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, Archimadus suggests a ruse—

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

agrees—"It is a gallant child; one that, indeed, physics the subject, makes old hearts fresh" (1.1.38-39)—but the following mentions of those who are afflicted desiring to see the prince grow to manhood, and, particularly, Archidamus's final statement, which begins with a clause of conjecture—"If the king had no son . . ." (1.1.45)— once again foreshadow dire events soon to occur.

There is one further point to be made about the opening scene, and it has to do with the language. When Archidamus is concerned about the quality of Bohemia's possible reciprocal entertainment, he makes the following halting statement: "We cannot with such magnificence—in so rare—I know not what to say" (1.1.12-13). In searching for the proper polite language, Archimadus interrupts the smooth flow of his sentence, a slight hesitation probably not very noticeable at the time, but fractured syntax soon becomes an indication and symptom of Leontes's derangement.

The Fall from Innocence

Once Polixenes agrees to Hermione's elaborately polite request to remain a while longer as a guest, Hermione desires to hear about their boyhoods, when Leontes and Polixenes were "pretty lordlings" together (1.2.62), and Polixenes rewards her with a lovely description of those idyllic days:

POLIXENES

We were, fair queen,

Two lads that thought there was no more behind

But such a day tomorrow as today,

And to be a boy eternal. . . .

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

All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables, the nightjars

Flying with the ricks, and the horses

Flashing into the dark.

As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm away,

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 thick 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:

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 "playfellow," 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:

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 ninemonth 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 to prolong his absence (1.2.12-13). Leontes, unable to persuade him to stay even a week longer, asks Hermione to intercede: "Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you" (1.2.27).

In another statement that soon proves ironic, Hermione mildly upbraids her husband for his failure to persuade his friend—"You, sir, / Charge him too coldly" (1.2.29-30)—and Hermione proceeds, by means of some charming courtly bantering, to get Polixenes to agree to a week's extension as her guest. Hermione then takes advantage of the opportunity to ask Polixenes about his boyhood with Leontes. When Leontes asks, "Is he won yet?", and Hermione replies, "He'll stay, my lord," Leontes praises her: "At my request he would not. / Hermione, my dearest, thou never spok'st / To better purpose" (1. 2. 86-89). This exchange leads to more bantering when Leontes admits that Hermione had indeed spoken to better purpose once before, and that was when, after a three-month courtship that Leontes found bitterly long, Hermione had pledged her love: "Then didst thou utter, / 'I am yours for ever'" (1.2. 101-105).

Suddenly, shockingly, as Hermione *Gives her hand to Polixenes, and they walk apart* (1.2.108 s.d.), everything changes for Leontes:

Too hot, too hot!

To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.

I have *tremor cordis* on me. My heart dances,
But not for joy, not joy. (1.2.108-111)

For Leontes, the "won" of his earlier "Is he won yet?" now means "wooed" rather than "persuaded." He realizes that the scene he is witnessing may

be entirely innocent—"t may, I grant"—but he is in the grip of a compulsive jealousy that makes him see himself as a cuckold:

As now they are, and making practised smiles
As in a looking-glass; and then to sigh, as 'twere
The mort o'th' deer—O, that is entertainment
My bosom likes not, nor my brows. (1.2.115-119)⁴⁾

As his irrational jealousy begins to run rampant, Leontes, even while talking to the perplexed Mamillius, begins to question the paternity of his son—"Can thy dam?—may't be?— / Affection, thy intention stabs the centre!" (1. 2. 137-138). Affection, perverted by jealousy, becomes an affliction that stabs. When something that is unreal becomes credent through the assistance of a coactive mind, as is happening with Leontes, then he can find it leading "to the infection of my brains / And the hard'ning of my brows" (1.2.141-147).

His mental infection having taken hold, Leontes proceeds to goad his illness. Saying he will walk with Mamillius, Leontes urges Hermione to demonstrate the very thing he fears: "Hermione, / How thou lov'st us, show in our brother's welcome" (1. 2. 172-173). In this ploy, Leontes believes he is cleverly angling, but he is only impaling himself more firmly on the barb of jealousy, arranging to see what he wants to see, and demonstrating the growing disorder of his mind:

LEONTES I am angling now,

Though you perceive me not how I give line.

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

Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only, That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing? Why then the world and all that's in't is nothing, The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing, My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings, If this be nothing, (1.2.282-294)

The "nothings" are somethings only in Leontes's afflicted imagining, and Camillo's reply only reinforces what we already know, but their exchange shows just how temperamentally irrational Leontes is becoming:

CAMILLO Good my lord, be cured

Of this diseased opinion, and betimes,

For 'tis most dangerous.

LEONTES Say it be. 'tis true.

CAMILLO No, no, my lord.

LEONTES It is—you lie, you lie!

I say thou liest, Camillo, and I hate thee,

Pronounce thee a gross lout, a mindless slave.

Or else a hovering temporizer, that

Canst with thine eyes at once see good and evil,

Inclining to them both. (1.2.294-302)

As his disease progresses, Leontes becomes increasingly tyrannical, and he pressures Camillo to poison Polixenes. Camillo agrees, but only on condition: "Provided that when he's removed your highness / Will take

again your queen as yours at first, / Even for your son's sake . . ." (1.2.333-335). Polixenes has sensed the sudden change in mood—"This is strange. Methinks / My favor here begins to warp" (1.2.361-362)—and when he meets Camillo, he is puzzled by Camillo's cryptic reason for the alteration:

CAMILLO There is a sickness

Which puts some of us in distemper, but

I cannot name the disease, and it is caught

Of you that yet are well. (1.2.380-383)

Polixenes finally prompts Camillo into giving a more direct explanation, and in his shocked response Polixenes applies the image of infection to himself:

CAMILLO He thinks—nay, with all confidence he swears,
As he had seen't, or been an instrument
To vice you to't—that you have touched his queen
Forbiddenly.

POLIXENES O, then my best blood turn

To an infected jelly and my name

Be yoked with his that did betray the best! (1.2.410-415)

As he prepares, with Camillo's help, to sail quickly away for Bohemia, Polixenes knows that there may be worse to come now that Leontes is consumed by his ill-founded suspicion:

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 ielly" 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:

I am Thane of Cawdor:

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair, And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, Against the use of nature? (1.3.133-137)

At almost the same moment that Leontes utters his startling "Too hot, too hot!" indication of suspicion, he feels a physical response similar to Macbeth's—"I have *tremor cordis* on me. My heart dances, / But not for joy, not joy" (1.2.110-111)—but he chooses to take it as a proof or sign of his suspicion rather than an instinctive warning that he may be mistaken and misled. We do not know the cause of Leontes's jealousy or when the germ of suspicion first lodged in his mind—the play never tells us—but we do know that he "approves" it, in Milton's sense, and Leontes's later self-diagnosis is eerily accurate:

LEONTES There may be in the cup

A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
Is not infected; but if one present
Th'abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.

(2.1.39-45)

Leontes *chooses* to see the spider. He chooses to drink the poison of his suspicion, thereby disastrously infecting his knowledge, and it is upon

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,

You 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

about her. / Away with him" (2.1.59-60). In doing so, Leontes thus condemns himself to living out the untold story, for not long after he will be compelled by guilt into daily attendance at a churchyard, frozen in a state of perpetual penance.

The only sprites and goblins are those produced by Leontes's infected imagination. Now convinced that Polixenes is the father of Hermione's unborn child (2.1.60-62), Leontes repeatedly charges her with adultery: "She's an adulteress! . . . She's an adulteress, I have said with whom . . . she's / A bed-swerver" (2.1.78, 88, 92-93).

Unlike Prospero in *The Tempest*, Leontes is in no position to lecture anyone. Indeed, he spends much of his time in *The Winter's Tale* being calmly but firmly contradicted by his queen, cautiously but courageously corrected by his retainers, and soundly scolded by the undaunted Paulina. It is Leontes who must learn a painful lesson at the cost of intense grief and a lengthy penance. The gravid Hermione maintains a preternatural gravity in the face of her husband's tempestuous derangement. Despite the insulting nature of his mistaken and unmerited accusations, Hermione responds with a calm dignity, providing measured reasonable assertions of her innocence:

LEONTES ... and let her sport herself

With that she's big with, [to Hermione] for 'tis Polixenes

Has made thee swell thus. [Mamillius is taken away.]

HERMIONE But I'd say he had not,

And I'll be sworn you would believe my saying,

Howe'er you lean to th' nayward. (2.1. 60-64)

LEONTES ... But be't known

From him that has most cause to grieve it should be,

She's an adulteress!

HERMIONE Should a villain say so,

The most replenished villain in the world,

He were as much more villain—you, my lord,

Do but mistake. . . .

How will this grieve you

When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that

You thus have published me? Gentle my lord,

You scarce can right me throughly then to say

You did mistake. (2.1.76-81, 96-100)

Throughout, Hermione bears her burden of "honourable grief" without histrionics, remaining a pillar of dignity, and when, as she goes to her imprisonment, she asks the attendant lords to "measure" her, we are reminded of what a strikingly visible contrast she presents on stage, both a contrast to and indication of the chaos that has beset her husband's mind. As a precursor to the famous statue scene, Hermione already appears statuesque.

That Leontes has been a good king is shown through the behavior of his retainers, who are no sycophants, but who instead try to correct their mistaken king even at grave risk to themselves. Camillo is the first to show such courage when he refuses, despite Leontes's insistence, to condemn Hermione, and instead speaks in her defense:

CAMILLO I would not be a stander-by to hear

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—

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):

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-

tongued wife" (2.3.170), he agrees to carry out Leontes's instructions:

LEONTES that thou carry

This female bastard hence, and that thou bear it

To some remote and desert place, quite out

Of our dominions; and that there thou leave it,

Without more mercy, to it own protection

And favour of the climate. As by strange fortune

It came to us, I do in justice charge thee,

On thy soul's peril and thy body's torture,

That thou commend it strangely to some place

Where chance may nurse or end it. Take it up. (2.3.172-181)

There is a bitter irony in some of Leontes's lines, as when he comments on the "familiarity" of Hermione and Polixenes, "Which was as gross as ever touched conjecture / That lacked sight only" (2.1.175-177) and his blind insistence that he "need no more / Than what I know" (2.1. 189-190).

He has, in the interest of public confirmation, sent Cleomenes and Dion to Apollo's temple in sacred Delphos to consult the oracle. The extremely short opening scene of Act 3, a mere 22 lines, is another thematic one, but it also provides, as Tony Tanner says, "a breath of fresh air" in their references to the delicate climate, sweet air, and the reverence of the attendants. Both Cleomenes and Dion hope the sealed oracle will clear the queen.

As the public session, the indictment against Hermione is read, and her responses, though in longer speeches than previous protestations of innocence, are again notable for their dignity:

HERMIONE

if powers divine

Behold our human actions—as they do—
I doubt not then but innocence shall make
False accusation blush and tyranny
Tremble at patience....

For Polixenes.

With whom I am accused, I do confess
I loved him as in honour he required;
With such a kind of love as might become
A lady like me; with a love, even such,
So, and no other, as yourself commanded....

if I shall be condemned

Upon surmises, all proofs sleeping else
But what your jealousies awake, I tell you
'Tis rigour, and not law. Your honours all,
I do refer me to the oracle.
Apollo be my judge. (3.2.27-31, 60-65, 109-114)

When the oracle is unsealed and read, its short, clear, utterly unambiguous statements are a complete refutation of and stylistic contrast to Leontes's jealousy-fueled accusations:

OFFICER [Reads.] Hermione is chaste, Polixenes 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.

(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'th' 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*, *freshest 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 without plentiful disguises, deceptions, and mistaken identities?

Rather than having to escape into the green world, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*, Perdita is practically born into it, and, having discovered her there while pursuing his falcon, that is where the love-struck Florizel now tarries. Garbed in "unusual weeds" to appear as the goddess Flora in order to preside over the sheepshearing feast, Perdita is somewhat troubled by the new appearances she and Florizel have adopted:

PERDITA

Your high self,

The gracious mark o'th' land, you have obscured With a swain's wearing, and me, poor lowly maid, Most goddess-like pranked up. (4.4.7-10)

Perdita is most worried about what might come of an accidental meeting with Florizel's father while robed in their "borrowed flaunts" (4. 4.23). Florizel, who is dressed as a rural swain or peasant, tries to reassure her by mentioning gods, such as Jupiter and Neptune, who took on the "shapes of beasts," and this effort to reassure brings forth Florizel's profession of the strength and purity of his love for Perdita:

FLORIZEL Their transformations

Were never for a piece of beauty rarer, Nor in a way so chaste, since my desires Run not before mine honour, nor my lusts Burn hotter than my faith....

or I'll be thine, my fair,

Or not my father's. For I cannot be

Mine own, nor anything to any, if

I be not thine. To this I am most constant....

(4.4.31-35, 42-45)

When the old shepherd, her presumed father, mildly rebukes Perdita and urges her to play a more active role as hostess, particularly in welcoming strangers—the disguised Polixenes and Camillo have just entered—Perdita quickly and charmingly demonstrates both her mastery of the language of flowers and her perceptive ability to assess the personalities of strangers. She is soon engaged in a polite art-vs.-nature debate with Polixenes, with the king arguing for grafting and hybridization, Perdita, as Flora, supporting the purity of "great creating nature" (4.4.88). The piedness of bastard flowers is, for her, akin to the falseness of cosmetics:

PERDITA 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. (4.4.99-103)

This exchange and Perdita's further discourse to Florizel about flowers and seasons evokes his lovely compliment of her graces:

FLORIZEL What you do

Still betters what is done. When you speak, sweet,

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.

CAMILLO 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 pitiably 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

for a belly (4.4.330-335, 347 s.d.).

It is unsurprising that the dance of the Satyrs, which would be such a sharp contrast to the earlier dance of Shepherds and Shepherdesses, in which Perdita/Flora took part, dancing "featly," would bring a change of tone to this unusually lengthy scene, and the mood quickly darkens. Still questioning his unknowing son, Polixenes hears Florizel and Perdita pledge their love for each other, but when Florizel insists he will not consult or inform his father about their intended marriage, the enraged Polixenes throws off his disguise, denies his son, promises to hang the old shepherd, and calls Perdita a "fresh piece / Of excellent witchcraft" (4.4. 422-429). In a further depressing similarity to the mistaken Leontes, Polixenes threatens Perdita, even using an image made familiar by Leontes:

POLIXENES I'll have thy beauty scratched with briars and made

More homely than thy state . . .

And you, enchantment, . . .

if ever henceforth thou

These rural latches to his entrance open,

Or hoop his body more with thy embraces,

I will devise a death as cruel for thee

As thou art tender to't. (4.4.430-431, 439, 442-446)

For Polixenes, apparently, what's good for the flora is not good for this Flora. Parallels are no surprise in Shakespeare and, in fact, are surprisingly common in *The Winter's Tale*, but for Polixenes to become 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

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 homeland he was longing to see again (4.4.666-671). So it is that Leontes is next startled to hear that Polixenes has landed and requests that Leontes detain Florizel, a son who has cast off his dignity and duty to flee with a shepherd's daughter (5.1.179-184). Florizel feels betrayed by Camillo, but he admits to Leontes that he has not yet married Perdita. This leads Leontes to regret that Florizel's "choice is not so rich in worth as beauty, / That you might well enjoy her" (5.1.5.1.213-214), but Leontes, who cannot help noticing a similarity to Hermione in Florizel's "precious mistress," is impressed by Florizel's constancy when he comforts Perdita—

FLORIZEL Dear, look up.

Though Fortune, visible an enemy, Should chase us with my father, power no jot Hath she to change our loves (5.1.214-217)—

and he agrees to intercede on their behalf:

LEONTES I will to your father.

Your honour not o'erthrown by your desires, I am friend to them and you. (5.1.228-230)

The following narrated scene brings forth such an outpouring of joyous revelations that it is no wonder many of the characters begin to feel they are taking part in an old tale. Mamillius was barely allowed to begin his sad tale, and there have been repeated references to old myths in allusion to gods transforming themselves and the story of Proserpina,

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). 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

repeated interruptions and restraints should only help us to perceive what is most important, which is what Leontes is achieving in the course of their exchanges:

PAULINA

I'll draw the curtain.

My lord's almost so far transported that

He'll think anon it lives. . . .

I am sorry, sir, I have thus far stirred you; but

I could afflict you farther.

LEONTES

Do, Paulina,

For this affliction has a taste as sweet

As any cordial comfort. Still methinks

There is an air comes from her. What fine chisel

Could ever yet cut breath? Let no man mock me,

For I will kiss her. (5.3.68-70, 74-80)

The miracle of *The Winter's Tale* is not that a statue comes to life or that Paulina manages to bring a supposed statue to life. No, the miracle is what we are privileged to witness, for what we see—and, more importantly, hear—is Leontes *imagining* the statue of Hermione into life. And if the final scene of *The Winter's Tale* should leave us breathless with astonishment—well, it is but rarely, even in our imaginations, that we are graced with the vision of a miracle.¹⁴⁾

Notes

All quotations from The Winter's Tale are taken from The Arden Shakespeare, third series, edited by John Pitcher, with some exceptions. 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).

- 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).
- 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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