

18. *The Winter's Tale*

In 1608 Shakespeare's company acquired a second theatre, the Blackfriars, and his subsequent plays were perhaps written for it (though *The Winter's Tale* was first performed at the Globe). It gave him the opportunity to write for a more intimate and judicious audience than the audience at the Globe with its 'barren quantity of spectators'. It seems that he welcomed the chance to abandon all forms of realism (including psychological realism) in favour of mythic or folk-tale structures to carry meanings almost entirely poetic. The first two experiments in the new mode, *Pericles* and *Cymbeline*, were not entirely successful; but Shakespeare's persistence with it paid rich dividends in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. *The Winter's Tale* was written and first performed in 1611.

The play begins in Sicily. A Sicilian lord, Camillo, and a Bohemian lord, Archidamus, tell each other what the audience needs to know, that the king of Sicily, Leontes, and the king of Bohemia, Polyxenes, were 'trained together in their childhoods', and were inseparable until they acceded to their respective thrones, since when they have kept up their friendship with 'gifts, letters, loving embassies'. Their love is beyond the reach of any 'malice or matter' in the world. The heir to the Sicilian throne is the young prince Mamillius, who 'makes old hearts fresh': 'They that, went on crutches ere he was born desire yet their life to see him a man'.

Polyxenes has been visiting Leontes and has been persuaded to extend and extend again his visit until he has neglected his duties in Bohemia for nine months. He is determined to leave tomorrow, but still Leontes seeks to detain him, and enlists the aid of his wife Hermione, who presses Polyxenes so warmly that at last he acquiesces. The first sign of discord is in Leontes' line 'At my request he would not'.

There is the recurring image of physical contact between male and female. It is exactly such contact between Hermione and Polyxenes which triggers Leontes' psychic explosion. When Hermione gives her hand to Polyxenes, Leontes begins to be his own Iago. The mere taking of hands his disordered imagination extends to 'leaning cheek to cheek', 'meeting noses' and 'hanging about his neck'. This last phrase reminds us of the difficulty Hamlet had with his mother's physicality and sexuality even in relation to his father ('Why, she would hang on him / As if increase of appetite had grown / By what it fed on'). Against this sickness the play invited us to set Perdita's innocent venery ('No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on') and the mature advice of Leontes' courtiers:

What holier than, for royalty's repair,
For present comfort and for future good,
To bless the bed of majesty again
With a sweet fellow to't.

[V i 29-32]

Leontes wonders whether Mamillius is indeed his own child. The infection of his brains produces a 'brow of much distraction' which Polyxenes and Hermione comment on. He persuades them that all is well, but after their departure confides his doubts to Camillo, who stoutly defends Hermione. But Leontes is now totally at the mercy of his

own diseased imagination. He asks Camillo to 'bespice a cup / to give mine enemy a lasting wink'. Camillo agrees, but warns Polyxenes to flee and flees with him.

Leontes takes Polyxenes' flight as confirmation of his guilt. He orders Hermione to be denied access to Mamillius, accuses her of carrying Polyxenes' child, and sends her to prison. So many courtiers speak up strongly on her behalf that he sends messengers to the Delphic oracle. Hermione gives birth to a daughter in prison. Her maid Paulina offers to show the baby to Leontes in the hope of softening his heart. Leontes is told that Mamillius is sick. Paulina forces her way into his presence with the baby. Her baiting drives Leontes to commit Hermione and the 'brat' to the fire. At the intercession of several lords he instructs Paulina's husband Antigonus to take the baby to 'some remote and desert place, quite out / Of our dominions' and leave it there.

The messengers return from Delphi and testify to the 'solemn and unearthly' experience of consulting the oracle. Leontes promises to give Hermione 'a just and open trial'. She protests her innocence, and accuses him of murdering their innocent child. She places her faith in the oracle, which says, unambiguously:

Hermione is chaste; Polyxenes blameless; Camillo a true subject; Leontes a jealous tyrant; his innocent babe truly begotten; and the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found.

Everyone else praises 'the great Apollo'. But Leontes says: 'There is no truth at all i'th' Oracle'. Immediately a servant enters with the news that Mamillius is dead. Leontes admits his error, and his long repentance begins: 'Apollo's angry and the heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustice'. Hermione faints, and Leontes beseeches Paulina to 'tenderly apply to her / Some remedies for life.' He begs Apollo's pardon:

I'll reconcile me to Polyxenes,
New woo my queen, recall the good Camillo ...

But Paulina enters to tell him the queen is dead. Leontes reconciles himself to 'shame perpetual' and vows to weep daily at the tomb of his wife and son for the rest of his life.

The contrast with Othello could not be greater in that Othello is given many convincing layers of psychological motivation, whereas Leontes is given none at all. His jealousy is a given like the qualities and actions of characters in folk-tales and fables. Shakespeare is not interested in his motives. He is the type of the male who irrationally persecutes the female, not only the specific female, his wife, but the female element in his own psyche, his anima, and Nature herself. What Shakespeare is deeply interested in here is not the causes but the consequences, the possibility of redemption from such sin.

Antigonus is put ashore at a Bohemian desert with the child. He tells us that Hermione had appeared to him in a dream the previous night to tell him to call the child Perdita - that which is lost. His long farewell to the child is interrupted by the world's most famous stage direction - Exit, pursued by a bear. This is the moment at the play's centre, when its tenor changes from the tragic to the comic/pastoral. A shepherd enters and finds the baby which he takes up for pity. His clownish son enters to tell confusedly, of seeing, simultaneously, Antigonus being eaten by the bear, and his ship being sunk by an incredibly localized storm, with all souls lost. The shepherd

comments: 'Now bless thyself: thou met'st with things dying, I with things new born'. They find gold in the wrappings of the child, which they take to be a fairy changeling: 'Tis a lucky day, boy, and we'll do good deeds on't'.

At the beginning of Act IV Time enters to announce that sixteen years have passed. He turns his glass, thus reversing the irresistible momentum of irretrievable loss which characterizes tragedy. From now on the processes of Time will not be destruction, decay and death, but birth, growth, renewal. Time promises to introduce us to Polyxenes' son Florizel, and 'to speak of Perdita, now grown in grace'.

Leontes' crime is yet another variant of the hubristic male aspiration to transcend body, time and process. He has committed the primal crime against Nature, against the woman who has given him total unconditional love, and against his own anima ('the wrong I did myself'), that is his capacity for love, forgiveness and acceptance. In the absence of his wife, the wronged female part of himself is objectified in his daughter, who is, in Mahood's words, 'returned by Apollo to the education of Nature'.

In the folk-tale mode it is no longer necessary, as it was in tragedy, that everything must be paid for, or at least that it should be paid for by intolerable suffering, total breakdown, and death. The restoration of Lear by his daughter is a precious moment when fatal time is intersected by the timelessness and joy of acceptance; but it soon resumes its sway, and the survivors are hardly confident of their power to redeem it. Lear's progress from rash majesty to madness to humble joy occupies a few weeks. The same progress in Leontes, translated to the unhurried time-span of folk-tale, lasts sixteen years.

Shakespeare's main source for *The Winter's Tale* was Greene's *Pandosto*, whose subtitle was *The Triumph of Time*. In early Shakespeare such a phrase could only have signified the triumph of time over life, youth, beauty, value. But at the very centre of this play Time the Destroyer (tragedy) turns his hourglass and becomes Time the Revealer, the Healer, the Restorer and the Begetter (comedy). The turning of the hour-glass is but a visual enactment, a spelling out and underlining of what the old shepherd had said a few lines earlier: 'thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born'. Birth, growth and maturity are as much the work of time as decay and death. As Inga-stina Ewbank has pointed out, Time had earlier been jolted into its destructive mode by Leontes' headlong acceleration of normal time, giving it no possibility of operating in any other way. The triumph of time in this play is to return that which has been violated by man to normality, health, sanity: time itself functions as a bestower of grace.

Camillo, who has become indispensable to Polyxenes, begs to be allowed to return to Sicily to lay his bones there. Polyxenes refuses. He asks Camillo to accompany him, in disguise, to the house of a shepherd whose daughter 'of most rare note' draws Florizel there daily.

At the sheep-shearing Perdita, mistress of the feast, is dressed as Flora, the presiding goddess. Florizel is in attendance, costumed as a 'poor humble swain'. Perdita trembles at the difference in station between them, and dares to think what his father would say if he knew they had sworn to marry. Polyxenes and Camillo are present in disguise. Perdita welcomes them and gives them flowers, rosemary and rue. She apologizes for not having fairer flowers. It is the end of summer, and the only brightly-coloured flowers still in season are carnations, which she dislikes because, with their streaked and pied varieties, they seem to her 'nature's bastards'. She disapproves of art

interfering with 'great creating nature', with the hubristic assumption that man can improve on nature. Polyxenes uses against her the sophistical Baconian argument that since Nature made man everything man makes must be natural. Though unable to refute it in terms of logic, Perdita intuitively perceives its dangerous speciousness, and reaffirms her spontaneous repugnance for all things 'painted' with typical outspokenness:

I'll not put
The dibble in earth to set one slip of them;
No more than, were I painted, I would wish
This youth should say 'twere well, and only therefore
Desire to breed by me.

She is equally impatient of artificiality in speech and behaviour. When Camillo pays her a conventional compliment consisting entirely of wordplay, she rejects that too in favour of unaffected literalness and nature however harsh:

Cam. I should leave grazing, were I of your flock,
And only live by gazing.
Perd. Out, alas!
You'd be so lean that blasts of January
Would blow you through and through.

When Florizel declares his intention to marry without consulting his father (knowing all too well what objections his father will make), Polyxenes discloses himself and threatens to hang the shepherd, disfigure Perdita, and bar Florizel from the succession. Perdita is not impressed by the assumption behind this bluster that courtiers are innately superior to shepherds:

I was not much afeard; for once or twice
I was about to speak, and tell him plainly,
The selfsame sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage, but
Looks on alike.

Her language embodies a completeness which closes the usual gap between body and spirit. When that gap is closed, life needs no straining for grace beyond itself. Every common act, speaking, singing, dancing, buying, selling, giving, praying, 'ordering your affairs', radiates spirit:

Each your doing,
So singular in each particular,
Crowns what you are doing, in the present deeds,
That all your acts are queens. [IV iv 143-6]

Florizel believes that to break faith with Perdita would be unnatural:

It cannot fail, but by

The violation of my faith; and then
Let nature crush the sides o' th' earth together,
And mar the seeds within!

Camillo advises Florizel and Perdita to flee to Sicily. His idea is that Polyxenes and himself will then pursue them there, and everyone be reconciled. Autolycus overhears the plan and tells the shepherd and clown who resolve to follow them to Sicily.

Meanwhile, Leontes' courtiers try to persuade him that he has grieved long enough and should remarry, but Paulina continue to put salt in his wounds. He agrees never to marry until Paulina bids him. Florizel and Perdita arrive and Leontes graciously welcomes them. At their reunion Leontes greets Perdita, before he knows she is his daughter, with the auspicious words: 'Welcome hither / As is the spring to th'earth', indicating that he too at last has been 'restored to nature':

Penitence and devotion ... can be raised to the level of sanctity, and the functions of 'blood', no longer the cause of jealousies and divisions which have exhausted their tragic consequences with the passage of time, can now become a source of life to the unified and gracious personality.

[Traversi, *An Approach to Shakespeare 2*, 298]

Leontes offers to mediate between Florizel and his father.

Gentlemen of the court report that Perdita has been recognized as the king's daughter by Hermione's jewel about her neck. The old shepherd has told the whole tale. All have been reunited and reconciled in joy mixed with sorrow as Leontes has told Perdita of the death of her mother. That Paulina has revealed that she has commissioned a famous scultor to make a statue of Hermione, and taken the whole party to a 'removed house' to see it. What they see there is the miracle of life redeeming time. Or rather there are none of the miracles of *Pericles* or magic of *The Tempest*, only the semblance of miracle or magic to Leontes. There is not even art, for art would have tried to stop the processes of time, whereas the Hermione who is returned to Leontes is not the Hermione he lost:

Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing
So aged as this seems.

She is sixteen years older and shows it. The final reconciliation of Leontes and Hermione has no hint that at their age the hey-day in the blood is tame and young affects defunct. What Hermione offers Leontes, and what he is now mature enough to accept as the staple of life is the sacredness of the body and its affections, everything that 'pertains to life', the commonplace satisfactions of eating and making love:

Leon. O, she's warm!
If this be magic, let it be an art
Lawful as eating.

Pol. She embraces him!

Cam. She hangs about his neck!

In 'Easter 1916' Yeats shows how the 'casual comedy' of ordinary life can be transfigured by tragedy and lifted out of time. Here Shakespeare shows how tragedy can be transcended by comedy. Stone becomes flesh, participates once more in the flow of life. Tragedy is largely subjective - a projection onto Nature and the world of the diseased or defective psyche of the protagonist. Comedy is temporal, communal and seasonal; all that cornucopia of rich human and natural values celebrated in the sheepshearing.

The world of the sheepshearing is no Eden or Arcady. Perdita distributes 'flowers of winter' as well as summer. The shepherd's wife is dead, but vividly present in his memory, 'her face o' fire / With labour, and the thing she took to quench it'. And an important part of the new-born life of the second half of the play is Autolycus. For the new life is not always 'gracious'; it can be wayward and anarchic. Mahood speaks of 'the folly of regarding everything in Nature as subject to moral judgement'. In the first half of the play 'blood' had meant 'lust' as it did for Othello:

Now, in Autolycus's song about 'the red blood rains in the winters pale', it represents a passion as natural and inevitable as the sap that rises in spring, to be accepted as philosophically as the old shepherd endures the ways of 'these boyld-braines of nineteene, and two and twenty'. Autolycus is an English coney-catcher, and his daffodil and doxy belong less to the classical Arcadia than to Herrick's Devonshire, where Christianity has absorbed much of an older cult, and if there is a Puritan he too sings psalms to hornpipes. According to Blake's paradox, the return of spiritual vision by which what now seemed finite and corrupt would appear infinite and holy was to be accompanied by 'an improvement of sensual enjoyment'; and such enjoyment is felt throughout the scenes in Bohemia.

[*Shakespeare's Wordplay*, 224]

Autolycus represents the roguish element which will always escape the rules, which will pop up again however often it is knocked down, which laughs at the posturing hero; what the Greeks acknowledged in their satyr plays, what the citizens of Windsor acknowledged in Sir John, what Prospero will have to learn to acknowledge in Caliban.