

# Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference

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Volume 13

Article 6

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2023

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### Recommended Citation

Pierce, Robert B. (2023) "Does Shakespeare Believe in Sudden Conversions for his Villains?,"

*Selected Papers of the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference*: Vol. 13, Article 6.

Available at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/spovsc/vol13/iss1/6>

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# Does Shakespeare Believe in Sudden Conversions for his Villains?

Robert B. Pierce, *Oberlin College*

The fifth-act conversion of the villain is a favorite device of playwrights (and fiction-writers) because it is so convenient for eliminating the bad guy as a blocking force that prevents the working-out of the happy ending. Clarifying the closing action often necessarily complicates the end of the play, which leaves little stage time to provide a careful motivation for the villain's conversion. By its abruptness the device saves space in the denouement. Shakespeare repeatedly uses the device of sudden conversion to eliminate a barrier to characters' fulfillment and happiness over his playwriting career, from Proteus's repentance in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* to Iachimo's in *Cymbeline*, but does he actually believe in it as plausible psychology for his characters or more generally in instant conversion as realistic human psychology? That is, does he consider it a genuine human reality or just a handy dramatic tool, enabling him to tell his story, one of the ways in which he deviates from the literal realism that Ben Jonson would have had him respect?

In *As You Like It* Shakespeare manifests authorly nonchalance by his use of what might be called the "passing-hermit device" to dispose of Duke Frederick as an obstacle to the happy outcome.<sup>1</sup> Earlier in that play Shakespeare has made some effort to portray Frederick as a plausible villain, briefly sketching the psychology of a brother's jealousy toward his

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This paper was first delivered at the Ohio Valley Shakespeare Conference at Owens Community College, Toledo, in October 2021, on the topic of "Transformative Shakespeare." Thanks to the sponsors and fellow participants.

<sup>1</sup> With similar casualness Portia disposes of the impoverishment of Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* by revealing the news that she possesses a letter reporting that three of his ships were somehow preserved: "You shall not know by what strange accident / I chanced on this letter" (5, 1, 278-79). It is as though Sophocles had made Oedipus say in the denouement, "I happen to have learned that my wife is also my mother." One might ask how the apparent conversion of Shylock in that play fits into the pattern of this paper, albeit it is a doubtful conversion indicated in one line, "I am content," (389). In a talk read at the 2017 OVSC conference, I pictured Shylock under the concept of gaps in the presentation of that play, as one step toward the shift in method of characterization described in this paper. I am currently revising the paper, and I would say that in a way there is no character of Shylock left after his reversal; one cannot imagine a post-conversion Shylock. All quotations from Shakespeare in this paper are according to the Third Arden edition of each play.

virtuous and likeable younger sibling. But then he eliminates Frederick from Orlando's path by means of an outrageous plot device, a conversion offstage, with a passing smile at Jaques' dilettantish intellectual curiosity: "To him will I; out of these convertites / There is much matter to be heard and learned" (5, 4, 182-83). But Shakespeare has no interest in going on to portray the converted Frederick with his alleged flow of wisdom.

Critics and audiences have regularly been upset by the denouement of the early play *Two Gentlemen of Verona* for the improbability of a plethora of sudden conversions. Not only does Proteus in his changes become a parody version of his name, turning abruptly from sincere though neglected lover of Silvia to her would-be rapist, and then voicing apparently complete repentance at the moment when Valentine throws off his disguise to condemn him. Valentine earnestly applies the standard of the ideal of perfect friendship, which Proteus has betrayed, and then Valentine's words utterly transform Proteus from his villainy. Indeed this whole denouement is a collection of abrupt character transformations. Most bizarrely, Valentine the faithful lover suddenly offers his beloved Silvia to Proteus, reaffirming their total masculine friendship as if he has forgotten his own passion for her. And then Turio boldly claims Silvia for himself, but suddenly, like a coward, retreats at Valentine's determination to fight for her. Even the Duke, the conventional blocking father in his steady rejection of Valentine, suddenly accepts Valentine as a son-in-law, apparently converted from his violent opposition to the marriage by seeing the contrast in virtue between Turio and Valentine. It is with breathless Shakespearian speed that we arrive at Valentine's closing proclamation of total dramatic harmony, one produced after a very brief penance for Proteus that is to end with his after all wedding Julia:

That done, our day of marriage shall be yours,  
One feast, one house, one mutual happiness. (5, 4, 170-71)

It is surely hard to take Proteus and his fellow characters seriously as deep psychological studies of conversion.

What kind of psychology seems to be operating here, or is it merely dramatic contrivance at the whims of the plot? One can indeed see a kind of label psychology, in which a blocklike motive governs a character's behavior, with one or another exemplary trait taking over by abrupt turns,

as if a stage manager shifted a placard proclaiming one trait for another placard labelling another trait, the latter of which we can presume to take over the character wholly. One thinks of the familiar theatrical device of holding up signs labelling time and place or other useful information, as in the Olivier version of *Henry V* as it begins in the early modern theater. Or the implied placard may label a complete role with a set of associated traits that abruptly manifest themselves. Early in *Two Gentlemen* the two male lovers have consistently acted out of their very youthful loves, with their passion represented as an overwhelming, irrational force that is their complete motivation. It is as if the prompter holds up the character-placard, “Love is irresistible folly.” They also unvaryingly act out of an impetuosity that is another of the characteristic traits of youth. Even Valentine, who is faithful in love (as his labeling name suggests), is also extravagantly impetuous: he easily turns from lover and respectful son to chief of bandits, but one who immediately overawes his bandit followers and kindles the virtue in them by his own sheer virtue and force of character. Silvia on her part converts from the Petrarchan lady as love object, coolly distant and distrustful of her passionate wooer Valentine, to one who, in her rash passion for him, sets off on a love-journey in which she takes on a male disguise, changing her social role in her love for him. So does Julia in her turn, each female lead impetuously and self-consciously breaking the bounds of feminine propriety for her passionate love. Every character in the play has a labeling role (lover, male or female; father and head of family; comic servant; dog) and associated traits—for the lover intensity, irrationality, either idealism or cynicism, fidelity or changeability (the last often assigned according to gender); for the father dogmatic willfulness, a propensity to give advice, a concern with amassing family wealth; for the servant either blockheadedness or witty impudence; for the dog untrainability.<sup>2</sup>

Each of these roles and traits performs as though it had an on-off switch. When turned on, the role or trait acts like a powerful jolt, a shot of adrenalin or whatever enzyme produces an abrupt turn of behavior. Shakespeare cannot even be trying to portray conflict of impulses

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<sup>2</sup> Historically later as a cliché about dogs, the trait of fidelity is shown in Bill Sikes’s dog and Lassie. As critics have often noted, Shakespeare does not seem to have anticipated the subsequent English idolatry of pet dogs, given his usually unflattering references to them.

realistically that produces the change of character.<sup>3</sup> Thus Valentine is both a lover and a friend. When either role dominates him, he expresses his defined nature with eloquence, and it controls his behavior, but it is as though at any moment either one or the other provides all the energy that moves him. In a parallel way, when Proteus falls in love with Silvia, he can see his past love for Julia only as a distant memory; and then suddenly his role as lover of Silvia is changed by her indifference to him into a rapist's lust, as if his threatened violence were a trait suddenly imported from the soldier role:

Nay, if the gentle spirit of moving words  
Can no way change you to a milder form,  
I'll woo you like a soldier, at arms' end,  
And love you 'gainst the nature of love—force ye. (5, 4, 55-58)

Since her placard shows maidenly indifference rather than love, he will invert his behavior, which totally defines him as a character. Even the blank verse with which he expresses himself turns abruptly from the gentle movement of the first two lines to his harsh threat, expressed by the last two, irregularly exploding into the trochee at the end: "force ye." In a similar technique of plotting, the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* abruptly shift their behavior again and again, as though one or another trait of loverdom took charge of their whole natures: submissiveness, jealousy, rivalry, righteous indignation, etc. In that play the change is visibly caused by the mechanism of the magic flowers, the juice of them visibly turning the switches on and off, as it were.

When Claudius, the primary antagonist in *Hamlet*, tries to repent, the moment comes in a soliloquy of prayer, and in the middle of the play, not the end.<sup>4</sup> In some ways the psychology of this episode is like what we

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<sup>3</sup> In contrast, by the later comedy *Much Ado About Nothing* he is much more careful to show with psychological acuity Benedick's decision to fall in love with Beatrice. See my discussion of him in "Thinking about Judgment with Shakespeare."

<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare prepares for this moment by Claudius' anguished response to Polonius' random moralizing upon giving a prayerbook to Ophelia as a prop when she is about to expose Hamlet to the eavesdroppers Claudius and her father:

How smart a lash that speech doth give my conscience!  
The harlot's cheek beautied with plastering art  
Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it

have seen in *Two Gentlemen*. The king has two traits that alternately dominate his speech in this soliloquy: the desire to repent and the desire to keep the spoils of his crime and so eliminate Hamlet as a danger to him. The moment of his prayer has a straightforward irony in keeping with this two-value psychology: Hamlet decides not to carry out his revenge when he sees Claudius for the moment (apparently) repentant. He offers a justification for delay (I'll send him straight to Heaven if I kill him now). But we, who hear Claudius's soliloquy, know that Hamlet's decision is based on a mistake; and indeed he never sounds more like the revenger of convention, and closer to Claudius in ruthlessness, than at this moment. It is as though one facet of his mercurial character comes to the fore and he becomes totally ruthless, but with the ironic effect of preventing him from instantly killing Claudius as an efficient avenger might.

At the same time we see more deeply into the psychological moment in Claudius (as well as Hamlet), in contrast with most earlier Shakespeare conversions, successful or aborted. Some element in Claudius at prayer seems to look on at the two impulses within him, as it were reads the two placards, and this side of him voices horror at his dilemma, with the powerful image of a bird caught in a sticky substance that allows him motion, but only ineffectual motion:

O limed soul that struggling to be free  
Art more engaged. ((3, 3, 68-69))

At the expense of being able to outline clearly the two motives between which Claudius hesitates, the usual effect of the placard-labels dramatization, Shakespeare portrays a psychological reality in the king's hesitation. With a deeper irony than Hamlet's mistake described above, Claudius never sounds more like the Hamlet caught between conflicting inclinations, and sure that he has chosen the worse alternative, than at this moment, which as a result manifests a specifically psychological realism as he is torn between clashing impulses. This Claudius can look at himself with a despairing insight. Just as Shakespeare uses the device of the soliloquy with new depth to portray a confused and self-analytical Hamlet, so he complicates his villain in this effort to repent and so shapes a more

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Than is my deed to my most painted word.  
O heavy burden! (3, 1, 49-53)

realistic imitation of a repentant Claudius, in this case undergoing a failed repentance.<sup>5</sup>

In many ways *King Lear* reverts to a more extreme and foreshortened characterization than *Hamlet*, especially in the crowded denouement, and that return is true of the surprising conversion of one of the villains, Edmund, who on hearing Edgar's account of their father's death suddenly announces:

I pant for life. Some good I mean to do,  
Despite of mine own nature: Quickly send—  
Be brief in it—to the castle, for my writ  
Is on the life of Lear and on Cordelia.     (5, 1, 241-43)

His reference to his nature suggests the earlier form of characterization: he has the role of villain with its associated traits, and they constitute his nature, but, as his death nears, he chooses to act against what has defined him. Surely that suggests a Proteus-like transformation in him.

However, that conclusion is not true to the whole impact of Edmund's character. For one thing, he is distinguished from the other villains in the play: Goneril, Regan, Cornwall, and in his own way Oswald. The others take villainous pleasure in inflicting pain for its own sake, but Edmund does not; he is simply indifferent to the sufferings of others in pursuing his own advantage. His pleasure is not a loathsome sadism but profit for him and also delight in his own ingenuity, his intellectual superiority to the supposed sentimentality of others' moral scruples. Early in the play he consciously chooses to inhabit the traditional meaning, the label in that sense, of his bastardy. From this perspective he ends his

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<sup>5</sup> One might ask how Shakespeare handles the repentance of the dying Laertes at the end of this play. Shakespeare makes Laertes' change of mind plausible because of his impetuosity; he is consistently persuaded of the code of the duello, and something in him responds to Hamlet's generosity toward him, a quality in Hamlet in keeping with the principles of dueling. A couple of years later Shakespeare repeats this effect of deepening the portrayal of sudden transformation in his problem play *Measure for Measure*, when Angelo looks with Puritanical horror at the emergence of his lustful desire for Isabella. See my discussion of him in "Being a Moral Agent in Shakespeare's Vienna," especially p. 271.

And the movement toward psychological realism is even more powerful in the Macbeth who is so eloquent on why not to murder Duncan.

soliloquy: “Now gods, stand up for bastards!” (1, 2, 22)<sup>6</sup> But from the beginning of the play there are complications to Edmund’s characterization. To what extent in the opening scene is he motivated by resentment at his social position as the illegitimate outcast whom Gloucester cavalierly plans to send away? Directors have an important choice in staging that scene: does Edmund overhear the conversation between Gloucester and Kent, or is he out of earshot? Different Edmunds find different balances between anger at his social position and a sort of devil-may-care pleasure in his freedom from social constraints.<sup>7</sup>

Are we to think of his repentance as a plot contrivance, like Duke Frederick’s conversion? I think not. One of the curious psychological elements of the denouement is how Edmund keeps inserting himself and his repentance into the action, while the others ignore these insertions, except to respond to his practical information that Lear and Cordelia are in mortal danger.<sup>8</sup> Partly they are absorbed by the political and military situation and their own personal predicaments, though they are also inclined with aristocratic snobbery to dismiss Edmund’s claim to social importance, as in Albany’s sneer “Half-blooded fellow, yes” (5, 3, 82). But Edmund is more fully rounded out. He actually interrupts his revelation of his order condemning Lear and Cordelia to ask who it is that has defeated him in their combat. He is obviously concerned to figure out whether his foe has been a socially worthy opponent, and so whether Edgar’s rank supports Edmund’s claim to equality among these nobles. (5, 3, 160-64) Also he finds pleasure at being loved with some equality by the sisters when seeing their bodies: “Yet Edmund was beloved” (238). But his claim to social importance is ignored by everyone else. His assertions of importance

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<sup>6</sup> Alfred Harbage in lecture made a distinction between Falstaff’s cowardice and that of his gang: they are cowards out of fear, but he is a coward on principle. Edmund is a villain on principle, that of egoistic hedonism, but he can have an emotional tug toward virtue that goes against his principle.

<sup>7</sup> Thus in Edmund’s last soliloquy, in which Foakes hears his “near-desperation” (fn. At 5, 1, 56-770), I hear an amused refusal to make a choice between Goneril and Regan:

To both these sisters have I sworn my love,  
Each jealous of the other as the stung  
Are of the adder. Which of them shall I take?  
Both? One? Or neither?

(“Should I toss a coin?”) And he goes on to dismiss the murder of Lear and Cordelia with a quick appeal to his safety.

<sup>8</sup> The differences between Q and F versions of the final scene complicate the difficulties of interpreting it. In his edition Foakes makes a plausible attempt to sort out the problems.



and identity are overwhelmed by the greater events around him, as in Albany's response to news of his death: "That's but a trifle here" (294).

Thus, even in the midst of the chaotic denouement of *King Lear*, Shakespeare keeps in mind the moment-to-moment experience of a character like Edmund. We still see him making cold-blooded decisions: to order the killing of Lear and Cordelia, to accept the challenge of his disguised brother, to keep a bold front among these peers and warriors; but we also see the conflicting impulses, the hesitations and cross-currents of a lived life. Presumably he winces at Albany's sneer. One might say that the character Edmund reads the placards of his identities and has difficulty choosing among them, and we see his struggles and are impelled to see his inner experiences.

Toward the end of his career Shakespeare turns to the tragicomic form of his dramatic romances, and in that form he replays his past dramatic genres in a foreshortened style and fusing the elements that we have been looking at.<sup>9</sup> Leontes occupies the role of villain in *The Winter's Tale*, as it were combining Othello and Iago within himself to produce the tragic shape of the first half of the play and then launching the turn to romance with his sudden reversal at the blunt oracle of Apollo in mid-play. At the start Leontes' jealousy, the motivation for his extravagant behavior, seems to explode before us with his soliloquy beginning "Too hot; too hot!" (1, 2, 108), and indeed the other characters including Polixenes and Hermione are slow to recognize what is happening to him in his abrupt transformation. Is this like the old psychology of placard-motives? In that view of Leontes, jealousy suddenly replaces marital affection, but one could also describe it as realistic psychology: a psychotic break that brings out his inner potentialities.<sup>10</sup> From this point on, he in his madness sees things

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<sup>9</sup> One might see the change this paper describes as produced by Shakespeare's shifting genres, that the placard method is suitable to the methods of comedy and tragicomedy and the more psychological method to tragedy. There is some truth to that analysis; but Shakespeare is always playing with the boundaries of different genres. If anything I would say that he makes the shift in methods while exploring the genre of English history in the 1590s, especially in the transition from the Marlovian characterization of Richard III to the subtler psychology of Prince Hal and that the shift is evident in his later plays, including the emergent form of the dramatic romances.

<sup>10</sup> For the sudden turn compare Lear's sudden lurch into madness, losing all touch with reality at "Didst thou give all to thy two daughters?" (3, 4, 48). In Lear's case the break is thoroughly prepared for in his growing rage and despair. The New Cambridge Shakespeare Edition, in its introduction, pp. 24-30, judiciously explores these two views of Lear's madness, discussing different productions' staging. For a similar discussion of Leontes' behavior, see the New Cambridge Edition, pp. 24-30.

that are not there, above all Hermione's supposed infidelity. Before this moment Leontes has been playing a social role as a part of his kingly duties, namely the insistently courteous host; but does the role completely fit his inner self at the moment? Perhaps not. His previous utterances have been short—one could see them as forced, social gestures not expressing his inner feelings—in contrast with the easy flow of Polixenes' and Hermione's speech. The two of them are at ease in their social roles because they feel natural, unlike Leontes. Thus, one can ask, is the psychotic break truly a break, or is it manifesting forces that have been there all along inside Leontes?<sup>11</sup> But maybe the choice is too simple. Perhaps the madness is potentially present in his psyche, but then it breaks out suddenly in its vivid paranoia as the restraints of the social role crumble.

Leontes certainly becomes a monster at this moment, more and more obsessed with the image of Hermione destroyed that he sees as a mighty act of justice. As he creates a fantasy of justice, Sicilia has been punished by the will of the gods for the pollution that she has brought into the court, into Leontes' very imagination, and so she deserves immolation, punishment by being cast into the fire. When Paulina brings his baby daughter Perdita before him and lays her down, sure that he cannot look at her without succumbing to a father's love, he insistently looks away and instead condemns the baby to a fiery death along with Hermione. But it is striking that he always refers to the baby in the third person, as though he is unwilling to name it, even to see it, for fear of feeling love for his child. He has to think of it as a bastard, Polixenes' offspring, a *thing*. In his tormented imagination only fire can purge and destroy the hideous image of that thing, and he transfers the horrible qualities of a burning baby in his imagination to the baby itself.

That is the key to Leontes' psychology. That is why he can give orders to do terrible deeds, and he can even imagine doing them himself: "The bastard brains with these my proper hands / Shall I dash out." (2, 3, 138-39) But, immediately after this horrendous imagined act, he orders someone else, Antigonus, to throw the baby into the fire. Leontes is too weak, too lacking in a savage will for justice, to be a thorough monster. In the past he has had Hermione, a strong-willed wife, to rely on to mold him into a socially adequate being, and in his present madness he can no more

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<sup>11</sup> For a powerful psychoanalytical reading of Leontes, see Adelman.

act for himself. When at Apollo's sign he turns abruptly and repents his rejection of Hermione, he immediately appeals to Paulina, another strong woman, to lead him. to the years of penance Thus in his sudden repentance he manifests the nature of the character that he has had all along, by asking to be led to the years of penance: "Come, and lead me / To these sorrows." (239-40) His change is an abrupt shift but also a manifestation of a continuing trait, his consistent passive yielding toward stronger wills.<sup>12</sup>

One surprising moment occurs later when he shows a glint of incestuous desire for his daughter, not knowing her identity, on learning that she and Florizel have run off and are not yet married. Responding to Florizel's assurance that Polixenes would do anything out of his friendship for Leontes, he replies with an evasive conditional:

Would he do so, I'd beg your precious mistress,  
Which he counts but a trifle. (5, 1, 222-23)

In Shakespeare's source this incestuous desire is much more explicit, but Shakespeare's Leontes is more tentative and ambiguous: he addresses his hint to Florizel, not Perdita, and immediately pulls back at Paulina's blunt chastisement, as if she were the voice of his own superego or the guardian angel perched on his shoulder.

Thus Leontes makes sense as a character in the very quality of his vacillations. Because he is not a Richard III or Iago, self-actuated as they are in the power of their will and intelligence to be consistent in villainy, he has to drag himself into acting out his monstrous impulses. He even wants Antigonus to perform the casting Perdita into the fire of his own imagining.

What then are we to make of the denouement of the play, with the spectacular unreality of the statue coming to life? In particular, how does it bear on our understanding of the nature of Shakespeare's characterization of Leontes and Hermione? As everyone has noticed, this event is Shakespeare's version of the Pygmalion story in Ovid, where the

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<sup>12</sup> In this manifestation of continuity appearing through an abrupt change in basic structure of character, one thinks of Saul becoming Paul and Wittgenstein turning from the severe logician of truth-tables to the celebrator of the indefinite mind. Recent commentators on the two have emphasized the continuities extending over both conversions.

point seems to be that Pygmalion can have what he thinks is an impossibility, a wife who is soft, warm flesh but with the unchanging constancy of an ivory statue. In Ovid the miracle is perfectly real, a somewhat whimsical reward from the gods as their response to Pygmalion's misogyny-tainted love for his statue-wife, but Shakespeare's version offers a somewhat more rationally plausible version, with the fantastic miracle simulated by Paulina's deception: Hermione has been alive all along. Critics and productions are uncomfortable with this version (especially since the audience is allowed to believe in Hermione's death for so long in the play).<sup>13</sup> A plausible interpretation is that Paulina's story is what we are intended to believe, but that we also experience dramatically the actual miracle of the statue's coming to life. We as attenders of the play experience the awed wonder of the play's own spectators at this revivification of Hermione. As a result both versions are symbolically true, though surely Paulina's report of Hermione's concealed survival is the actual explanation in Shakespeare's plot. The literal Hermione has warm flesh to meet Leontes' embraces (and also the wrinkles of sixteen years that have passed), but symbolically she has the qualities of an artwork, the "still unrivalled bride of quietness And slow time" of Keats's ode, and that reality about her expresses that she has the Aristotelian virtue of constancy, unchangingness. Her affection for Leontes and her family and her strength of will never waver.

Why then does Shakespeare gradually transform his dramaturgy over the years? A plausible suggestion to account for this shift is that he got more and more impatient with the signboard method of dramatizing abrupt changes in characters' behavior, perhaps because he got more and more interested in how people change, in dramatizing the moment-to-moment experience of his characters as they have to process shifts in their inner perspectives. The earlier characters (and often minor characters throughout his corpus) are more like mechanical toys, abruptly changing direction at a touch of the master control with its individual settings. The later, more fully developed characters are like rivers, whose identities cannot be wholly defined by labeled traits, just as rivers are always changing but always the Mississippi or the Amazon or the Nile. But both

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<sup>13</sup> See the New Cambridge *Winter's Tale* discussion of these issues and different productions' approaches to them, pp. 47-56.

forms of characterization get at part of the reality of human psychology, the one focusing on the traits that manifest themselves again and again in our behavior and making them vivid. The other shows the process of living and changing while manifesting the continuities of character, the combination being our identities. We are both placards and rivers, and Shakespeare's dramaturgy more and more blends the two. Indeed the unrealistic device, as so often in his dramatic methods, provides an alternative view into human beings' complex identities.

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