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English 405 – Paulina’s Reversal in *The Winter’s Tale*

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Paulina displays bold leadership and a strong voice early in *The Winter’s Tale*, but later in the play, she seems repentant and shrinks back from her initial boldness. For example, early in the play, she rebukes a lord and a servant to the king, who are both men, when they try to keep her from speaking to the king (2.3.26-38). Paulina later chastises her husband (2.3.78-80) and prompts the king to say, “[Antigonus] dreads his wife” (2.3.81). Paulina’s boldness continues as she defies even the king and refuses to be ushered out of his presence. She even indirectly calls the king a tyrant (2.3.116, 120). Paulina’s defiance is remarkable because although the men of Leontes’ court disagree with the king, their protests pale in comparison to Paulina’s boldness. Paulina displays a powerful presence during the first half of the play and before all men on stage.

However, after Paulina communicates the news of Hermione’s death, she becomes uncharacteristically penitent and remorseful about her criticism of the king. At one point, a lord merely suggests that Paulina has been too bold before the king, and she responds, “Alas, I have showed too much / The rashness of a woman” (3.2.220). Later she says, “Now, good my liege, / Sir, royal sir, forgive a foolish woman. / The love I bore your queen—lo, fool again! / I’ll speak of her no more, nor of your children” (3.2.226). Paulina had every reason to be angry toward the king and had no fears about expressing that anger before 3.2, so the reason for Paulina’s penitent reversal late in 3.2 is somewhat of a mystery. Her language in this scene embraces a biased perspective that views women as impulsive and irrational. However, by describing herself as rash and foolish shortly after being vindicated by the oracle, Paulina’s language could be read—and acted onstage—as a sarcastic commentary that further highlights the poor judgment and blindness of Leontes.