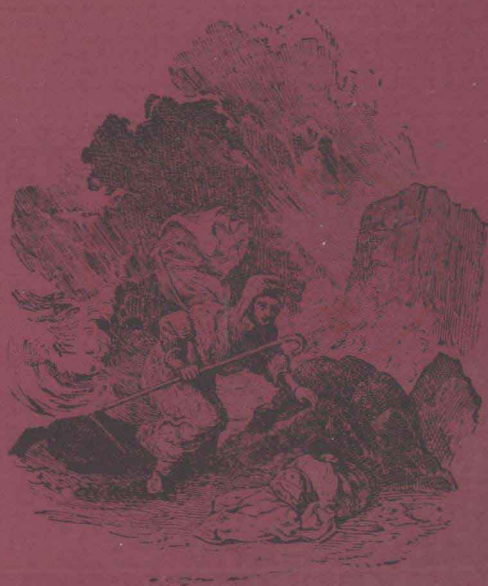


Shakespeare's Vast Romance

A Study of *The Winter's Tale*



Charles Frey

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University of Missouri Press
Columbia & London, 1980

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University of Missouri Press, Columbia, Missouri 65211
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number 79-3063
Printed and bound in the United States of America
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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Frey, Charles, 1935—
Shakespeare's Vast Romance.

Includes index.

1. Shakespeare, William, 1564-1616. The winter's tale.

I. Title.

PR2839.F7 822.3'3 79-3063

ISBN 0-8262-0286-1

For A. H. F.

Preface

I first saw *The Winter's Tale* as a young boy and first wrote on it in Maynard Mack's Shakespeare course twenty-five years ago. This book issues from successive expansions and revisions of my first study, and my indebtedness to Shakespearean researchers and interpreters of widely differing interests and persuasions is apparent throughout.

I thank all my friends for their steadfast encouragement and wise counsel. Maynard Mack, Dustin Griffin, Kathleen Blake, and Susan T. Frey read and improved the drafts. My students have taught me more, of course, than I have taught them. Still, despite all the help I have received from readers, students, editors, and others, I remain keenly aware of how far beyond my ken *The Winter's Tale* serenely glides.

The reader will find the relatively few references to primary sources clustered, for the most part, in notes to the second chapter. In accordance with the general practice of interpretive works such as this, no citation list separate from the notes is provided. My sources are mainly other interpretations, and I gratefully acknowledge the substantial aid of prior interpreters. I apologize to all those, moreover, who have written on *The Winter's Tale* and remain unmentioned here. We labor together in silent communion.

A portion of the fourth chapter was published in somewhat altered form in *Shakespeare's Romances Reconsidered*, edited by Carol McGinnis Kay and Henry E. Jacobs (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), pp. 113–24, and is reprinted with permission.

C. F.

Seattle, Washington

May 1978

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Introduction

In the past few decades, no group of Shakespeare's plays has increased more in public and scholarly esteem than the four late comedies—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*—generally collected in modern editions under the heading "Romances." Major summaries tracing the rise in critical fortunes of the romances reveal that the shift in appreciative estimate has been accomplished by the collective efforts of many persons pursuing varied interests and approaches.¹ Much of the effort has gone to create a new space in critical and theatrical consciousness for a kind of drama that reaches beyond conventional categories of comedy or tragedy. We now accept the challenge and significance of this new kind, variously denominated "tragicomedy," "repentance play," "comedy of forgiveness," "pastoral romance," or, perhaps most simply and clearly, "dramatic romance."

Most of the longer studies have treated the plays as a group, inviting observation of similarities more than singularities.² We

1. See Philip Edwards, "Shakespeare's Romances, 1900–1957," *ShS* 11 (1958):1–18; Philip Edwards, "The Late Comedies," in *Shakespeare: Select Bibliographical Guides*, ed. Stanley Wells (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), pp. 113–33; Norman Sanders, "An Overview of Critical Approaches to the Romances," in *Shakespeare's Romances Reconsidered*, ed. Carol McGinnis Kay and Henry E. Jacobs (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1978), pp. 1–10, and see the extensive bibliography of over 650 items in that volume, pp. 182–215.

2. E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1938); G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Final Plays* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947); E. C. Pettet, *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* (London and New York: Staples Press, 1949); Derek Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Last Phase* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1954); Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955); Frank Kermode, *William Shakespeare: The Final Plays* (London: Longmans, Green, 1963); Carol Gesner, *Shakespeare and the Greek Romance* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1970); Howard Felperin, *Shakespearean Romance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972); Joan Hartwig, *Shakespeare's Tragicomic Vision* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972); Hallett Smith, *Shakespeare's Romances: A Study of Some Ways of the Imagination* (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1972); Douglas L. Peterson, *Time, Tide, and Tempest: A Study of Shakespeare's*

have begun, however, to separate out Shakespeare's four romances into their distinctive personalities, worlds, orchestrations, and metabolisms. The evidence of books and articles about individual romances suggests that the focus of interpretation is shifting to cover the romances in an order that reverses their chronology. The concentration of the 1920s and 1930s upon *The Tempest* has given way to a broader interest in all the romances but particularly, in our era, *The Winter's Tale*. Future decades may see *Cymbeline* and then *Pericles* enter more fully into the new collective prominence of Shakespearean romance. Right now it appears specially fitting to attempt one or more synthesizing, synoptic, holistic accounts of the play that, to judge from the large numbers of contemporary performances and interpretations, has evidenced a peculiar attraction for us.

This book is designed to provide one such relatively comprehensive account of *The Winter's Tale*. My method involves a kind of triangulation whereby I provide, first, a selective history of recorded responses to the play. Second, I consider certain problems concerning the play's background, including sources, Shakespeare's own development, and a few analogues of the time. Third, having repositioned *The Winter's Tale* or, more accurately, the reader's mind within important contexts of the play I provide a brief account of what a fresh seeing or reading of the play may yield to a reasonably well-informed spectator or reader. My overall purpose is to weave together some of the major strands in history and criticism that should become part of the play's interpretive fabric.

The Winter's Tale is, even for a Shakespearean play, surprisingly difficult to approach with confidence. In *The Tempest*, the presence of Ariel and Caliban, the declaratory speeches of Gonzalo and Prospero on the commonwealth, the meaning of art, and the power of forgiveness, and the laboratory focus of the play on three groups, three masques, one isle, one afternoon, all invite the sort of schematic, philosophical criticism that *The Tempest* has generated so abundantly. *The Winter's Tale* is not like that. It is the opposite of a philosophical play. It is not a drama of ideas so much as a drama of actions that

Romances (San Marino, Calif.: The Huntington Library, 1973); Barbara A. Mowat, *The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Romances* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1977).

are sudden, spontaneous, manifold, and only mysteriously gathered, if at all, toward some final significance.

A substantial chorus of interpreters agrees that *The Winter's Tale* has its imposing life and makes its mark in the theater, during performance, but leaves little in the way of "deeper meanings" for conceptual analysis. Elsewhere I have outlined some of the problems that have been posed for these and indeed all interpreters by the play's protean resistance to such analysis.³ I have argued that, given the play's resistance to conceptual analysis, a sound interpretive strategy, for the moment, would be to provide not post-play rumination but a collection of materials most useful to pre-play preparation, that is, to inform, strengthen, and encourage intellects that would re-encounter the play for themselves, the play in its irreducible mystery. My triangulation of chapters that follow attempts to provide one such collection of preparatory materials. In ordering and presenting these materials, I seek, particularly, a recurrent focus upon the developing, cumulative drama of the play in performance or reading and upon the uses of a temporal-affective criticism responsive to that drama. In addition to my search for a helpful mode of interpretive response to the play's progressions and climaxes, however, I search as well for a response that answers to the play's vastness and opacity. The full winter's tale—whether play or season—includes both fall and spring in its disturbing and hopeful embrace. If we would appreciate a bit better how the play makes its own embrace as great and as creative, we need an interpretive vision that can focus upon connection and evolution yet open itself peripherally to unresolvable diversities and incommensurables.

To emphasize the paradoxical amalgam of coherence and vastness in *The Winter's Tale* is to encourage modern interpreters toward more innovative methods than have been generally employed so far. We need constantly to reposition the play amid changing notions of its prehistory (sources, backgrounds, Shakespeare's development) and post-history (staging and criticism) that evolve with our evolving points of vantage. We need also to experiment with a variety of fresh interpretive "performances" of *The Winter's Tale*. Such performances should not be seriatim readings that detail the critics' succes-

3. Charles Frey, "Interpreting *The Winter's Tale*," *SEL* 18 (1978):307–29.

sive and, often, highly subjective responses to each scene in sequence; they should be comprehensive efforts at marking out major dramatic patterns that give the play its distinctive presence and progress. One such pattern, for example, is the tightly structured alternation—through the first three acts, of (on the one hand) long, loud, crowded scenes in which Leontes appears, berates women, rejects his associates, threatens death and (on the other hand) brief interstitial scenes in which pairs of lesser characters meet in amity and hope.⁴ In the final chapter herein, I detail a few of the remarkable effects of this alternating rhythm and then trace the way the rhythm shifts in the latter part of the play. There, a similar opposition between mistrustful and faithful characters—this time Polixenes against Perdita and Florizel—is regularly interrupted and partly dissipated by the parodic intrusions of Autolycus. Tracing out the progress and the implications of such patterns helps sensitize us to shifts of pace, of tonal quality, and of attitudes generated by the play. It also does much to explain the dramatic functions of Autolycus that have long puzzled interpreters.

If we view the statue scene, similarly, as climax to a sequence in which Hermione, Paulina, and Perdita are made still centers of attention coming from uncomprehending bystanders who stimulate and witness radical transformations in the central woman, then we can respond more readily to the impact of the final scene: the chapel-gallery setting, the bystanders shown to be more stone, less real, than the statue, the aura of religious veneration, the conjunction of “faith” and “wooing,” the mixtures of satire and seriousness, miracle and mockery, comedy and high reverence. We need, in other words, to work with whole-play features, devices, and patterns in sustained attempts to make more palpable and effective the full drama of the play.

Amid the general consensus that *The Winter's Tale* now makes new and impressive claims upon us, but facing the general vagueness of and disagreement about the exact nature of those claims, contemporary critics have been ever more insistently asking just what kind and degree of “faith” or belief in its action and world the play demands. Again, however, their

4. This matter is taken up in the final chapter herein, a portion of which has appeared in somewhat different form in my essay, “Tragic Structure in *The Winter's Tale*: The Affective Dimension,” in *Shakespeare's Romances Reconsidered*, pp. 113–24.

brief inquisitive essays fail to include enough of the play's full working to provide convincing answers. Too often, the interpreters divide into (1) formalists who defend the play's artistry against detractors who think it broken backed, lacking in unity, shallow in character portrayal, strange in style, and so on, and (2) non-formalists or contentualists who face more directly the "message" of the play. The first sort of defense is exemplified by articles such as one titled "Style in *The Winter's Tale*" which argues that the abstract patterns of the play render it "not sparse but dense":

Shakespeare has left nothing out. Rather he has crowded into the frame of one play the patterns of many. The King is jealous, the Queen is falsely accused, the Queen dies. The Prince in disguise courts the Pauper, the Prince is discovered, the Prince flees. The play has no shortage of plots, but such summaries of its action are almost all that are given to us. Neither event nor character is fully amplified. Much is alluded to. Almost nothing is explained.⁵

The Winter's Tale, it is concluded, creates a world of absolute, artificial, abstract "intelligible forms," a world that "demands of us the kind of intellectual assent that is ultimately more binding than the plausible surfaces of *Othello*." Without ever really saying what the play is about, the author urges us to admire this sort, or "style," of art and give it not just aesthetic but intellectual assent.⁶

The second mode of defending *The Winter's Tale* tries to explain its mysterious power to move an audience, a power seemingly incommensurate with the play's apparent quaintness and artificiality. Whereas the formalist critic argues an aptness of style in this romance but tends to abide the mystery of its power to affect us, the critic oriented toward content may try to look directly at that mystery. Attention centers, of course, upon the statue scene, a scene that contains, according to G. Wilson Knight, "the most strikingly conceived, and profoundly penetrating, moment in English literature."⁷ One interpreter in this mode rejects all lesser versions of the "miracle" of Hermione's restoration and argues that she was dead and is

5. Marion Trousdale, "Style in *The Winter's Tale*," *CritQ* 18:4 (1976):30.

6. Such formalist praise takes another shape in an article that describes effective repetitions of words and actions in the two halves of the play: Richard Proudfoot, "Verbal Reminiscence and the Two-Part Structure of 'The Winter's Tale,'" *ShS* 29 (1976):67-78.

7. *The Sovereign Flower* (London: Methuen, 1958), p. 240.

brought to life; the play asks us and, apparently, persuades us to believe in the "one wholly satisfying solution to the problem of death." "It is a very difficult truth for many, but it is the truth of the play."⁸ Another writer in this vein, who also concedes the power of the play's ending, "its capacity to convince us," asks again: "To what are we required to lend our faith?" His answer is that the statue scene appeals to our deepest wishes and desires for a miraculous renewal of lost life. We give our assent to the restoration of Hermione as an accurate reflection of our greatest hopes. But, at the same time, "*The Winter's Tale* pushes comedy to the limits of the form." The radiance of the statue scene only accentuates our dark knowledge of permanent loss, the reality of death, the evanescence of attempts "to evade the enormous price of a thing done."

Life is not like art, and does not afford us this miraculous imagined redemption. Life renews itself through new generations—Perdita, not Hermione. The dead stay dead. Not all our tears change that. . . . Beautiful and heart-thrilling as *The Winter's Tale* unquestionably is, in the end we must say of it something like this—it truly reflects our human wish, but if we think of another final scene where a woman as loving and true as Hermione lies dead as earth, we shall not confuse that wish with truth.⁹

To the question, What kind of assent does *The Winter's Tale* demand from us?, we thus get two dramatically opposed answers: (1) religious affirmation of personal immortality, and (2) near-tragic reflection upon the finality of death. These dissidents agree with the analysts of style that the play attempts to body forth a golden world and to awaken faith; they disagree, however, as to the depth and lastingness of that awakened faith. A middle mediatory position emerges, inevitably, in the arguments of another critic:

Shakespeare has made Paulina's art as suggestive and ambiguous as possible: is it true or false, good or evil, magic or theater? The dual nature of Paulina's magic is also that of Venus, of femaleness itself in the play: the corrupt and destructive "seeming" Leontes imagines or the grace and fertility which transform Leontes' sterile order. It is the duality of the fallen world, as reflected in the play, and particularly in the Renaissance pastoral romance, in which . . . "we find two worlds juxtaposed: the actual

8. Robert R. Hellenga, "The Scandal of *The Winter's Tale*," *ES* 57 (1976):18.

9. F. H. Langman, "The Winter's Tale," *SoRA* 9 (1976):203–4.

world of human experience, and a kind of inner circle, a purified abstraction of that world, or 'Arcady.' " . . . It is also the duality of Shakespeare's art in particular, and even more in particular, of *The Winter's Tale*: a celebration of the power of art in the context of all-embracing illusion.

Without ever answering the question of how fully and completely we are made to believe in Hermione's restoration, this interpreter ends with paradoxical hints that the "old tale" hides within it a "divine reality." "As the play's title reminds us, its truths are fiction. Yet it moves and convinces; it brings itself to life."¹⁰

For these interpreters of *The Winter's Tale*, plainly, a crucial issue, if not the crucial issue, is the exact quality of conviction or life contained in or evoked by the play. These attempts to pay homage to the play's peculiar power all falter, in my view, to the extent that they overstress, on the one hand, constructive artistry or stylistic integrity and overstress, on the other hand, the play's presentation of miracle and its demands for religious faith. In the first place, the generations of readers and spectators who have testified to the confusing shifts in the play from one style to another, one mood to another, one place and time to another, cannot be so easily dismissed. *The Winter's Tale* is, above all, vast: vast in its scenic, characterological, and tonal range. It is a romance of "rough magic" and should not be simplified through a formulaic conception of its style. Relatively brief pieces, such as the articles cited, tend, perhaps inevitably, to miss the sense of teasing complexity and strangeness engendered by the living play, and that is one reason for believing that a longer study, one that examines the full length of the play and its contexts of origin and reception, may help us become more responsive to its vastness. In the second place, the issue of the play's demand for "faith" can hardly be settled definitively, if at all, in essays that concentrate only on the final scene or in essays that overplay as do the last three discussed, the issue of "miracle" by suggesting that Hermione really died and then came back to life in the statue scene. Hermione herself declares to Perdita:

I,

Knowing by Paulina that the Oracle

10. Patricia Southard Gourlay, "'O my most sared lady': Female Metaphor in *The Winter's Tale*," *ELR* 5 (1975):394-95.

Gave hope thou wast in being, have preserv'd
Myself to see the issue.¹¹

Hermione's statuesque pose is at best analogous to the sleeps of Thaisa in *Pericles*, of Imogen in *Cymbeline*, and of many another Sleeping Beauty. It is a standard feature of romance—non-Christian and Christian—enshrined in a thousand stories from ancient times to the present. Again, to work with the full play in its many informative contexts helps to remind us that the statue scene represents much more than faith in personal immortality. To judge, in particular, from the various scenes of waking sleepers and of art ceremonies interrupted by intrusive “life” in the late plays, Shakespeare was less intent upon proofs of immortality than upon showing ways in which waking and dreaming, truth and illusion, life and art interpenetrate and create each other's meanings. In the romances, disenchantment soon proves itself a dream. In the romances, smaller revels dissolve but only into grander ones. To apprehend the vastness of the process may help to save us from naive, polar commitments. It may also help us to awaken our own dreams of faith.

Though past critics have sometimes responded to *The Winter's Tale* with admiration and delight, modern interpreters are the first to intimate that the play presents a radical, shocking, soaring vision of regeneration and redemption that may take lasting hold upon readers and watchers. What has been for a long time the play's tragicomic veil of strangeness may now be parting, like Paulina's curtain before the statue, to reveal life within re-creating art, an art that might impel us some way past illusion, maya, and bafflements of hope. My main purpose here is to make more accessible for readers and spectators of *The Winter's Tale* its artful life, its vital grandeur, its plain humanity, its lasting countenance of affection.

11. J. H. P. Pafford, ed., *The Winter's Tale*, Arden ed. (London: Methuen, 1963), 5. 3. 125. All references from this edition are cited by act, scene, and initial line numbers, unless noted otherwise. Quotations from Shakespeare's other works follow the *Complete Works*, Alfred Harbage, gen. ed., Rev. Pelican ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1969).

Chapter II.

Views and Reviews

Viewers and readers of *The Winter's Tale*, both past and potential ones, may profit from considering certain selected responses to the play, responses recorded through time since the play's inception. Though the history of such responses is, in part, a history of truncated performances and distorted readings that tell us more about tastes of the times than tests of the play's worth, still, our perceptions of past inadequacies imply an image of potential wholeness. We see, for example, that Garrick's pastoral pastiche fails to satisfy fully because the audience was not made to suffer a near-tragic confinement and waste before the pastoral; the audience was not asked to experience three acts that make the pastoral deeply refreshing. We see that the Victorian *Winter's Tale* isolated Hermione and Leontes in tableaux scenes and bravura set speeches, to promote character and spectacle at the expense of scenic continuities and progress of the action, to make the play solid and heavy in terms of personalities but void of that great ascent through related climaxes—accusation, trial, betrothal, and statue scene—to which the text so plainly bears witness. We see that recent interpretations of the play as “pastoral” and “romance” have emphasized its skeletal affinities with literary, often nondramatic, traditions but have also neglected the play's peculiar dramatic structure and its particular rhetorical strategies.

Stage history, by itself, presents a limited guide to what has been made of the play. For centuries, readers of Shakespeare's works have been at least as numerous as viewers, so that responses to the printed play and to writings of others about it have influenced both productions of and responses to the presented play. If we seek to inform our own responses as both spectators and readers, we need to know not only how the play has been conceived and received in production but also how the play has affected readers. To this end, the shaping or educating of response to *The Winter's Tale*, I trace a selective history

here of its life among significant producers, actors, spectators, and readers.

The Jacobean Winter's Tale

I

The first recorded performance of *The Winter's Tale* took place on 15 May 1611, at which time Simon Forman, an astrologer and doctor, wrote this account of it:

In the Winters Talle at the glob 1611 the 15 of maye ^u [i.e., Wed.] Obserue ther howe Lyontes the kinge of Cicillia was overcom w^t Jelosy of his wife with the kinge of Bohemia his frind that came to see him. and howe he Contriued his death and wold haue had his cup berer to haue poisoned. who gaue the king of bohemia warning therof & fled with him to bohemia / Remēber also howe he sent to the Orakell of appollo & the Aunswer of apollo. that she was giltles. and that the king was Jelouse &c and howe Except the Child was found Again that was loste the kinge should die without yssue. for the Child was caried into bohemia & ther laid in a forrest & brought vp by a sheppard And the kinge of bohemiā his sonn married that wentch & howe they fled into Cicillia to Leontes. and the sheppard hauing showed the letter of the nobleman by whom Leontes sent a was that child and the Jewells found about her. she was knowen to be Leontes daughter and was then 16 yers old

Remember also the Rog that cam in all tottered like coll pixci/. and howe he feyned him sicke & to haue bin Robbed of all that he had and howe he cosoned the por man of all his money. and after cam to the shep sher with a pedlers packe & ther cosoned them Again of all their money And howe he changed apparrell w^t the kinge of bomia his sonn. and then howe he turned Courtiar &c / beware of trustinge feined beggars or fawninge fellowss¹

Did Forman see substantially the same play as that printed in the First Folio? He mentions no statue scene. He has Perdita carried "into" Bohemia and laid in a "forrest" instead of being left on shore; perhaps he infers a forest from the presence of the Bear, but he fails to mention him.² He says that Perdita and

1. As transcribed from Bodleian manuscript, Ashmole 208, F. 201v–202r, by J. H. P. Pafford, ed., *The Winter's Tale*, Arden ed. (London: Methuen, 1963), pp. xxi–xxii.

2. The so-called Padua First Folio Promptbook, perhaps used by amateurs performing in England circa 1625, indicates no appearance of the Bear. Gwynne Blakemore Evans, ed., *Shakespearean Promptbooks of the Seventeenth Century* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1963), Vol. 2, pt. 2.

Florizel marry in Bohemia, whereas, in the Folio version, their attempt to marry is thwarted by Polixenes. He also misquotes the Oracle which, in the text, refers only to "that which is lost" (3. 2. 135). Still, the play Forman reports is recognizably ours.

How may Forman's account affect our conception of the play? Whatever he saw, it is clear that Autolycus was, from the first, mightily impressive and quite capable of stealing the show, at least to the didactically minded. And Forman's specification of the lost "Child" instead of the more vague "that which is lost" suggests how easily and quickly spectator and critic may lessen the full complexity of dramatic ambiguity. But the report of the play does not necessarily distort the experience. Though Forman does not mention Time's speech, for example, saying merely that Perdita was "laid in a forrest & brought vp by a sheppard," nonetheless, so calm a reduction of sixteen years to an ampersand may only indicate that he, like others, was totally unconcerned about the unity of time. It may also point to a rapid pace and to a seamless continuity in performance.

Though Forman, who summarized in similar style two other Shakespearean productions, seems to have been insensitive to broader emotional and intellectual meanings beyond plot outline and moral lessons, his words supply a useful point of view. He covers the essential action with little hint of the remorse or the laughter, the music or the beauty. If one knew no more about the play than Forman's account, one would assume that it consisted mainly of jealousy, attempted poisoning, flight, and cozening. Neither the penitence arising out of the trial, nor the "mirth o' th' feast," nor the waking of Hermione is mentioned though each contributes vitally to the final reunion and spirit of reconciliation. Forman's example is the first of many to show how easily, in the case of *The Winter's Tale*, one may learn the plot only to lose much of the play. On the other hand, it is useful to be reminded that the play does work, at least partly, in realistic and solid terms: emotions of fight and flight and the functional objects upon which Forman centers his attention—money, peddler's pack, oracle, letter, jewels, ragged costumes, and other apparel. Beneath whatever romantic or mythic gloss one may put on the play, there remains its familiar physical action, which was much in evidence at the Globe, at least to one Jacobean spectator.

Not only does Forman remind us that the play proceeds through the factuality of common emotions and objects, he