discussed later, signified a culmination of this accuracy of depiction. *Xenis* form strong connections with a special kind of *tromp l'oeil* painting frequent in still life. It concerns the image of a cabinet

filled with objects such as books (usually with references to Virgil, Dante and others), flowers in vases, skulls (pointing out impermanence and highlighting an omnipresent death) and others. Philostratos mentioned those *xenis* in relation to describing the "real" looking objects present in still life. His two books of essays called *Imagines* were well known to educated painters in the 16th century as well as the work *Descriptions* by Callistratus, who encouraged the creation of pictorial and sculptural *trompe l'oeil*. Callistratus describes a bronze statue of Dionysus and he is convinced that this work of art really surpassed either a painting or nature itself: "[…] nevertheless blushed, and though it had no part in life, […] sought to show the appearance of life and would yield to the very finger-tip if you touched it" (Schifferer 47). In the last act of *The Winter's Tale* Paulina refers to a "statue" of Hermione and two Gentlemen in the second scene of that act talk about a sculptor named Julio Romano. What here is Shakespeare alluding to? Is he trying to confirm that this Italian master is capable of surpassing nature because he managed to "put breath into his work […] he so near to Hermione hath done Hermione that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope of answer" (5.2.97–101)?

If we come back to the story of Parrhasios and Zeuxis, it is obvious that their "rediscovery" in the Renaissance was understood as *aemulatio* – the comparison to legendary artists whose fame passed through the centuries. Therefore, there could be a possibility that Shakespeare was thinking about Pliny's work when writing the mentioned scene. We can see that ancient *xenis* stood in fact as a model or the inspiration for the sixteenth century *trompe l'oeil* phenomenon – in the House of Vestals in Pompeii, for example, *xenia* were depicted as an illusion on the walls of the room. All these instances in the history of art confirm that a skilful artist was the one who was able to depict reality best.

Let us put the veil under closer examination. The main devices that appeared in the history of visual art and were commonly used in connection with *trompe l'oeil*, were the painted fly, the so-called *cartellino* (little card) and a veil. All these three items are used in painting so as to maintain a contradiction between illusion and reality. When we shift our focus to the painting by Wilhelm van Haecht which depicts an artistic collection, we can easily find that the walls which are covered with paintings of various genres include some works with the veil. The question is whether the veil is painted or added on the surface of a piece of work. There are in fact two kinds of such a veil: the one that is painted (with reference to Parrhasios) and the other which is made of real cloth (mostly of silk) and is fixed to a painting so as to carry out the function of protecting the work of art. As for the "added veil", it is known that – for instance – some of Caravaggio's or Poussin's paintings from the Rome collection, were covered by the veil. The function of this "curtain" was both aesthetic (to decorate and beautify the painting) and practical (to protect the painting from dust and direct sunlight). But it is also said that the occasional covering of the work enhanced its gracefulness, attractiveness and strengthened the opinion that what can not be seen is more magnetic and evokes inquisitiveness in people's thoughts. This kind of a veil can be

seen in Haecht's painting. What is striking about this work is that we face a piece of art that represents the "real" silk veil – the painter shows us a secondary image of a thing that is added to a painting and at the same time he informs us of the collection of Cornelius van der Geest by creating an image of it. Shakespeare's role is very similar in fact – he is in the position of an observer who has to interpret the situation happening in front of the audience on stage. Both of them offer us a secondary image/description of reality.

The "painted veil" had far more functions and references, the most important of them being the *tromp l'oeil* relation. What is decisive here is the effort to reach an effect – the effect of an optical illusion which enables the owner of the painting to amaze and astonish its spectator. Deception, illusion and trickery gave them an impetus for surprise and even laughter. The most important reaction brought about by such a veil was, however, the opportunity to discuss it. In fact, the painted veil was a kind of picture within a picture or image within an image as in the case of Zurbarán's *Saint Bonaventura*. However, we can discern other functions, such as its use in the religious sphere. One stood for an attribute to the Virgin Mary and the other served the purpose of covering the image of a saint. It symbolized a visual pattern for contemplation and devotions as we can see in Zurbarán's painting. These forms of a painted veil that appear in the history of art might be taken into consideration when we try to interpret *The Winter's Tale*.

Illustration 1 Wilhelm van Haecht, *Die Sammlung des Cornelius van der Geest*, 1628 (Rubenshaus, Antverp)

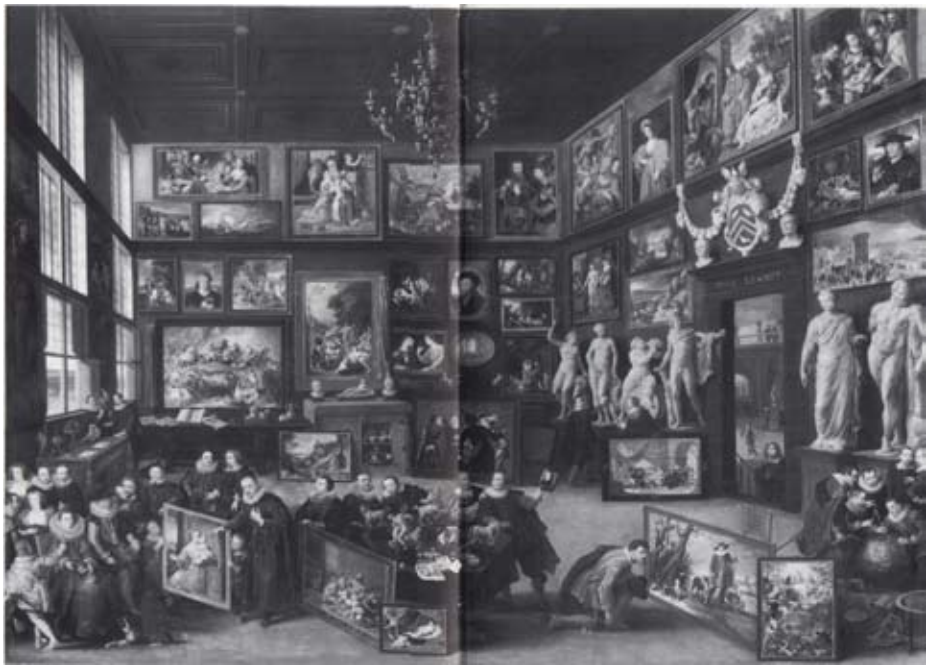

Illustration 2 Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Saint Bonaventura*, 1629 (Berlin)

Another important phenomenon relating to Shakespeare's play is the role of *mimesis* mentioned at the beginning. Plato draws the distinction in *The Republic* between *mimesis* and *diegesis*, which means a difference between representation and simple narrative. When we apply it to the world of art, we can simply use the term "mimetic arts". He interprets the terms imitation, image and nature in parallel with their context – to imitate nature means imitating its visual semblances, human emotions and human acts through music, painting or drama. He also distinguishes between three types of representation, the third being the imitation of the artist. He gives a story of a painter who is making a portrait of a shoemaker, as an example. According to Plato, a painter can easily deceive people who think that the depicted craftsman is real. Aristotle, Plato, Cicero and others exhort in their works to make art resemble nature in order to achieve more aesthetic results. The idea that nature stimulates men to develop art appears frequently in the Renaissance because of their looking back to ancient times and because they reinterpreted such works as Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's analysis of nature. But the artist-versus-nature problem had existed even before Plato – nature and art are the two creative representatives, Nature in Renaissance thinking being a synonym for the divine art. Thus every other "human" art is inferior in competing with nature. The Hermione statue (if it really is a statue) is transformed into a human being. It can be said that the Divinity in Shakespeare's play surpassed the human striving for imitation. But what if the statue is just an illusion (made by a human Giulio Romano) and thus this piece of work deceived nature itself?

Another example of the Renaissance deriving themes from antiquity is the so-called bucolic poetry which has its origins in Virgil's *Eclogues* (as for Latin poetry) or Polybios's *Historiae* (Greek poetry). It was only in the Renaissance that Virgil's *Arcadia* was again revived. Later, in Baroque painting, Claude Lorrain was one of the artists who took the Arcadian theme as a subject for their works. The revival of the old ancient ideals such as the work of Pliny was common in the Renaissance and Shakespeare could have used their ideas in his own plays. Ebert-Schifferer states, coming back to the Zeuxis and Parrhasios, that "with the revival of antique literature during the Renaissance, this anecdote came to set the standard for the perfect painted imitation of nature (mimesis). Still-life painters strove for title 'a modern Zeuxis,' to imply not only their skill, but also their place within an esteemed tradition" (Schifferer 109).

Returning to the depiction of the veil in the history of art, one might find a parallel between the connoisseur and the reader/viewer. As the connoisseur himself is deceived (Zeuxis as well) when trying to "unveil" the painting, so is the viewer or reader of *The Winter's Tale*. The moment of surprise in all those cases mentioned has the same meaning – to provoke and puzzle the reader and to create an illusion. It is also obvious that Shakespeare stated his own attitude to the art-versus-nature problem when he developed such dialogues as that between Perdita and Polixenes. Talking about the shepherdess's beauty, the tedious conversation culminates with Polixenes's reaction to Perdita's interest in art which is hidden in flowers:

> But nature makes that mean: so, over that art,
> Which you say adds to nature, is an art
> That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
> A gentler scion to a bark of baser kind
> By bud of nobler race. This is an art
> Which does mend nature – change it rather – but
> The art itself is nature.
>
> (4.4.90–97)

This dialogue is again based on one presumption – that there is an art "which, in their piedness / shares with great creating nature" (4.4.88–89). Perdita is talking about flowers called gillyvors and uses the term "nature's bastards" (bastard meaning deceitful or false) and alluding to cross-breeding. She thinks that there may be an unnatural art in them and Pafford claims that "the gilly-flower was also thought to produce cross-breeds without human aid" (Pafford 170). This kind of flower was also associated with unchastity, which Pafford again connects with the allusion to painting or a painted woman. And Perdita herself offers us an image of her being changed into a painted portrait. She compares the gardener's art to that of a painter. Both of them are trying to "mend, improve and imitate" nature, which Polixenes justifies by stating that the art itself is nature (and it is made by man). Shakespeare develops an argument in this dialogue by emphasizing that

what is painted is sterile at the same time – it is producing sterile images of reality. He supports Perdita who calls these attempts – that of a gardener who depreciates nature when he tries to perfect her by cross-breeding and that of a painter who strives for a better representation of her beauty than is attained by nature – absurd and pointless.

Let us now analyze the play within the play that is hidden in Camillo's plan for Florizel's and Perdita's escape to Sicilia. There they are to present themselves before Leontes and recite a dialogue composed by Camillo. We are witnessing a play that is an entire illusion or vision of Camillo, who wants Florizel to lie about his father's consent. Their aim is to convince Leontes that the scene played before him is real. What is striking about the fourth act is the scene where a Lord enters Leontes' court and breaks the illusion by using semantically similar words such as a "seeming lady" (5.1.190). It is of great interest that just at the end of the play, Camillo's "vision" becomes real because what emerges from a discussion between the characters involved is that Perdita really is the king's daughter.

Another moment is important when we connect an iconographic symbol in the form of a veil with this play. Leontes' lack of faith at the beginning of the first act is the starting point in fact for his own tragedy when he causes the imprisonment of Hermione and the banishment of the baby Perdita. His disbelief is so strong that he ends his monologue with the words: "All's true that is mistrusted" (2.1.48). In fact he is again dealing with a "vision" about a conspiracy when he first openly claims that Hermione is disloyal to him. The second aspect of Leontes' disbelief relates to his rejection of the baby Perdita, who is unveiled by Paulina when shown to the father. Leontes shouting at Paulina and accusing her of being an ally with witchcraft lays stress again on the art of illusions. His last hesitation about accepting what is real is the moment when Hermione is unveiled in the dramatic scene of the last act. This is where tension between the genuine and the false culminates. The king is facing a work of art (in the form of a statue) which itself is nature.

We can sense allusions to illusion and reality right from the beginning of the play, but their full form evolves in the fifth act as in the following lines: "Prepare to see the life as lively mocked / as ever still sleep mocked death […] (5.3.18–20). With these lines Shakespeare starts to play with illusions because what is vital here is the use of metaphor that life is imitated as closely as sleep imitates death. Now the "paragone" allusion takes place, paragone meaning comparison. When Leonardo da Vinci and his contemporaries used the word "paragone", they meant it in the sense of comparison, as a rivalry between the artists and their works. Only later did the term come to refer to the comparison of the arts. In Renaissance thinking, this paragone related to the competition between the sculpture and painting.

Before applying the paragone to Shakespeare's work in general, we should examine closely whether the transformation of Hermione means a transformation into a painting or into a sculpture. For the problem is that the description of a presumed sculpture rather matches that of an oil painting. The passage "The statue is

but newly fixed; the colour's not dry" (5.3.48–49) suggests that the painted image is nearly done and that the picture highly corresponds to the real appearance of Hermione. Another example makes us believe that it is rather a painting of Hermione than a statue when Shakespeare refers to: "The ruddiness upon her lip is wet, you'll mar it, if you kiss it; stain your own with oily painting […]" (5.3.81–83). Shakespeare again plays with the senses and puzzles his audience. He plays a trick on us and it is possible that this trick of a painted or a sculptured Hermione has another shift in meaning – that of a painted veil which would even more complicate the one-sided interpretation. Because when we try to unveil the painting, we will be deceived twice. And that would in no way mean that Shakespeare's play has ended. There will always be other explanations hidden in this work. One of them could concern the paragone mentioned above. The Renaissance historiography of art was represented mainly by Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*, in which he dealt with the paragone term. As Pafford rightly states, Shakespeare may have read those *Lives* and may have seen some of Giulio Romano's paintings there (depending on certain editions). Giulio Romano is mentioned in *The Winter's Tale* as the one who created the statue. Pafford claims that Shakespeare knew Romano only as a painter, not as a sculptor. Hermione therefore might have been shown to the others as a statue but with an allusion to an oil painting with a veil, shifting the whole play to the spheres of illusion and *trompe l'oeil*. Then the paragone could mean a rivalry between painting (in the form of a veil) and sculpture. However, the question should be posed as follows: which of these two ways of art imitates nature best?

The possibility of a reference to a *tromp l'oeil* painting that often uses a veil as a heritage of antiquity and at the same time as a means of playing with reality, could be hidden in this last act. The painters were seeking to find connection with the observer and the artist by playing a trick on them and at the same time by stimulating them to reevaluate the ancient times. The veil in both a *tromp l'oeil* and on the statue has one attribute in common, and that is the aim to provoke a discussion about the limits between illusion and truth.

The Winter's Tale does not indicate one single interpretation but it poses various questions. We have discussed so far particular scenes where one comes across allusions to representation of reality. The term *mimesis* and the history of its usage allowed us to understand the aims of Renaissance artists who began to concentrate on *trompe l'oeil* – it means playing with the illusion and searching for imitation – better. There are two crucial scenes in *The Winter's Tale* that raise questions about the right of such artists to imitate nature: the first is a dialogue between Perdita and Polixenes, the second is the act of unveiling the statue of Hermione. Perdita's reaction contributes to an interpretation of the last scene in a sense that she talks about distorting nature when trying to surpass her. She alludes to a painted image that can never interpret the "truth" that is hidden in nature created by God. Polixenes, on the other hand, suggests that even if we try to change nature by "mending" it, that art itself is still nature. These hidden points, however, culminate and are fully present in the last act where the art-ver-

sus-nature problem is revealed. The veil that can be understood either as the one painted on a canvas and having its origins in Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* or the one which covers a statue of Hermione, confirms that whatever way of imitation we choose, we are always deceived and mocked by that art. The primary function of the art of imitation is to convince the observer (viewer or reader) that the reality represented is even more precise in mediating it than nature itself. The characters in *The Winter's Tale* describe the standing statue in so many details that it only strengthens their belief about the image being real. And as we have seen, Zeuxis was as well deceived by an accurate interpretation of a real thing. Perdita's words about the pointless strife of imitation are confirmed in the last scene because if Shakespeare really meant a painted veil that hides the image of Hermione, the audience is thus deceived twice and the circle is closed by nature's superiority.

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