

Modern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

William Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale



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The Winter's Tale

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Harold Bloom

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Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the best critical essays available upon Shakespeare's late pastoral romance, *The Winter's Tale*. The essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Katherine Treadwell for her devoted labor in helping me to edit this volume.

My introduction contrasts the nihilistic, projective jealousy of Leontes with the value-conferring generosity of Perdita. G. Wilson Knight begins the chronological sequence of criticism with his rather Wordsworthian reading of the play, in which a continuity between past and present is realized anew as an act of healing for the self. In a study of repetition as a mode by which good and evil mutually restrain one another, James Edward Siemon presents the play's earlier and later movements as a dialectic of something rather less than healing.

L. C. Knights, exploring the image of "integration" in *The Winter's Tale*, looks carefully at the question of the relevance of psychoanalytic criticism to the play. In a very positive reading, Carol Thomas Neely commends the play for its healthy sexuality, and for allowing its women a fully human status. Studying tragic structure in this late Shakespearean romance, Charles Frey finds an element he can judge tragic in the drama's effect upon its audience, particularly the hunger it stimulates in them for the "comfort of awakening faith."

Anne Barton considers *The Winter's Tale* as an amalgam of several kinds of fiction, while Louis L. Martz relates the play to the entire Renaissance enterprise of Humanism. In this book's final essay, Richard Studing revises the customary view of the pastoral scene in act 4, finding in it darker elements than

“the simplicity, naturalness, and pristine values of Bohemia,” in which the pretenses and conflicts of that idealized country are exposed.

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Introduction

I

Winter's tales, then and now, tend to be wild chronicles, fantastic stories told by the fireside. Once accounted a comedy, Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* is now considered a romance, together with *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* before it and *The Tempest* beyond it. Granted that the comedy of one era is hardly that of another, it would still be difficult to think of *The Winter's Tale* as a comedy. Yet we think of *Measure for Measure* as a comedy (a "problem play" is not a genre), and there are dark affinities between it and *The Winter's Tale*. In *The Winter's Tale* everything again is beyond absurdity, ranging from a spectacularly unexpected, paranoid jealousy and murderousness to the resurrection of the statue as the living Hermione. The Shakespeare who writes *The Winter's Tale* might almost be Anthony Burgess's Shakespeare in *Nothing like the Sun* and Enderby's *Dark Lady*. This is an overtly outrageous Shakespeare, deliberately provoking to fury his empirical friend and rival, Ben Jonson, by giving Bohemia a sea-coast.

On that spurious coast poor Antigonus exits, pursued by a bear, in a stage direction worthy of Groucho Marx. As with *Measure for Measure*, all that matters is the staging of a fantastic story, an entertainment so designed that it allows for a totally original and most powerful meditation upon death in *Measure for Measure*, and in *The Winter's Tale* allows for the pastoral phantasmagoria of act 4 and for our enchantment by Perdita. Perdita, I will venture, is the play, the goddess Flora incarnated in a personality so fresh and winning that reality cannot hold out against her. She is everything in herself, while happily not needing to know it, whereas Leontes moves towards madness because he fears that he is nothing in

himself, a fear which he projects upon everyone and everything else:

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.

One dozen rhetorical questions, followed by six assertions of total nihilism, is an astonishing structure for a speech, yet marvelously appropriate for a descent through sudden and wholly irrational jealousy into the death drive. Othello has Iago, but Leontes has nothing:

Affection! thy intention stabs the centre.
Thou dost make possible things not so held,
Communicat'st with dreams (how can this be?),
With what's unreal thou co-active art,
And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent
Thou mayst co-join with something, and thou dost
(And that beyond commission), and I find it
(And that to the infection of my brains
And hard'ning of my brows).

Hallett Smith, in the very useful *Riverside Shakespeare*, reads “affection” here not as “desire” but as Leontes’ own jealousy. Probably both readings are right, since Leontes’ projected jealousy is also his own unruly desire, a return of repressed bisexuality, with its deep need for betrayal. Shakespeare’s beautiful irony is that “affection” here is meant by Leontes as the sexual drive of the supposed lovers, yet manifestly projects his own murderous jeal-

ousy. For a romance to begin with a paranoid siege of jealousy is profoundly appropriate, and demonstrates Shakespeare to be Proust's (and Freud's) largest precursor. *The Winter's Tale*, even as a title, becomes a story of projected jealousy and its antidote, whose name is Perdita.

II

Even Shakespeare has nothing else as ecstatic as act 4 of *The Winter's Tale*, which has established one of the limits of literature as an art. Autolycus is one kind of splendor, setting the context by bold contrast to "an art / Which does mend Nature—change it rather; but / The art itself is Nature." That art is Perdita's nature, and becomes Florizel's:

PER: O Proserpina,
For the flow'rs now, that, frightened, thou let'st fall
From Dis's waggon! daffadils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets, dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primeroses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength (a malady
Most incident to maids); bold oxlips, and
The crown imperial; lilies of all kinds
(The flow'r-de-luce being one). O, these I lack,
To make you garlands of, and my sweet friend,
To strew him o'er and o'er!

FLO: What? like a corse?

PER: No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on;
Not like a corse; or if—not to be buried,
But quick and in mine arms. Come, take your flow'rs.
Methinks I play as I have seen them do
In Whitsun pastorals. Sure this robe of mine
Does change my disposition.

FLO: 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 ord'ring 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.

One sees why Florizel might take the risk of "a wild dedication of yourselves / To unpath'd waters, undream'd shores." Rosalie Colie usefully traced some of the Shakespearean originalities in regard to pastoral conventions here. I myself would emphasize how little really any conventions of pastoral suit either Perdita's art-exalted nature or Florizel's as he is influenced by her. Perdita incants more like a mortal goddess, Flora, than like an earthly maiden, while the inspired Florizel celebrates her like an Elizabethan John Keats. It takes an extraordinary effort to keep in mind that Perdita is invoking absent flowers, rather than actual, natural presences. Those "daffadils, violets, primeroses, oxlips, lilies" are not seasonal, due to Proserpina's failure of nerve, and so Perdita's great declaration is a kind of litany of negations, and yet makes a wholly positive effect, upon the audience as upon her lover. When she cries out, with marvelous boldness: "Come, take your flow'rs," she substitutes her own body for the floral tribute she has conveyed only through its absence. Startled as she herself is by her unaccustomed and only apparent lack of modesty, she provokes Florizel's ecstatic defense of her ontological goodness, as it were. I can think of no comparable praise by a lover to his beloved, anywhere in Western literature since the song that was Solomon's.

The deepest aesthetic puzzle (and strength) of *The Winter's Tale* remains its extraordinary originality, striking even for Shakespeare. In a drama where everything is incongruous, everything works together to conclude in a new mode of congruity:

If this be magic, let it be an art
 Lawful as eating.

If eating has become yet another art that itself is Nature, then we tremble on the verge of an aesthetic that, by magic, will con-

sume Nature. Jealousy will vanish away, and with it our darkest tendency, which is to react to any declaration that we are alive, by hooting at it, like an old tale. *The Winter's Tale* evidently exists to tell us that, it appears, we live, though yet we speak not.

“Great Creating Nature”: An Essay on *The Winter's Tale*

G. Wilson Knight

But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die; and that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: but God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body.

All flesh is not the same flesh; but there is one kind of flesh of men, another flesh of beasts, another of fishes and another of birds. There are also celestial bodies and bodies terrestrial: but the glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another. There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the stars; for one star differeth from another star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead.

I Corinthians 15:35

In *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare handles a similar narrative to that of *Pericles* with the infusion of a closer and more realistic human concern and a tightening of dramatic conflict. Pericles experiences a sense of evil followed by unmerited suffering; Leontes sins and endures a purgatory of guilt. Here the sackcloth and ashes of Pericles' martyrdom are given a profounder relevance.

The Winter's Tale has had a poor showing in commentary, having seldom been regarded as more than an inconsequential romance with fine bits of poetry; while even those who, during recent years, have regarded it as a serious reading of human affairs, have avoided, or slurred over, as though un-at-home with its nature, the

crucial and revealing event to which the whole action moves: the resurrection of Hermione.

The play is in three main sections. The first is tragic; the second pastoral; the third must for the present be left undefined. There is a strong suggestion throughout of season-myth, with a balance of summer against winter. Evil passions, storm, and shipwreck are contrasted with young love and humour. Maturity and death are set against birth and resurrection.

The action opens with a short prose dialogue between Camillo and Archidamus in which the simplicities of Bohemia are contrasted with the luxuries of Sicilia. The contrast is not later developed, and more important are the following remarks on maturity and youth. Leontes and Polixenes "were trained together in their childhoods," though since separated by "mature" responsibilities (1.1.24-35). The picture is completed by thought of the boy Mamillius:

CAMILLO: It is a gallant child; one that indeed physics the subject, makes old hearts fresh; they that went on crutches ere he was born desire yet their life to see him a man.

ARCHIDAMUS: Would they else be content to die?
(1.1.42)

Youth is conceived as a power; as a renewer of life and antagonist to death. Thus early is the central theme of *The Winter's Tale* set before us.

Polixenes also has a son whom he "longs to see" (1.1.34), but Hermione presses his stay, asking about his and her own lord's youth together and of their "tricks" as "pretty lordings." He answers:

POLIXENES: We were, fair queen,
Two lads that thought there was no more
behind,
But such a day to-morrow as to-day,
And to be boy eternal.

HERMIONE: Was not my lord the verier wag o' the two?

POLIXENES: We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i'
the sun,
And bleat the one at the other; what we
chang'd
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not