

〈論 文〉

An Infected Imagination: Seeing the Spider in *The Winter's Tale*

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Quite unlike *The Tempest*, which opens so noisily and dramatically with the storm of the title, *The Winter's Tale* begins with a short, quiet scene of two lords talking. The two opening scenes are not just alike in their brevity, however, but also in that they present a great deal of thematic significance. In retrospect, one might even say that the initial brief scene of *The Winter's Tale* provides a check-list of the major themes of the drama.¹⁾

As the play begins, Archidamus, a lord of Bohemia, and Camillo, a lord of Sicilia, are having a polite conversation regarding a possible reciprocal visit to Bohemia by the King of Sicilia, and almost immediately the former mentions what he feels to be the “great difference betwixt our Bohemia and your Sicilia” (1.1.3-4). Apparently worried that Bohemia would be unable to provide entertainments of sufficient magnificence, Archidamus suggests a ruse—

We will give you sleepy drinks, that your senses, unintelligent of our insufficiency, may, though they cannot praise us, as little

accuse us (1.1.13-16)—

and altered senses and insane accusations are soon to appear. Camillo's polite response—"You pay a great deal too dear for what's given freely" (1.1.17-18)—becomes, tragically, an apt description of the soon-to-occur rupture between Leontes and Hermione. And when Archidamus replies—"Believe me. I speak as my understanding instructs me . . ." (1.1.19-20)—we have a warning as to how irrationally one might speak when the understanding is poisoned.

In reassurance, Camillo refers to the long-standing friendship between the two kings—

They were trained together in their childhoods, and there
rooted betwixt them then such an affection which cannot
choose but branch now (1.1.22-24)—

and the metaphorical references to rooting and branching are an early suggestion of the later importance of the green world to *The Winter's Tale*.

Camillo concludes his praise of the royal friendship with a prayerful exclamation—"The heavens continue their loves!" (1.1.31)—and this time it is Archidamus who offers reassurance—"I think there is not in the world either malice or matter to alter it" (1.1.32-33)— but, alas, there *is* something to alter it, much for the worse, and it happens with shocking suddenness.

When Archidamus goes on to credit the "unspeakable comfort of your young prince, Mamillius" (1.1.33-34), Camillo wholeheartedly

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i'th' sun
And bleat the one at th'other: what we changed
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed
That any did. (1.2.62-65, 67-71)

This is the state of childhood grace captured so brilliantly by Dylan Thomas in "Fern Hill," when each night the sun-bathed, shining world is borne away, only to be renewed in all its glory with the next dawning:

All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chimneys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass.
And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.

And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoulder: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day. (ll. 19-32)²

But we also need to recall that Blake's lamb, the archetypal symbol

of innocence, cannot answer the apparently simple question—“Little Lamb, who made thee? . . . Dost thou know who made thee?”—and it is the piper, speaking as a child, who answers:

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!
He is called by thy name,
For he calls himself a Lamb:
He is meek & he is mild,
He became a little child:
I a child & thou a lamb,
We are called by his name.
Little Lamb God bless thee.
Little Lamb God bless thee. (ll. 11-20)³

Completely at one with its maker in a state of natural innocence, the lamb does not know and cannot answer, but for a child to be in a state of innocence is to be less than completely human, and in *The Winter's Tale* the necessary fall from innocence is specifically linked to the growing awareness and significance of sex, as is made explicit in the continuing exchange between Polixenes and Hermione:

POLIXENES Had we pursued that life,
 And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared
 With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven
 Boldly, 'not guilty', the imposition cleared
 Hereditary ours.

HERMIONE By this we gather
 You have tripped since.

POLIXENES Oh my most sacred lady,
 Temptations have since then been born to's, for
 In those unfledged days was my wife a girl;
 Your precious self had then not crossed the eyes
 Of my young playfellow.

HERMIONE Grace to boot!
 Of this make no conclusion, lest you say
 Your queen and I are devils. Yet go on.
 Th'offences we have made you do we'll answer,
 If you first sinned with us, and that with us
 You did continue fault, and that you slipped not
 With any but with us. (1.2.71-86)

This concentration of negative terms—*guilty, temptation, crossed, devils, offences, sinned, fault, slipped*—in a short exchange emphasizes that sex, unless confined within the bounds of marriage, is contrary to a state of grace. However, it is also perfectly natural for blood to strengthen, as Polixenes puts it, and we see this transformation from innocence taking place in Mamillius.

Archidamus had lauded the promising young prince as a comfort to the kingdom, and Camillo, in enthusiastic agreement, had gone so far as to attribute curative powers—“physics the subject, makes old hearts fresh”—to the “gallant child” (1.1.38-39). Soon after the onset of Leontes’s mental infection, it seems as though the curative effect of Mamillius might yet take hold, as Leontes can briefly see his formerly innocent self

in his son's face:

LEONTES Looking on the lines
Of my boy's face, methoughts I did recoil
Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched,
In my green velvet coat; my dagger muzzled . . .
How like, methought, I then was to this kernel,
This squash, this gentleman. (1.2.153-156, 159-160)

Polixenes reinforces the notion of a child's curative powers when he expresses his fondness for his own young prince, who is back in Bohemia: "If at home, sir, / He's all my exercise, my mirth, my matter . . . And with his varying childness cures in me / Thoughts that would thicken my blood" (1.2.164-165, 169-170).

Sadly, as he continues to imagine himself a cuckold, Leontes even begins to doubt the paternity of Mamillius—"Art thou my boy? . . . Art thou my calf?" (1.2.120, 127)—but soon, plagued with the thought of being cuckolded, he sends Mamillius away:

LEONTES Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays, and I
Play too; but so disgraced a part, whose issue
Will hiss me to my grave. Contempt and clamour
Will be my knell. Go play, boy, play. (1.2.186-189)

For Mamillius, however, "play" is already taking on the sexual meaning Leontes attributes to Hermione, and when one of Hermione's attendant ladies-in-waiting offers to be the restless Mamillius's "playfel-

low,” the reason for his abrupt dismissal of the offer—“No, I’ll none of you”—is a clear indication of his developing sexual maturity: “You’ll kiss me hard, and speak to me as if / I were a baby still. [*to second Lady*] I love you better” (2.1.3, 5-6). Mamillius is already paying a far-from-childish attention to women’s faces, to the extent of noticing which shape of eyebrow might best become a woman (1.2.7-12). A further indication of Mamillius’s emergence from the innocence of childhood comes when the first Lady speaks of how his situation will change with the imminent birth of his sibling, assumed to be a boy:

1 LADY The queen, your mother, rounds apace. We shall
 Present our services to a fine new prince
 One of these days, and then you’d wanton with us
 If we would have you. (2.1.16-19)

The Lady’s use of “wanton” may be glossed as “play” in this case, but the term certainly retains the connotation of sexual play, and Leontes had earlier referred to Mamillius as a “wanton calf” (1.2.126). On the cusp of young manhood, Mamillius’s waning innocence soon comes to a sad ending.

An Infected Imagination

Polixenes has determined that the time has come to end his nine-month stay with Leontes and return to Bohemia. He feels the tug of affairs dragging him homeward, and, in a dark irony in view of what is soon to occur, he is concerned about what troubles might “breed upon our absence,” what “sneaping winds” might imperil his kingdom were he

Go to, go to!
How she holds up the neb, the bill to him,
And arms her with the boldness of a wife.
To her allowing husband. [*Exeunt Polixenes and
Hermione.*] Gone already.
Inch thick, knee-deep, o'er head and ears a forked one!
Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays, and I
Play too; but so disgraced a part, whose issue
Will hiss me to my grave. Contempt and clamour
Will be my knell. Go play, boy, play. There have been,
Or I am much deceived, cuckolds ere now,
And many a man there is even at this present,
Now, while I speak this, holds his wife by th'arm,
That little thinks she has been sluiced in's absence,
And his pond fished by his next neighbour, by
Sir Smile, his neighbour. Nay, there's comfort in't,
Whiles other men have gates, and those gates opened,
As mine, against their will. Should all despair
That have revolted wives, the tenth of mankind
Would hang themselves. Physic for't there's none:
It is a bawdy planet, that will strike
Where 'tis predominant; and 'tis powerful, think it,
From east, west, north and south; be it concluded,
No barricado for a belly. (1.2.179-203)

With this unmistakable echo of the maddened Lear, we are given a vivid, frightening insight as to the progress and scope of Leontes's

obsession. From mistakenly seeing himself as a cuckold, he generalizes the affliction to “many a man,” even unto “the tenth of mankind,” until he is compelled to recoil in disgust from an entire world that is bawdy and diseased. Like Lear, Leontes is repulsed by the notion of a world of rampant, ungoverned sexuality.

We are given more evidence of the extent of Leontes’s disorder when he turns on Camillo, his most trusted confidant. In fact, Leontes refers to Camillo as “priest-like” for his cleansing, reforming abilities (1.2.235-237). However, when Camillo does not acknowledge any signs of duplicitousness in Hermione, Leontes immediately accuses Camillo of being either a liar, a coward, or a fool. In defending himself, Camillo acknowledges human failings, noting that “fear . . . oft infects the wisest” (1.2.259-260), but it is jealousy that has infected Leontes, and he continues to press Camillo, insisting that he must have noted some signs that Hermione has been “slippery,” or unfaithful (1.2.271).

When the bold and gallant Camillo refuses to slander the queen and goes so far as to courteously but firmly upbraid the king for speaking against her, Leontes responds with the evidence he insists should be accredited as visual proof:

LEONTES

Is whispering nothing?

Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?

Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career

Of laughter with a sigh? —A note infallible

Of breaking honesty. Horsing foot on foot?

Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?

Hours, minutes? Noon, midnight? And all eyes

POLIXENES

This jealousy

Is for a precious creature. As she's rare,
 Must it be great; and, as his person's mighty,
 Must it be violent, and as he does conceive
 He is dishonoured by a man which ever
 Professed to him, why, his revenges must
 In that be made more bitter. (1.2.447-453)

Except for the mystery of its abrupt onset, there is no subtlety about what happens to Leontes at the beginning of *The Winter's Tale*. Leontes is afflicted with an infection of his mind, particularly of the imaginative faculty that has the creative power, for better or worse, to give to "airy nothing / A local habitation and a name," as Theseus poetically proclaims in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (5.1.16-17). Act 1, scene 2, as lengthy as it is, is sprinkled with terms that emphasize the theme of disease: Leontes refers to "the infection of my brains" (1.2.145); for Camillo, "fear . . . oft infects the wisest" (1.2.259-260); Camillo wishes Leontes to "be cured / Of this diseased opinion" (1.2.294-295); projecting his own disease, Leontes condemns Hermione—"Were my wife's liver / Infected as her life"—and believes it is Polixenes who has infected her (1.2.302-306); Leontes wonders if Camillo believes him to be "so muddy, so unsettled" (1.2.323); Camillo describes the just-departed Leontes as being "in rebellion with himself" (1.2.352), and in attempting to describe the situation to Polixenes, he employs the cluster of "sickness," "distemper," "disease," and "caught" in a few lines (1.2.380-383); Polixenes exclaims that Leontes's foul accusation can turn his "best blood" into "an infected jelly" and his "freshest reputation" into an infected stench (1.2.413-420); Camillo fears

that nothing can shake Leontes's adherence to "The fabric of his folly" (1.2.425); and Polixenes laments that the queen has fallen victim to Leontes's "ill-ta'en suspicion" (1.2.456).

Another clear indication of Leontes's mental disorder is his sometimes broken syntax. Well, actually, the point is that at key points Leontes is *not* clear, and his language breaking down into near incoherence reveals the extent of his confusion. One example is in his long speech while with Mamillius (1.2.128-146), and editors are still in disagreement about punctuation and meaning.⁵⁾ Another obvious instance is when Leontes is trying to convince Camillo of the queen's perfidy, but he keeps interrupting himself with interjections, and the fractured lines reveal a man trying, against his better nature and reason, to convince himself (as well as Camillo) of his false imaginings (1.2.265-271).

Yet another audible indication of Leontes's deteriorating mental state would seem to be his verbal tic of doubling an exclamation, as though repetition would reinforce his increasingly crazed beliefs, and the scene is punctuated by the drumbeat rhythm of his double spondees, from the initial "Too hot, too hot!" (1.2.108), to "Go to, go to!" when angling to see a betrayal (1.2.181), and "you lie, you lie!" when refusing Camillo and the truth (1.2.297).

How Should This Grow?

Leontes's abrupt plunge into the destructive delusions of obsessive jealousy occurs in four brief syllables—"Too hot, too hot!" (1.2.108)—and is as inexplicable as unexpected. Lear's anguished query—"Is there any cause in nature that make these hard hearts?" (*King Lear*, 3.6.75-76)—is

universal in its scope, but at the end of Act 1, scene 2, of *The Winter's Tale*, the perplexed Polixenes's more narrowly focused question about the folly of Leontes has the same import: "How should this grow?" (1.2.427). The reason this obvious question cannot easily be answered is because *The Winter's Tale* is Shakespeare's most surprising presentation of the problem of evil, and Camillo's answer must suffice for the moment: "I know not. But I am sure 'tis safer to / Avoid what's grown than question how 'tis born" (1.2.428-429).

We, on the other hand, do not need to avoid the question . . . and may even feel compelled to pursue it. The problem, to put it somewhat crudely, is that *The Winter's Tale* has no bad guy who leads Leontes astray. There is no malevolent, misguiding Iago (*Othello*), no prodding, prophetic witches or poisonously prompting Lady Macbeth (*Macbeth*), not even a minor murderous whisperer such as Antonio in *The Tempest*.

In depicting the existence of evil, Shakespeare often uses the image of poison entering one's ear, even once making the image literal when the ghost of Hamlet's father recounts how his own brother poured poison in his ear as he slept (*Hamlet*, 1. 5. 59-70). More often, the poison is metaphorical, as when Lady Macbeth is shown to be eager to corrupt her husband with the poison of her malign spirits: "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear" (1.4.25-26).

In his ambitious effort to depict the origin of man's fall from innocence and a state of grace, John Milton employs a similar image in *Paradise Lost*, for the angels sent—too late—to protect the sleeping Eve find Satan, in the form of a toad, crouched at her ear, infecting her dream:

. . . him there they found

Squat like a Toad, close at the ear of *Eve*;
Assaying by his Devilish art to reach
The Organs of her Fancie, and with them forge
Illusions as he list, Phantasms and Dreams,
Or if, inspiring venom, he might taint
Th' animal Spirits that from pure blood arise
Like gentle breaths from Rivers pure, thence raise
At least distemperd, discontented thoughts,
Vain hopes, vain aimes, inordinate desires
Blown up with high conceits ingendring pride. (4.744-809)

Since angels are unable to deter the presence of evil even in Eden, Milton provides man's one sure defense and solace when Adam comforts the stricken Eve:

Evil into the mind of God or Man
May come and go, so unapprov'd, and leave
No spot or blame behind: Which gives me hope
That what in sleep thou didst abhorr to dream,
Waking thou never wilt consent to do. (5.117-121)⁶

For Shakespeare, too, evil exits, and in the *The Winter's Tale* he seems to have come to accept the existence of free-floating, incorporeal evil, but Shakespeare leaves no doubt that evil, however manifested, can and should be resisted. Our imaginative, instinctive, visceral response is usually an accurate moral guide, as Macbeth's heart tells him before he becomes steeped in the blood of others:

this faulty foundation that Leontes erects his entire edifice of distorted imaginings. When Polixenes and Camillo are reported to have been seen leaving, Leontes takes it as affirmation of his worst suspicions: “How blest am I / In my just censure, in my true opinion!” (2.1.36-37). Once Leontes’s imagination is infected, the poison spreads rapidly and encompasses everything he mistakenly perceives, “For the eye altering alters all,” as William Blake puts it tersely but accurately in “The Mental Traveller” (l. 62), and now, calamitously, for Leontes, right has become wrong: “All’s true that is mistrusted” (2.1.48).⁷

A Sad Story Untold, A Sad Story Lived: The Tragedy of King Leontes

Mamillius, who seems as precocious about genres as he is about women’s faces, agrees to his mother’s request for a story to pass the time. Hermione, understandably, would like one “As merry as you will” (2.1.24), but Mamillius has a firm notion of what sort of story most befits the season—“A sad tale’s best for winter. I have one / Of sprites and goblins” (2.1.25-26)—and he begins:

MAMILLIUS There was a man— . . .
 Dwelt by a churchyard—I will tell it softly,
 Yon crickets shall not hear it. (2.1.29-31)

Tragically, no one hears the story, for Leontes, whose suspicions have seemingly been confirmed by the sighting of Camillo and Polixenes hurrying to their ships, enters with Antigonus and some other lords to take Mamillius from his mother: “Bear the boy hence: he shall not come

My sovereign mistress clouded so without
My present vengeance taken. 'Shrew my heart,
You never spoke what did become you less
Than this; which to reiterate were sin
As deep as that, though true. (1.2.277-282)

Antigonus and other lords are courageously unswerving in their support of the queen, one going so far as to risk his life—

LORD For her, my lord,
I dare my life lay down, and will do't, sir,
Please you t'accept it, that the queen is spotless
I'th' eyes of heaven and to you—I mean
In this which you accuse her. (2.1.129-133)—

and Antigonus shows his faith in the queen's innocence of adultery in a truly shocking declaration:

ANTIGONUS Be she honour-flawed,
I have three daughters—the eldest is eleven;
The second and the third, nine and some five.
If this prove true, they'll pay for't. By mine honour,
I'll geld 'em all. Fourteen they shall not see,
To bring false generations. They are co-heirs,
And I had rather glib myself than they
Should not produce fair issue. (2.1.143-150)

The extent of Leontes's further descent into bloody-minded madness is revealed in another allusion to Macbeth, for Leontes, too, has murdered sleep: "Nor night nor day, no rest" (2.3.1). His mental sickness has intensified, and he is being consumed with thoughts of vengeance. Since Camillo and Polixenes are beyond his reach, he intends to take his "present vengeance" on Hermione, whose death might bring him peace: "say that she were gone, / Given to the fire, a moiety of my rest / Might come to me again" (2.3.22, 7-9).

It is Paulina, the wife of Antigonus and close friend of the queen, who is the most courageous and forthright speaker of blunt truths. When she goes to the prison to console Hermione, who has just borne a daughter, Paulina is refused permission to see Hermione, but Emilia, a lady-in-waiting who has accompanied the queen, gives the baby into Paulina's care. Already speaking openly of "These dangerous, unsafe lunes i'th'king" (2.2.29), Paulina takes upon herself the responsibility of being the queen's "advocate to th' loudest" (2.2.38) and hopes that the sight of the innocent newborn may influence Leontes:

PAULINA We do not know
 How he may soften at the sight o'th' child.
 The silence often of pure innocence
 Persuades when speaking fails. (2.2.38-41)

For us, as for Emilia, Paulina's honor and goodness are abundantly evident (2.2.42), and speaking rarely fails her. Were her cause less just, Paulina might be regarded as a shrill termagant, but she demonstrates an uncommon courage and determination in her confrontation with

Leontes. She does not mince words, referring openly to Leontes's "tyrannous passion" to the present lords, announcing that her "medicinal" words will "purge" the king "of that humour / That presses him from sleep" (2.3.27, 36-38).

She is no less audacious in the face of Leontes, who had commanded Antigonus to keep her away from court. Insisting upon her loyalty, Paulina nonetheless presents herself as a physician who has the courage to treat the king's "evils," going so far as to say that were she a man she would fight the king in defense of the good queen's honor (2.3.51-61). When Leontes orders that she be forced from his presence, Paulina presents the king's infant daughter, saying, boldly, that the babe is "no less honest / Than you are mad" (2.3.69-70). When the enraged Leontes calls them all "A nest of traitors!" (2.3.80), Paulina turns the term against him, for, as she puts it, Leontes has become a traitor to himself in slandering the queen's—and thereby his own—honor, and "The root of his opinion . . . is rotten / As ever oak or stone was sound" (2.3.81-89).

The alarming extent of Leontes's derangement makes itself apparent in his grotesque desire to burn others, as his fevered imagination projects his disordered state of mind. Leontes reacts violently when Paulina presents the baby as an undeniable "copy of the father" (2.3.98):

LEONTES This brat is none of mine.
 It is the issue of Polixenes.
 Hence with it, and together with the dam
 Commit them to the fire. (2.3.91-94)

Leontes lodges the same threat against the obdurate Paulina, “I’ll ha’ thee burnt” (2.3.112), and is soon ordering Antigonus, whom he now considers a traitor who has purposely set Paulina to confront him, to carry out his fiendish wish, adding the threat of killing the child with his own hands:

LEONTES Thou, traitor, hast set on thy wife to this.
My child? Away with’t! Even thou, that hast
A heart so tender o’er it, take it hence,
And see it instantly consumed with fire.
Even thou, and none but thou. Take it up straight.
Within this hour bring me word ’tis done,
And by good testimony, or I’ll seize thy life,
With what thou else call’st thine. If thou refuse,
And wilt encounter with my wrath, say so;
The bastard brains with these my proper hands
Shall I dash out. Go, take it to the fire,
For thou set’st on thy wife. (2.3.129-140)

Barring Macbeth, a king could scarcely sink to lower, more demonic intent. The lords show their nobility in their unflinching support of Antigonus, making them false in the eyes of the king—“You’re liars all!” (2.3.144)—but still they kneel and beg that Leontes “do change this purpose, / Which, being so horrible, so bloody, must / Lead on to some foul issue” (2.3.149-151). The noble Antigonus volunteers—“I’ll pawn the little blood which I have left / To save the innocent” (2.3.164-165)—to save the life of the infant, so, on threat of death to himself and his “lewd-

that which is lost be not found.

(3.2.130-134)

Only the last clause, in contrast to the first part of the oracle, is lengthy and somewhat enigmatic, though clear enough. All Leontes can do is completely deny the oracle he has requested: “There is no truth at all i’t’h’ oracle. / The sessions shall proceed—this is mere falsehood” (3.2.137-138). Almost immediately, as though sent by an angered Apollo, signs of celestial disapproval begin to appear, as a servant arrives to announce that Mamillius has died, which causes Hermione to swoon. Surprisingly, Leontes’s acceptance of his own fault and responsibility is nearly as sudden as his precipitous plunge into jealousy:

LEONTES Apollo’s angry, and the heavens themselves
Do strike at my injustice. . . .
I have too much believed mine own suspicion.

(3.2.143-144, 148)

Paulina enters to confront Leontes again, and she delivers an accusatory accounting of all the ills issuing from his tyranny and jealousies, concluding with the information that the queen has died (3.2.176-199). Paulina is not in a forgiving mood, and she condemns him to “nothing but despair,” a figurative ten thousand years of perpetual winter storm (3.2.204-211). This time, Leontes’s double spondee, “Go on, go on,” indicates his acceptance of responsibility: “Thou canst not speak too much. I have deserved / All tongues to talk their bitterest” (3.2.211-213).

In a surprise of her own, Paulina makes her own repentance, feeling

that Leontes has been “touched / To th’ noble heart,” and asks the king’s forgiveness (3.2.218-224). Free, now, of distorting delusions, Leontes acknowledges that Paulina “didst speak but well / When most the truth” (3.2.229-230), and he goes on to make a final request of her:

LEONTES Prithee bring me
To the dead bodies of my queen and son.
One grave shall be for both. Upon them shall
The causes of their death appear, unto
Our shame perpetual. Once a day I’ll visit
The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there
Shall be my recreation. So long as nature
Will bear up with this exercise, so long
I daily vow to use it. Come, and lead me
To these sorrows. (3.2.231-240)

There is a hint of promise in the latent double meaning of “recreation” as “pastime” and “re-creation,” but the “sneaping winds” that Polixenes feared might afflict his kingdom in his absence would seem to have become Paulina’s threatened perpetual winter for Leontes (1.2.13; 3.2.209-210).

An Audacious Transition

At the end of Act 3, scene 2, we have a seemingly completed drama that might fairly be called *The Tragedy of King Leontes*, but the structure of *The Winter’s Tale* is unique, and two short, audacious scenes of transition lead us abroad to a new land and leap us ahead into

the future. The two scenes taken together could be thought of as a hinge holding together two disparate parts of a larger structure, but the situation is even more complex, for we are first reintroduced, in Act 4, to the green world of early comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*. Then, in Act 5, we encounter something different, an entirely new type of comedy that characterizes the late plays—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*—and which is distinct enough that these plays are given their own generic label and called romances.

The first transition, in Act 3, scene 3, is a physical one, a sea voyage to a new locale with new characters and a new mood, as we are carried with Antigonus and the banished babe to Bohemia. While at sea, Antigonus has a prophetic dream in which Hermione appears to him, naming the babe Perdita and telling him he will not see Paulina again (3.3.14-35). As he lays the infant upon the earth, Antigonus calls her Blossom rather than Perdita, and he also leaves documents and treasure in hopes they may “breed” her (3.3.45-48). When the shepherd who finds the baby opens the fardel left with her, he is convinced it is “fairy gold” (3.3.120), and thus the abandoned infant of fairytale lore is found, saved, and reared in obscurity by a far-from-courtly pair, her abandoner is devoured by a bear, and all those who bore her from Sicilia perish in the storm that sinks their ship. And so we have, most emphatically, a new beginning.

When swearing to carry out Leontes's command to abandon the baby in some remote place, Antigonus had expressed his concern for the child:

ANTIGONUS Come on, poor babe,

Some powerful spirit instruct the kites and ravens
To be thy nurses. Wolves and bears, they say,
Casting their savageness aside, have done
Like offices of pity. (2.3.183-187)

Ironically, but fittingly, wild nature does not cast aside its savageness or show any pity to Antigonus, and his gruesome end is indicated in the famous stage direction, *Exit, pursued by a bear* (3.3.57). The sinking of the ship and the grisly death of Antigonus are reported by Clown, the shepherd's son (3.3. 86-99), and when the two meet, the shepherd is carrying the baby in his arms, giving rise to his memorable comment:

SHEPHERD Heavy matters, heavy matters. But look thee
 here, boy. Now bless thyself; thou met'st with things dying,
 I with things newborn. (3.3.109-111)

The shepherd's statement is often cited as a brief, accurate description of the conjunction of the two parts of *The Winter's Tale*, but it also brings us conveniently to the appearance of Time.

A Gap of Time

Time may be considered as either cyclical or linear, and *The Winter's Tale*, even in the title, seems most concerned with cyclic time, as when Polixenes describes the amount of time he has been away from his throne and visiting Sicilia as "Nine changes of the watery star" (2.1.1); that is, nine months or nine lunar cycles. Unfortunately, the linear amount of time for nine lunar cycles, nine months, is also the amount of

time of the human gestation period, so the correspondence of Polixenes's stay and Hermione's pregnancy might be what prompts Leontes's suspicion.

The diurnal cycle of the sun's birth-death-and-rebirth is evoked when Polixenes describes his idyllic boyhood with Leontes, a golden time when they "were as twinned lambs that did frisk i'th'sun" and "thought there was no more behind / But such a day tomorrow as today" (1.2.67, 63-64). The cycle that is dominant in *The Winter's Tale*, however, is the annual cycle of the seasons, with spring heralding the rebirth and renewal of nature, and Shakespeare's green world is a restorative realm of spring-summer-autumn, characterized by budding, blooming, and blossoming, by rebirth, growth, and ripening. For Leontes, in bleak contrast at the end of Act 3, scene 2, there is no apparent cycle of renewal, for, frozen in grief and self-reproach, his existence has become, as Paulina foretold, one of perpetual winter, with no thaw in sight.

Linear time, in contrast, emphasizes beginnings, duration, and endings, which can be presented in human terms, such as in Jaques's sour description of the seven ages of man in *As You Like It*, a pitiable progress from mewling, puking infancy to the dotage of second childhood (*As You Like It*, 2.7.139-166), or, given in reverse order by Edgar when comforting and encouraging Gloucester in *King Lear*, "Men must endure / Their going hence even as their coming hither" (*King Lear*, 5. 2. 9-10). Fortunately for us, Time himself has the "power / To o'erthrow law" (4.1. 7-8), particularly temporal law. Although a number of terms in Time's 32 choral lines—*growth*, *plant*, *brought in*, *freshet things*, *growing*, *grown*—would seem to refer to cyclical time, Time makes use of his wings to "slide / O'er sixteen years . . . that wide gap" (4. 1. 5-7).

Significantly, particularly in light of what is to follow in Act 5, Time asks us to *imagine* him “now . . . In fair Bohemia,” where he will mention Florizel, the son of Polixenes, and “speak of Perdita, now grown in grace / Equal with wondering” (4.1.19-25). The story to follow “Is th’argument of Time” (4.1.29), and we are more than amply rewarded for this gift.

The Return of the Green World

Act 4, scene 2, begins as a clear parallel to the opening of Act 1, scene 2, although now it is Polixenes urging Camillo to remain in Bohemia, claiming that whereas it would be “sickness” to deny him leave to depart, it would be “death” to grant his desire, for Camillo has become just as essential to Polixenes as he was to Leontes (4.2.2-11). Camillo has begun longing for his own country. He has remained in Bohemia since leading Polixenes to safety, but now the repentant Leontes has sent for him, and Camillo wishes to die in his own land. Nevertheless, once Polixenes brings up his current concern with his son, Florizel, Camillo willingly agrees to help. Florizel, it seems, has been keeping away from court, and his father has received reports that his son “is seldom from the house of a most homely shepherd . . . who hath a daughter of most rare note” (4.2.37-38, 41-42). Polixenes is concerned about “the angle that plucks our son thither” (4.2.46), an image that calls to mind Leontes’s earlier misguided attempt to “angle” for confirmation that his wife “has been sluiced in’s absence, / And his pond fished by his next neighbour” (1.2.179, 193-194). In order to find answers, Polixenes suggests that they go question the shepherd, “not appearing what we are,” and Camillo quickly agrees, delighting Polixenes: “My best Camillo! We must disguise ourselves” (4.2.47-48, 54). After all, what would a green world comedy be

I'd have you do it ever; when you sing,
I'd have you buy and sell so, so give alms,
Pray so, and for the ordering your affairs,
To sing them too. When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o'th' sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that, move still, still so,
And own no other function. Each your doing,
So singular in each particular,
Crowns what you are doing in the present deeds,
That all your acts are queens. (4.4.135-146)

Both disguised strangers are impressed, sensing Perdita's quality—

POLIXENES This is the prettiest low-born lass that ever
Ran on the greensward. Nothing she does or seems
But smacks of something greater than herself,
Too noble for this place.

CAMILO He tells her something
That makes her blood look out. Good sooth, she is
The queen of curds and cream. (4.4.156-161)—

and when Perdita joins in the *dance of Shepherds and Shepherdesses* (4.4.167 s.d.), Polixenes confirms his son's opinion of her ability: "She dances featly" (4.4.178).

It is at this point, just after the dance, that Autolycus enters the scene, appearing as a "peddler at the door" (4.4.183-184). Fortunately for our purses, we have met him earlier and so should not be conned by his

superficial charm. Autolycus first appears while singing of “the doxy over the dale . . . in the sweet o’ the year, / For the red blood reigns in the winter’s pale . . . summer songs for me and my aunts / While we lie tumbling in the hay” (4.3.2-4, 11-12), and his merry preoccupation with promiscuous sex would seem to be abundantly apparent. He describes himself as a rogue and a thief, memorably as “a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” (4.3.25-26), and he openly confesses his dishonesty: “With die and drab I purchased this caparison, and my revenue is the silly cheat” (4.3.26-28). We see a demonstration of his nefarious skill when he pretends he has been robbed, picks the pocket of the sympathetic and gullible Clown, thus relieving him of all the money for the sheepshearing feast, then refusing the Clown’s generous offer of a little money, before describing his supposed robber as a rogue named Autolycus: “That’s the rogue that put me into this apparel” (4.3.101-102). This last statement is a perfect example of the con man’s ability to say something that is absolutely true and at the same time completely misleading. Having heard of the sheepshearing feast, Autolycus departs eager to shear the shearers.

Autolycus, whose name means “the wolf himself,” is that familiar threat of fairy tales, the wolf in sheep’s clothing, and he proceeds—when he is not peddling his trinkets and spurious ballads—to fleece the unwary shepherds, picking their pockets.⁹ There is a thinly veiled nastiness beneath his flim-flam charm and patter. Although Perdita/Flora is concerned about the lyrics of his ballads—“Forewarn him that he use no scurrilous words in’s tunes” (4.4.215-216)—the unwitting servant who will admit him confirms what we already know:

SERVANT He has the prettiest love songs for maids, so
without bawdry, which is strange, with such delicate burdens of
dildos and fadings, 'jump her and thump her. . . .' (4.4.194-197)

The mention of dildos shades a reference in a later ballad line, "poking-sticks of steel, / What maids lack from head to heel" (4.4.228-229), into something other than a millinery concern. Autolycus clearly favors women who, shall we say, open their gates freely and frequently, and he vouches for the truth of a final ballad to be sung "against the hard hearts of maids. It was thought she was a woman and was turned into a cold fish for she would not exchange flesh with one that loved her" (4.4.278-281).

The cautionary epigram of pastoral literature, *Et in Arcadia ego*, would in this case be a reference to lust rather than death, for lust is the vice most strongly associated with Autolycus, and the combination has cast a dappling shadow over the feast. It is Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida* who warns us most bluntly about "appetite, an universal wolf" (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.121), and prowling the feast we have, in Autolycus, the wolf himself. The threat of predatory sex had been suggested earlier in Florizel's reference to gods in the shape of beasts—Jupiter as a bull, Neptune a ram—ravishing human women, and the maid's pleading ballad refrain—"Whoop, do me no harm, good man" (4.2.200-201)—would seem pitifully ineffectual when set against the next dance. A dozen men who "have made themselves all men of hair" present a "rough" dance, "a gallimaufry of gambols," and the ensuing *dance of twelve Satyrs* is a graphic, troubling vision of rampant sexual appetite that Lear and Leontes conceive out of dread, a world in which sexual gates are wantonly or forcedly open, a bawdy planet, with no barricado

so abruptly vicious and threaten to mar Perdita/Flora's beauty with briars, when he has shortly before argued in favor of combining baser stock with nobler in breeding improved flowers, is nearly as great a shock as hearing Leontes threaten to burn or dash out the brains of his newborn daughter.

Once Polixenes storms off, both Perdita and the shepherd feel they have been "undone," and the shepherd angrily blames Perdita: "O cursed wretch, / That knewst this was the prince and wouldst adventure / To mingle faith with him. Undone, undone!" (4.4.458, 463-465). When Camillo reports the king's undiminished temper and fury, Florizel refuses to break his oath to Perdita and declares that they will trust to fortune and put to sea. In a reversal of his years-ago flight from Sicilia, Camillo quickly comes up with a plan for the pair to "make for Sicilia," where he is sure they will be well received. In a delightful irony, Camillo tells Florizel that to appear before Leontes his "fair princess" will need to "be habited as it becomes / The partner of your bed" (4.4.548, 549-552).

Autolycus reenters, sounding now like an even more cynical, wordier version of Puck: "Ha, ha! What a fool honesty is, and trust—his sworn brother—a very simple gentleman!" (4.4.600-601). Delighted at having sold all his trumpery, he goes on at length about the success of his larcenous activities, but the scene concludes in a tangle of comic complications, and Autolycus plays a key part.

Camillo realizes that he can make use of Autolycus, so there is more disguising, as Camillo—"Unbuckle, unbuckle" (4.4.651)—has Florizel and Autolycus exchange garments. Camillo also requires that Perdita must muffle her face with her sweetheart's hat in order to board the ship unrecognized, and Perdita is aware of the necessity of this dissembling:

“I see the play so lies / That I must bear a part” (4.4.659-660). Autolycus, who, due to his trade, is unusually quick to smell out a trick (or spot one or hear one), perceives that Florizel is “stealing away from his father with his clog at his heels,” but, true to his perverse nature, he chooses knavery:

AUTOLYCUS If I thought it were a piece of honesty to
acquaint the king withal, I would not do't. I hold it the more
knavery to conceal it, and therein am I constant to my
profession. (4.4.683-686)

When he encounters the shepherd and his son, who are carrying the “secret things” about Perdita to show the king, Autolycus prevents them, telling them the king is on a ship. Fearful that the pair might still go to the palace to show the king their “strange sights,” Autolycus offers to lead them to the prince’s ship. It is in this convoluted, duplicitous manner that Autolycus becomes honest by chance, a rare situation he confided in an earlier aside, “Though I am not naturally honest, I am so sometimes by chance” (4.4.715-716), a self-reflective comment that he makes, it must be noted, just before taking off a false beard! And in doing some unintended good, Autolycus bears out the accuracy of a verse from his second song:

And when I wander here and there
I then do most go right. (4.3.17-18)¹⁰

The Miracle of the Amending Imagination

In its entirety, Act 5 is shorter than the final scene of Act 4, yet a snarl of comic complexity must be untangled before the conclusion. To give an example of one such thread: Perdita, the threatened, abandoned foundling raised as a shepherd's daughter in a distant kingdom, appears arrayed as Flora to preside over a pastoral festival, only to be denounced by King Polixenes—while removing his own disguise!—as a status-seeking sorceress, who must then be “disguised” as a princess in order to flee with her betrothed to Sicilia, where Prince Florizel introduces her to her unknowing father as a princess from Libya, just before she is again unmasked by the closely following, angry Polixenes, only to be revealed at last to be the long-lost daughter of Leontes, a true princess by birth. Whew!

Fortunately, most of the untangling discoveries and revelations are narrated rather than staged, enabling us to skim over a great deal of import in much the same way that Time had enabled us to traverse with ease a wide gap of time. Otherwise, we would be emotionally drained, if not also physically spent, even before the statue scene.

Back in Sicilia, Cleomenes and Dion give voice to dynastic concern about the heirless kingdom, cautiously suggesting that it is time that Leontes thought of taking a new queen. Paulina, though, is quick to intervene. Bluntly telling Leontes that he had, in effect, killed his unparalleled queen, she reminds him of the oracle—

PAULINA For has not the divine Apollo said?

 Is't not the tenor of his oracle

 That King Leontes shall not have an heir

Till his lost child be found? (5.1.37-40)—

a circumstance Paulina finds so unlikely as to be “monstrous to our human reason” (5.1.41), and she prompts the king into swearing he will never marry again unless she gives her permission. Sounding oracular herself, Paulina tells Leontes: “That / Shall be when your first queen’s again in breath. / Never till then” (5.1.82-84).

An obviously dazzled servant announces the unexpected arrival of Prince Florizel “with his princess—she / The fairest I have yet beheld . . . the most peerless piece of earth, I think, / That e’er the sun shone bright on” (5.1.86-87, 94-95). When they meet, his suspicion-clouded vision now cleared, Leontes recognizes the father’s image in the son—“Your mother was most true to wedlock, prince, / For she did print your royal father off, / Conceiving you” (5.1.123-125)—but his response to Perdita calls forth an involuntary exclamation: “And your fair princess—goddess!” (5.1.131). Leontes soon refers to the princess as a “paragon,” and he senses in the young pair a revivifying presence—“Welcome hither, / As is the spring to th’earth!” (5.1.150-151)—while also lamenting what might have been:

LEONTES What might I have been,
 Might I a son and daughter now have looked on,
 Such goodly things as you? (5.1.175-177)

Unbeknownst to Florizel, Camillo also had his own plan, which was to inform Polixenes of Florizel’s escape and destination, encourage the king to pursue his son, and thus accompany the king back to Sicilia, the

but the shepherd believes he has found fairy gold along with the abandoned infant, and now others begin to feel they are living in a fairy tale. When an oracle is fulfilled and a king's daughter found, there can be, as one of the narrating gentlemen declares:

ROGERO Nothing but bonfires. The oracle is fulfilled, the
king's daughter is found. Such a deal of wonder is broken
out within this hour that ballad-makers cannot be able to
express it. . . . This news which is called true is so like an
old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion.
(5.2.22-25, 27-29)

For the third gentlemen, the fate of Antigonus, being torn to pieces by a bear, is "Like an old tale still" (5.2.60), and later Paulina offers her assessment of the restoration of Hermione to life: "That she is living, / Were it but told you, should be hooted at / Like an old tale" (5.3.115-117).¹¹⁾

As though bursting forth from the opened fardel, the amazements brighten the scene, as one joy crowns another. The contents of the fardel—the mantle, the jewel, the letters—are proofs of Perdita's identity, and now all are able to perceive "the majesty of the creature in resemblance of the mother; the affection of nobleness which nature shows above her breeding . . ." (5.2.35-37).¹²⁾ The estranged kings meet in tearful joy, and there are some hints of what is to follow, such as in the third gentleman's description of the response of those present to the sight of Perdita's sorrow at learning the fate of her mother: "Who was most marble there changed colour . . ." (5.2.87-88).

Perdita and the others go to view the statue of Hermione that

Paulina has commissioned and kept, and the first impression is that the sculptor has been of unusual excellence in his ability to add the wrinkles of sixteen years to the lifelike reproduction. Although she is no longer arrayed as Flora, Perdita, as the fulfillment of the oracle, still manifests the power of rejuvenation, a beneficent, creative energy expressed so aptly in Pablo Neruda's "Girl Gardening":

your flowering
went out
and returned . . .
your hand
fondled
the earth
and straightway
the growing was luminous.¹³⁾

Earlier, Paulina had "lifted the princess from the earth" (5.2.75), where she had fallen in grief, but now, as the statue returns to life—"If she pertain to life, let her speak too!" (5.3.113), a demand from Camillo, who wants more proof—it is only when Perdita kneels before her mother to ask her blessing that Hermione speaks again.

When Leontes appears overwrought at the sight of the statue, Paulina attempts to restrain him:

LEONTES Do not draw the curtain.
PAULINA No longer shall you gaze on't, lest your fancy
 May think anon it moves.

This brief utterance is a final balancing rectification of his disastrously distorting “Too hot, too hot!” But the repetitive “Let be, let be” must also necessarily call to mind both *King Lear* and *Hamlet*. At the conclusion of his brief encouragement of Gloucester, Edgar states, “Ripeness is all” (*King Lear*, 5.2.11), and Hamlet assures us that “The readiness is all . . . Let be” (*Hamlet*, 5.2.221-223). Having endured his long penance and having his daughter’s reappearance fulfill the oracle, the readiness and ripeness coincide for Leontes, who has both earned and achieved his miracle.

As he enters bearing his daughter in his arms, Lear knows that Cordelia is “dead as earth” (*King Lear*, 5.3.259). In a moment of desperate hope, Lear uses a looking-glass and feather to check for non-existent signs of breath (5.3.259-261, 263-265), and he dies in a moment of comforting delusion: “Do you see this? Look on her: look, her lips, / Look there, look there!” (5.3.309-310). At the end of *King Lear*, “All’s cheerless, dark and deadly,” in Kent’s bleak summation (5.3.288).

With these lines in mind, it is hard not to see *The Winter’s Tale* as an affirmative answer to *King Lear*, providing Leontes with a grace not granted to Lear. We have learned from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* that the imagination has the power to creatively amend, even if only to bring to life a most unimaginative performance of a play. Leontes’s long penance has not been barren, for his tears have thawed the frozen king and purified his infected vision, and at long last his uninfected, amended imagination is to bear fruit.

Paulina might be thought of as stage-managing the miracle, but her

For Leontes's difficult speech in 1.2., for lines 137-138 I prefer to make use of the clarity provided by the punctuation in the *Pelican* edition, edited by Frances E. Dolan. I also follow the *Pelican* edition in two stage directions. In the first instance, at 1.2.108, *Pelican* adds the useful *and they walk apart* regarding the actions of Hermione and Polixenes at that moment. In the second case, at 4.4.341, I opt for *Pelican's* shorter version of the lengthy stage direction in *Arden*: “[*The Servant admits twelve rustic Dancers dressed as satyrs, who dance to music.*]” (281). Additionally, I favor the *Pelican* punctuation of Autolycus's quip (4.4.726).

Quotations from the other plays are from *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*.

- 2) *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, 1464.
- 3) *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 8-9.
- 4) As Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare After All*, notes, “infection almost immediately becomes a dominant metaphor for his entire course . . .” (834).
- 5) Deborah T. Curren-Aquino, in her “Introduction” to the *New Cambridge Shakespeare* edition, points out the problem facing modern editors: “Fractured in syntax, frequently shifting in address, elliptical, and repetitions, the king’s language resists clear explication . . .” (24). I particularly like Frank Kermode’s description, in his “Introduction” to the *Signet Classic* edition, of the difficulty in dealing with Leontes’s jealousy-infected utterances: “The language that embodies it combines hysterical grossness with suggestions of a mind once habituated to clarity but no longer quite able to declare itself clearly because of emotional pressure . . . and neither Elizabethan nor modern punctuation can cope with its jolting syntax and distorted argument” (lxiv).
- 6) *The Complete Poetry of John Milton*, 337; 345.
- 7) *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 476.
- 8) *Prefaces to Shakespeare*: “The short opening scene of Act III is literally a

breath of fresh air, reminding us how unpleasantly heated, fetid and claustrophobic the court has become" (767).

- ⁹⁾ Or "the wolf by himself" or "the lone wolf," depending on how you translate the name (Orgel, 50). Critics such as Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, who finds Autolycus to be a "loveable" pickpocket (267); Russ McDonald, "Introduction," *Penguin Classics*, who sees him as amusingly lively and creative (liv-lv); and Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, who declares the "wonderful" Autolycus to be the "most amiable of all Shakespearean rogues" (649), seem to have been as completely bamboozled by Autolycus as the gullible rustics he cozens.

As should be obvious, I believe Orgel's emphasis on the lupine nature of Autolycus to be the most accurate assessment of his threatening nature, and I fully agree with John Pitcher's depiction of "the greedy, wolfish Autolycus' preying on victims according to no law at all" ("Introduction," *Arden Shakespeare*, 62). Near the end of lengthy Act 4, scene 4, Autolycus again calls attention to the rough "men of hair" and their disturbing intrusion when they perform their dance of the Satyrs (4.4.331; 347), but his brief remark also reminds us of his own variously disguised wolfish nature. When Clown claims that he and his father "are but plain fellows, sir," Autolycus immediately quips: "A lie! You are rough and hairy" (4.4.725-726).

- ¹⁰⁾ When he meets Shepherd and Clown later in Act 5, Autolycus rues the fact that he has yet again done some unintended good to others, an outcome that grates against his nature: "Here come those I have done good to against my will, and already appearing in the blossoms of their fortune" (5.2.122-123).
- ¹¹⁾ Northrop Frye, who has done so much to illuminate the nature of romance, has pointed out that "*The Winter's Tale* insists on the affinity of its story to old tales and ballads" (56).

- ¹²⁾ In an additional boon, the scene furnishes an answer to Hamlet's rhetorical question, "Who would fardels bear . . .?" (*Hamlet*, 3.1.75). A Shepherd and a Clown, that's who!
- ¹³⁾ Pablo Neruda, *Selected Poems*, 255.
- ¹⁴⁾ *The Winter's Tale* ends as a romance should, with the afflicted king restored to health, miraculously reunited with the queen he thought he had killed and joyously resuming a friendship with the old friend he had considered a betrayer, with the long-lost beautiful princess to marry her chaste and charming prince, and with even Paulina generously provided with a new husband in the honorable Camillo.

However, given the current political situation in the United States, where a president is sounding and attempting to act more tyrannical by the day, it is interesting to read Stephen Greenblatt's recent sardonic take on the play:

Still, more than any of Shakespeare's other plays, *The Winter's Tale* allows itself the dream of a second chance. The event that makes this renewal possible, in the wake of disaster, is one of the playwright's most daring and implausible fantasies: the tyrant's full, unfeigned, utterly sincere repentance. Imagining this inner transformation is almost as difficult as imagining a statue coming to life.

(*Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics*, 136)

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