

**“There is no tongue that moves”
—Female Healers and the Therapeutic
Female Tongue in *The Winter’s Tale***

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Abstract

This reading of Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* focuses on the theme of female healers or medical practitioners, both as we see them in the play itself and as their history contributes to the cultural background of the play. While the female healer, Pauline, may be said to stand squarely within this tradition, Queen Hermione is less directly representative of it. More precisely, the reading focuses on the central role played by the voices, tongues, and forceful speeches of these two women. Empowered by their words and wits, these two wise women, in particular Paulina, the play’s central female figure and my main focus, transform their traditional gender roles, acting as female healers whose wits and tongues remove blockages within the

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public order and the minds of the men who control it, restoring circulation in both to a state of health.

On the one hand, Paulina's words, which operate both magically and therapeutically, turn King Leontes's diseased speech into what sounds like repentance. On the other hand, the marble-like statue of his queen, Hermione, who has supposedly been dead ever since the trial at which her husband accused her of adultery, is "reanimated" by Paulina's magical utterance. Here we have the traditional midwife enabling a symbolic rebirth in the final scene of the play, which again suggests the restoration of a healthy public order, or in alchemical and Paracelsian terms, the refinement or transmutation of lead/death into gold/life.

Key Words: *The Winter's Tale*, woman healers, midwifery, Paracelsus, sixteenth-century England