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"THE WINTER'S TALE" AS AN EXPERIMENT IN FORM

I

Only within the past thirty years have Shakespeare's late comedies come to be fully appreciated. It seems clear that the rehabilitation of these plays represents not merely a shift in taste, but a genuinely increased understanding of what the poet was trying to do. But as often with Shakespearean criticism there has been a time-lag between the demonstration of a new approach and its assimilation into general use at school, or even university, level. *The Winter's Tale* is still sometimes condemned in the terms which were used before L. S. Bethell¹ or Wilson Knight² had written their accounts of the play. In other words the current academic view is not sufficiently established to be taken for granted. So the present essay, which is intended both to amplify and to question this view, must begin by restating it.

Until well into the present century the play was regarded as a confused work. In his Introduction to the Cambridge edition (1931) Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch claimed: "... the tragedy and comedy are not woven; its first and second halves are disparate..."³

This disparity was remarked by at least two other editors, though significantly they described it in different terms. M. R. Ridley, in the New Temple edition, asserts: "... not all Shakespeare's dramatic skill... can really persuade us that the first half of the play is more than a rather unskilful introduction to the second half"⁴. But the Arden editor declares: "The Bohemian pastoral of Act IV is a delightful intermezzo rather than an integral part of the main action"⁵.

The three editors, however, are at least in agreement in finding *The Winter's Tale* an inadmissible mixture of tragic and comic.

¹ *The Winter's Tale. A Study*, 1946.

² In *The Crown of Life*, 1947. Relevant studies by other authors include Derek Traversi's *Shakespeare: The Last Phase*, 1954, and E. M. W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's Last Plays*, 1938.

³ P. xxv.

⁴ 1935 (repr. 1952), p. x.

⁵ Introduction to the unrevised ed., p. xxi.

The recent rehabilitation of the play has in effect depended on establishing that *The Winter's Tale*, in common with the other late 'Romances', represents not a tragedy or comedy manqué, but a separate genre involving elements of both. Interestingly, many particular and detailed criticisms of the play can be refuted if this viewpoint is adopted. The justification of the play as a whole, in terms of genre, can also be made the justification of its parts.

It might be convenient, at this point, to list the main specific charges levelled against *The Winter's Tale*:

In the words of M. R. Ridley (though he speaks here for many other commentators): 1) "... the sudden and frantic blazing up of Leontes' jealousy is improbable to the point of absurdity..."⁶; 2) the sixteen-year time-gap in the middle of the play is a clumsy device⁷; 3) the introduction of Time as a chorus is a desperate contrivance necessitated by this gap⁸; 4) the disposal of Antigonus by means of a bear is ludicrously inappropriate⁹; 5) the failure to show on stage the reunion of Leontes and Perdita is a piece of theatrical laziness¹⁰.

The attribution of *The Winter's Tale* to a new genre seems to solve these problems by rejecting the traditional assumption that it operates on the same level of reality as the great comedies and tragedies. Once it is seen as a symbolic work, deliberately incorporating elements of near-fantasy, all the objections listed above can be explained away.

II

The received academic view of *The Winter's Tale* still permits disagreement as to detail. The following interpretation of the play might therefore be questioned by certain authorities on certain particular points, but the general outline would surely be accepted. This reading of the play, though it agrees largely with the findings of L. S. Bethell, was in fact worked out independently, and amplified by discussion with Professor Nevill Coghill.

Leontes' jealousy is not to be interpreted realistically. Shakespeare has specifically suppressed the possible motives to be found in his original, *Pandosto*. The suddenness of Leontes' fury, and its lack of reason, are intended to suggest that the play is not anatomising a particular case of jealousy, but saying something about sin in general. Suddenly and irrationally Leontes is infected with evil as with a sickness.

⁶ New Temple ed., p. x.

⁷ E. g. Cambridge ed., p. xix; Robert Bridges, *Collected Essays*, 1927, p. 22.

⁸ E. g. Cambridge ed., p. xix; Bethell, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

⁹ E. g. Cambridge ed., p. xx; Walter Raleigh, *Shakespeare*, 1907, pp. 137-8.

¹⁰ This was the view of, among others, Dr. Johnson and Hartley Coleridge; see Variorum ed., p. 278; cf. also Cambridge ed., p. xxiii.

Something rather similar happens in *Macbeth*¹¹, and a comparison with the earlier play sheds an interesting light on *The Winter's Tale*. When Macbeth first begins to yield to the temptations of the Witches he becomes so lost in reflection that he completely ignores his companions. "Look how our partner's rapt"¹²— comments Banquo. Leontes, in the first throes of his passion, becomes similarly self-absorbed. Hermione and Polixenes notice his distraction:

Pol. What means Sicilia?

Her. He something seems unsettled.

Pol.

How, my lord!

Leo. What cheer? how is't with you, best brother?

Her.

You look

As if you held a brow of much distraction...¹³

Again, Macbeth, after murdering Duncan, cannot sleep, and thinks to restore his rest by killing Banquo:

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly...¹⁴

It is for a similar reason that Leontes seeks to have Hermione executed:

Nor night, nor day, no rest: it is but weakness
To bear the matter thus; more weakness. If
The cause were not in being... part o'th'cause,
She th'adulteress... for the harlot king
Is quite beyond mine arm, out of the blank
And level of my brain: plot-proof: but she
I can hook to me: say that she were gone,
Given to the fire, a moiety of my rest
Might come to me again...¹⁵

Like Macbeth Leontes begins with a single weakness—in his case jealousy—and is led deeper and deeper into evil. In a short time he is plotting murder and all but committing infanticide. Finally he perpetrates blasphemy.

Leontes, however, is given a chance to atone for the wrongs he has done. After announcing the death of Hermione Paulina tells him:

... betake thee
To nothing but despair... A thousand knees
Ten thousand years together, naked, fasting,
Upon a barren mountain, and still winter

¹¹ In both plays evil is constantly described in terms of disease images.

¹² Cambridge ed., I, iii, 142.

¹³ Cambridge ed., I, ii, 146 ff.

¹⁴ III, ii, 16 ff.

¹⁵ II, iii, 1 ff.

In storm perpetual, could not move the gods
To look that way thou wert¹⁶.

But despite this gloomy prognostication the gods do look the way of Leontes, to the extent of restoring his 'dead' wife and returning his lost daughter. Because his repentance is real and lasting, grace and happiness are eventually recovered. The play mingles tragedy and comedy in order to show how through penance the evil implicit in the former can be overcome by the good implicit in the latter.

The immediate means of redemption for Leontes is very clear. At his worst he still possesses a residual humanity which restrains him from actual infanticide. In giving Perdita a chance of life he gives himself a chance of salvation. His sixteen years of atonement eventually make him worthy of this chance. Perdita's growth parallels his spiritual regeneration, and her final return symbolises his total recovery.

Mamillius, who has been shown as the type of childish innocence¹⁷, perishes at the culminating point of Leontes' wrongdoing: the news of his death immediately follows the king's blasphemous rejection of the oracle. Leontes' first reaction is to cry:

Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves
Do strike at my injustice¹⁸.

The death of Mamillius images the spiritual death—the mortal sin—of his father.

Now it is emphasised that Florizel is very much a counterpart of Mamillius¹⁹. When he eventually arrives at the Sicilian court Paulina comments:

... Had our prince
(Jewel of children) seen this hour, he had paired
Well with this lord; there was not a full month
Between their births²⁰.

Florizel, then, united with Leontes through marriage to Perdita, represents innocence rediscovered.

A still more important theme is embodied in the 'death' of Hermione, and her seemingly miraculous restoration. If Mamillius symbolises innocence then Hermione, as her character suggests and as the text hints²¹, symbolises Grace—the grace which Leontes seems to have lost forever through sin, but which he finds again through repentance. It is not for nothing that the statue scene has religious overtones —

¹⁶ III, ii, 208 ff.

¹⁷ Cf. II, I, i, 32 ff., III, ii, 193 ff. And NB I, ii, 151 ff., where his son's appearance reminds Leontes of his own innocent boyhood, which has been referred to previously by Polixenes (I, ii, 67 ff).

¹⁸ III, ii, 145-146.

¹⁹ Cf. II, I, ii, 163 ff.

²⁰ V, i, 115 ff.

²¹ E. g. at I, ii, 99; II, i, 121-122; V, iii, 26-27; cf. Traversi, *op. cit.*, p. 120-121.

... It is requir'd
You do awake your faith...²² —

for it is emblematic of the miracle of Divine grace.

To complete the symbolic pattern: Hermione is sustained throughout her sixteen years of hiding by Paulina, while Florizel and Perdita are united through Camillo's agency. Both Paulina and the 'priest-like' Camillo, of course, were bold in defying Leontes during his jealous fit. Between them they figure conscience, and their eventual marriage is not, as has sometimes been claimed²³, a shotgun wedding in the interests of the happy ending, but a symbolic union.

III

It will be seen that this reading of the play disposes of some of the traditional objections almost automatically. Leontes' jealousy is left motiveless deliberately. The sixteen-year time gap is necessary to prove the reality of Leontes' repentance. The reunion of Perdita and her father is not shown on stage because the attention of the audience must be concentrated on the still more important reunion to follow.

But it remains to be shown that Shakespeare has not only written a symbolic play but has composed it in such a manner as to impel the appropriate kind of reaction. Since, according to the modern reading, *The Winter's Tale* would seem to have been misinterpreted for several hundred years, the burden of proof here is a heavy one. But there is evidence of at least three kinds to be adduced.

First, the diction has been carefully stylised. In their early exchanges Hermione and Polixenes use an otund court language, heavy with conceits. Subsequently Hermione's utterances, first at her arrest and then at her trial, are public ones, naturally formal in style. The result is that she is too little individualised to attract the personal kind of sympathy which an audience feels for Desdemona. Even Camillo, who is compelled to speak his mind directly, is scarcely characterised by his form of words. Compared with those of Kent, to take an obvious parallel, his speeches have an anonymous quality. In the same way the language of Perdita and Florizel, though often beautiful, reveals nothing of their private personalities. Many of their speeches might, without incongruity, be interchanged with some of Miranda's or Ferdinand's from *The Tempest*.

Leontes might seem an exception to this stylistic rule. It is true that his early speeches have a spasmodic, contorted quality that is very characteristic, but at this time he is 'in distemper'. When he recovers from his jealous madness he reverts to a neutral, kingly idiom that bears little relation to his previous violent utterances.

²² V, iii, 94-95.

²³ Cf. Bridges, *op. cit.*, p. 22: '... Leontes busies himself in finding a husband for the aged and unattractive Paulina'.

What all this means is that the characters in *The Winter's Tale* have been denied the individual life of those in the great tragedies. Their speeches have been carefully depersonalised in order to give the speakers a wider significance. If in the past they were analysed as three-dimensional figures in the traditional Shakespearean manner, this was against the evidence of the language they are made to use. The hero and heroine are clearly intended to emerge less as 'Leontes' and 'Hermione' than as 'a jealous king' and 'a gracious queen'.

This fact corresponds usefully with a further aspect of the play. Shakespeare has deliberately invested it with the atmosphere of a fairy-story. The title, of course, suggests this in itself, and so does the repeated admission that the events of the last act are like 'an old tale'²⁴. If the play is seen in this light, various elements in it open to criticism on factual or logical grounds can be defended as deliberately fanciful. It seems probable, for instance, that Shakespeare realised the implausibility of a father successfully disguising himself from his own son, and was familiar with the fact that Bohemia had no sea-coast.

The general issue is an important one because the plot of the play is fantastic in its very nature. Hermione has to remain in hiding for sixteen years. Antigonus perishes on land at the same instant as his companions perish at sea. Florizel chances to meet, and fall in love with, the only shepherd's daughter in Bohemia who happens to be in reality an abandoned princess. It is true that the coincidences and deceptions involved are only a degree more far-fetched than those in some of the comedies, but in the earlier plays these unlikelihoods occur in a context remote from death and tragic feeling. In *The Winter's Tale* it is a question of which factors determine the general mood of the story. It is vital to the success of the play that the romantic excesses of the plot should be felt to distance and mollify the seriousness of the early scenes.

A third important point is that certain calculated stage effects emphasise both the unreality and the symbolic quality of what is taking place. The appearance of Time, for example, not only reminds the audience that what they are watching is no more than a fairytale — it also implies the nature of the recovery which Leontes is to make.

It has been pointed out that the much criticised bear, so far from being a miscalculation, is a brilliant mechanism for switching the mood of the play from tragic to comic²⁵. In an earlier scene Shakespeare uses a visual device of a different kind to demonstrate the nature and degree of Leontes' fall from grace²⁶. Paulina places his new-born child on the ground and challenges him to take it up. Leontes refuses. The sense of spiritual crisis is heightened when Paulina retires and the entire court

²⁴ V, ii, 59; iii, 117.

²⁵ See Nevill Coghill's *Six Points of Stagecraft* in "The Winter's Tale", "Shakespeare Survey", 1958, pp. 31 ff.

²⁶ II, iii.

kneels²⁷, while Leontes, standing over the child, debates the decision that is to determine the fate of his own soul:

Shall I live on, to see this bastard kneel
And call me father? better burn it now
Than curse it then... But be it: let it live...
It shall not neither...²⁸

The scene brings home to the audience, as words alone could not, that Leontes' sin is no mere freak of jealousy, but a comprehensive failure of love. The central issue of the play is generalised into something larger, less personal.

Later the child is again made the focus of the play's symbolic meaning. When Antigonus is chased off by the bear²⁹ and the infant Perdita is left lying alone on the stage, the action has virtually come to a standstill. Mamillius is dead, Hermione is believed dead, and Leontes has fallen into despair. At this point, the wasp-waist of the play, only the presence of the baby on the stage promises further development of any kind. The episode is another reminder that this is a play in which the destiny of the leading characters is in a special sense outside their hands.

But the most famous stroke of dramaturgy in the play is, of course, the statue scene. Professor Coghill has shown³⁰ that the purpose of the dramatist is to ensure that the audience, after the first shock of seeing a lifelike Hermione, are 'reconvinced against hope that she is a statue'. Ultimately Shakespeare explains away the resuscitation: Hermione had merely been hiding out for sixteen years. But to the theatre audience, as to Leontes, the effect is that of a miracle. Just as Hermione's survival seems outside the limits of human possibility to Leontes, so to the audience it is something outside the limits of normal dramatic convention. The reconciliation has not been achieved by action and planning. It is a dispensation from without. Once more, and most powerfully, Shakespeare has declared the nature of his play.

It is not simply the case, then, that *The Winter's Tale* is a work that could be interpreted symbolically by a sympathetic commentator. The nature of its diction, plot and stage effects unambiguously establishes what kind of play Shakespeare is writing.

IV

This is as far as the argument usually goes. If the play is considered from the right point of view, it is claimed, everything falls into place. *The Winter's Tale* emerges as a self-consistent and successful work of art in a new form.

A simple acceptance of these arguments, however, begs certain questions, not only about the play itself but about the quality of the genre it is held to represent.

²⁷ The stage-direction is written into the dialogue at II, iii, 153.

²⁸ II, iii, 155 ff.

²⁹ III, iii, 58.

³⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 39-40.

Before these questions are considered it must be admitted that there is some difficulty in assigning the play to a genre. In *Cymbeline* and *Pericles*, not to mention earlier works such as *Measure for Measure*, a serious situation involving a crucial moral issue is brought to a happy conclusion. And these plays, too, proceed in allegorical terms. The difference in *The Winter's Tale* is that the hero is taken not only to the brink, but apparently over the brink, of moral catastrophe. If Leontes committed suicide at the end of Act III the play would be a tragedy — a meaningless one, but still a tragedy — a kind of miniature *Othello*. It could be argued either that this fact places the work in a different genre from its allegorical predecessors, or that it merely puts it in a sub-section of the same genre. But even on the former reading *The Winter's Tale* is so close to the plays of the companion group that any weaknesses of form it reveals are likely to be significant for them also.

However defined, the genre is clearly one that has tempted few practitioners. This fact goes far towards explaining why *The Winter's Tale* was misunderstood for so long, but it also suggests that there may be certain difficulties or even failings implicit in the genre. Since some modern champions of Shakespeare's play have implied that to understand it must be to admire it³¹, this possibility may be in some danger of being overlooked.

It is to be noted, initially, that since it involves two complete plays the form in question presents certain technical difficulties. It will be harder for the dramatist to provide the requisite background information for his plot or plots, since so much more of it will be necessary. In *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare has to resort to some rather crude passages of information-giving³² — crude, for example, in that a speaker may be saying something that his companion already knows, and that therefore has significance only for the theatre audience. It is obviously with this sort of consideration in mind that S. L. Bethell speaks pejoratively of one of Camillo's speeches (IV, iii, 505 ff.) as a soliloquy 'with more than a tinge of direct address'³³. Professor Coghill comments in reply; "As for direct address, its use has been among the chief glories of drama from Aeschylus to T. S. Eliot..."³⁴

This is certainly true, but the problem, as far as *The Winter's Tale* and by inference the genre as a whole, is concerned, is rather a special one. The context in general is sufficiently unrealistic to permit a good deal of latitude in the use of stage techniques. Since there is almost twice as much scene-setting to be done as in an orthodox drama, it is convenient for the dramatist to be able to use direct address and redundant dialogue. But there is surely a risk of his becoming too permissive, and allowing himself to write and construct too laxly. Some of the passages of information-giving in *The Winter's Tale* might be held to lay Shakespeare open to this charge.

³¹ Cf. for example, Traversi, *op. cit.*, p. 192: 'It would be hard to find, even in Shakespeare, a more profound purpose more consistently carried out to its proper conclusion'.

³² E. g. I, i, 20 ff.; II, iii, 12 ff.; IV, ii, 4 ff.; V, ii, 111 ff.

³³ *Op. cit.*, pp. 48–49.

³⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 36.

The scope of this relatively minor criticism can be damagingly extended. There are some improbabilities, some loose ends of construction, in *The Winter's Tale*, which clearly have no bearing on the fairy-tale atmosphere, and tend rather to give the play a frayed, disjointed quality. To take a few examples at random: Archidamus, the first speaker in the play, though presumably a leading Bohemian nobleman, never reappears after the opening scene. Camillo, who addresses Archidamus in elaborate court prose, is elsewhere made to speak rather straightforward verse. Antigonus and Paulina, two of the major characters in the first part of the play, make no appearance until well into the second act. The fact that they are husband and wife emerges belatedly and indirectly³⁵. Polixenes and Camillo fly from Sicilia without apparently recognising the fact that their sudden disappearance will compromise Hermione. Nothing in Polixenes' character as revealed in Act I prepares the audience for his brutal attack on Perdita and the Old Shepherd. The truth about Perdita's parentage is conveniently concealed until the dramatically appropriate moment — but only because Perdita and Florizel succumb to chronic seasickness³⁶.

One way of replying to these and similar complaints might be to reiterate that the play is deliberately fantastic as to detail. But there is clearly a limit to the validity of an argument which might otherwise be used to justify any kind of crudity in the play down to a level of actual incoherence.

The greatest technical problem posed by the plot of the play is, of course, the time-gap. And it seems clear that such a gap is virtually a sine qua non of this kind of drama. The greater the sin into which the hero falls the longer, naturally, must be his road to atonement. The terms of Shakespeare's symbolism preclude any shortcut to recovered grace. In *The Tempest* he tries a different solution: the play begins after the requisite lapse of time, and the past evil is recalled in a theatrical equivalent to the film flashback. There is a long scene of information-giving (I, ii) more obvious, and far more tedious, than anything of the kind in *The Winter's Tale*. But the earlier play avoids such longueurs at the price of a tremendous theatrical jolt. At the end of three acts all the main characters except Leontes and Paulina have dispersed or died. And Leontes, being in a state of despair, has dried up as a source of dramatic action. When the play proceeds after Time's speech the audience has to apply its interest and sympathy to a new group of characters in a new context. Certainly it can be argued that the play survives the jolt, but it is notable that Shakespeare avoids repeating the experiment in *The Tempest*, and it is doubtful if any dramatist but he could make a success of it in any play.

It must be stressed that the time-gap is criticised here not for formal reasons, but because it strains and disperses audience interest. The risk is even greater than it might first appear in that Shakespeare's form practically deprives him of one of

³⁵ It would be too perversely Bradleyan to inquire about the fate of the three daughters mentioned by Antigonus (II, i, 143 ff)

³⁶ V, ii, 111 ff.

his usual means of providing such interest: complex characterisation and interaction between characters. The depersonalising method described in section III above is certainly appropriate to the kind of play Shakespeare is trying to write, but it should be equally clear that it involves certain losses. Hermione, Perdita, Florizel and Camillo are required to be neutrally virtuous: they are given no distracting personal idiosyncracies. (Paulina is at least permitted to be something of a scold). Polixenes is seen too little, and changes too suddenly, to emerge as an individual. Leontes himself is in some sense insane throughout the period in which he is at the centre of the play. After the crisis of Mamillius' death he withdraws into a lifetime of dignified repentance. He cannot, then, be said to have a recognisable personality in the sense that Othello and King Lear do³⁷.

The resultant loss is not limited to characterisation alone. In so far as the characters are less individualised and complex, relationships between them are also bound to sag. Camillo's protests to Leontes in Act I are not unlike those of Kent in the second scene of *King Lear*. But the episode as a whole is less gripping, since the protagonists are less powerfully defined. Obviously Shakespeare's ultimate intention in *The Winter's Tale* is different in kind, but the fact remains that the *King Lear* scene, as a scene, has a kind of energy which is missing from its counterpart in the later play. And Shakespeare offers nothing to compensate for this local loss. On the evidence of *The Winter's Tale* the genre he is attempting seems to suffer from a certain inherent lack of dramatic tension.

The characterisation of Leontes has several other drawbacks. Although he is the centre of interest for the first three acts, he is hardly the centre of sympathy. The play is not, therefore, an easy one for the audience to get into focus. Again, the lack of motive for Leontes' jealousy, however appropriate to the play's symbolic meaning, makes him a curiously empty figure. If there were some sort of reason in his madness it would provide a psychological pointer towards the man Leontes used to be. As it is, his emotions and actions are in effect meaningless, and on several occasions he seems frankly absurd³⁸. This is to some extent a deliberate device on Shakespeare's part: evil can make people ludicrous as well as ugly. But being neither rational, dignified nor even wholly formidable, Leontes does not make a commanding hero.

"Leontes is too bad, almost too silly, to be convincing" — comments M. R. Ridley³⁹. This essay has summarised the reasons for thinking that the character was

³⁷ Cf. H. B. Charlton, *Shakespearian Comedy*, p. 269: '*The Winter's Tale*, and most of all in its Leontes, plays with figures who are markedly lacking in the positive identity of personality which would stamp them as recognisably and consistently human.'; cf. also F. E. Halliday, *The Poetry of Shakespeare's Plays*, 1954, p. 173. The minor rustic characters, of course, are much more realistic in idiom and behaviour. But they represent conventional comic 'types', and are scarcely to be taken seriously as individuals.

³⁸ E. g. in II, iii, when he is being browbeaten by Paulina, or when he tells his courtiers (I. 146) 'You're liars all'.

³⁹ New Temple ed., p. x.

not supposed to be ‘convincing’ in the usual sense. But if the phrase ‘dramatically interesting’ were substituted the charge would be harder to refute.

It may be that in an ideal production of *The Winter's Tale* the actors would deliberately limit and stylise their performances to emphasise the two-dimensional, symbolic quality of the main characters. But the natural tendency is to feed a spurious personal life into them which adds to the liveliness of the performance as a whole even if it runs counter to the author's intentions. Perhaps such efforts are needed to counteract a certain lack of dramatic vitality in the play as conceived. The traditional misreading of *The Winter's Tale* is partly the result of ascribing to the characters a degree of reality which the play, in its very nature, cannot enable them to sustain. The genre demands a mode of characterisation disconcertingly less realistic than that of Shakespeare's greatest plays.

It follows that the diction is likely to be less powerful. It was suggested above that the stylisation of the language was a successful way of depersonalising the play and establishing its allegorical status. This, however, is another argument that cuts both ways. The fact that there is no pressure of personal expression to shape the verse means that the quality of the diction suffers. The language of *The Winter's Tale* betrays two almost antithetical weaknesses. In *King Lear*, because Kent, for example, has a distinct personality, even his most prosaic utterance is likely to have an appropriate verbal energy. But Camillo, as a more or less symbolic figure, reveals no such vigour. Except at moments of great emotional stress his speeches are relatively flat:

If you may please to think I love the king,
And through him what is nearest to him, which is
Your gracious self, embrace but my direction,
If your more ponderous and settled project
May suffer alteration. On mine honour
I'll point you where you shall have such receiving
As shall become your highness...⁴⁰

Polixenes, Leontes when he recovers his sanity, and Perdita and Florizel after their early poetic flights, are all likely to drop into the same neutral idiom. The verse may remain flexible and expressive, but it is in general a good deal less striking than that of the great tragedies.

On the other hand when the language does become tortuous or disjointed under emotional pressure the resulting unorthodoxies, unless self-justifying by reason of their intrinsic power, seem arbitrary, since there is no individuality in the speaker which could be held to give rise to them. Thus not only is Leontes' jealousy less interesting than Othello's but so — though comparably violent — is his language. The twists and turns of his speech cannot be taken to reflect personal nuances of feeling, since his ‘true personality’, unlike Othello's, remains obscure.

⁴⁰ IV, iv, 518 ff.

Other characters in the play sometimes use elaborate locutions for no obvious reason. Polixenes, for example:

Nine changes of the wat'ry star hath been
The shepherd's note since we have left our throne
Without a burden...⁴¹

Or Hermione:

I prithee tell me: cram's with praise, and make's
As fat as tame things: one good deed, dying tongueless,
Slaughters a thousand waiting upon that.
Our praises are our wages: you may ride's
With one soft kiss a thousand furlongs ere
With spur we heat an acre⁴².

And again:

... More than mistress of
Which comes to me in name of fault, I must not
At all acknowledge⁴³.

In none of these cases does the complexity of expression, imagery or word-order add anything significant to the bare sense of what is being said. Yet this looseness is hardly surprising. The usual control on Shakespeare's use of language, which is supplied by the demands of his powerfully individualised characters, is here missing. It is almost inevitable that the diction should at least sometimes wander towards a flat simplicity or a redundant complexity.

A final doubt about the possibilities of the genre is suggested by the nature of the happy ending to *The Winter's Tale*, which clearly involves a trick. With the statue scene Shakespeare produces the effect of a miracle without actually committing himself to a supernatural solution. The main deception arises not out of the scene itself, but from Antigonus' speech when he deposits Perdita on the shores of Bohemia⁴⁴. He says that the spirit of the queen has visited him, and that he is now convinced that she is dead. As far as the audience is concerned this clinches the fact of Hermione's demise⁴⁵. According to the rules Shakespeare seems to be following the dream must be taken seriously. To produce his startling ending he breaks the rules. This, however, is a device which will only work once. The statue scene achieves its effect precisely because it is unprecedented. How is a comparable solution to be found for further plays in the genre?

⁴¹ I, ii, 1 ff.

⁴² I, ii, 91 ff.

⁴³ III, ii, 59 ff. On the general point cf. Halliday, *op. cit.*, pp. 180–181.

⁴⁴ III, iii, 15 ff.

⁴⁵ Cf. Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies*, 1960, p. 297: 'This is proof beyond proof... Hermione is dead. Shakespeare has used his best means to tell us so.'

Answers to this and to one or two related questions are suggested by a consideration of Shakespeare's next play, *The Tempest*. Here, of course, there need be no resort to trickery since the hero is frankly accorded supernatural powers. The de-personalising process observable in *The Winter's Tale* is taken a step further. Prospero, with his magic skills and virtual omniscience, can scarcely be considered a 'character' in the traditional sense of the word. And Ariel and Caliban are specifically non-human figures.

The implication is that *The Winter's Tale*, even if it is held to be completely successful, is an unrepeatable achievement. It represents a balance between realism on the one hand, symbolism and the supernatural on the other, that could hardly be sustained in another play. If the late Romances are grouped together in a single genre it must be admitted that it is an unstable one, involving a difficult compromise between various kinds of effect. *The Winter's Tale* itself, though a remarkable feat of equilibrium, shows that the limiting effects of the genre on characterisation, and hence on language, constrict Shakespeare's greatest powers, and that the unreality which the form sanctions tempts him towards a debilitating technical laxity.

"OPOWIEŚĆ ZIMOWA" JAKO EKSPERYMENT W ZAKRESIE FORMY

STRESZCZENIE

Późne komedie Szekspira zaczęto w pełni doceniać dopiero w ciągu ostatnich lat trzydziestu. Nie jest to tylko wynikiem zmiany smaku, lecz także lepszego zrozumienia tego, co poeta chciał osiągnąć. Niniejsza praca zmierza do wyjaśnienia problemu *Opowieści Zimowej*.

Nawet w wieku XX sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, M. Ridley i redaktor wydania Arden uważali ją za twór nieudany, ni to komedię, ni to tragedię. Szczegółowe zarzuty były następujące: a) absurdalne nieprawdopodobieństwo naglej zazdrości Leontesa; b) szesnastoletnia przerwa w połowie sztuki; c) wprowadzenie Czasu jako chóru; d) śmieszność we wprowadzeniu niedźwiedzia dla pozbycia się Antagonusa; e) nie wykorzystanie na scenie zejścia się Leontesa i Perdity.

Nowszy pogląd uznaje w *Opowieści* osobny gatunek, łączący elementy tragiczne i komiczne, sztukę symboliczną czy alegoryczną, w której wyżej wymienione "potknięcia" artystyczne otrzymują uzasadnienie. Analizując sztukę w ramach nowszej koncepcji, autor rozpracowuje niezależnie jej szczegóły, opierając się również na ustnych dyskusjach z Prof. Nevill Coghillem. Tematem sztuki jest upadek moralny i przywrócenie do łaski po odbyciu pokuty. Zazdrość Leontesa ma charakter ogólny, przedstawia zło moralne. "Śmierć" Hermione — to utrata przez niego łaski, do której aluzją jest jej imię. Jej powrót do Leontesa — to skutek ekspiacji z jego strony. Podobnie śmierć Mamiliusa wyraża śmierć duchową, postać zaś Florizela kojarzy się z odzyskaną niewinnością.

Gdy przyjąć *Opowieść zimową* jako sztukę symboliczną o problematyce moralnej, uzasadnienie zazdrości staje się zbyteczne, gdyż chodzi tu o grzech w ogóle. Szesnaście lat ekspiacji dowodzi jej szczerości, spotkanie Leontesa z Perditą musi ustąpić miejsca na scenie znacznie ważniejszemu spotkaniu z Hermione.

Słuszności takiej koncepcji sztuki i świadomego jej wyboru przez Szekspira dowodzą: stylizowana, odpersonalizowana mowa postaci; atmosfera baśni (nieprawdopodobieństwa i zbiegi okoliczności, zjawienie się Czasu na scenie, tworzenie momentów ulgi komicznej, jak np. w scenie z niedźwiedziem); krytyczny moment, kiedy możliwość dalszego rozwoju akcji nie leży już w rękach

ludzkich (III, 3, 58) i wreszcie powrót Hermione, który ma dla Leontesa i dla widzów charakter cudu, zrządzenia boskiego.

Proste przyjęcie tych argumentów nie wyczerpuje jednak zagadnienia. Trudno przyporządkować *Opowieść zimową* jakiemuś znanemu gatunkowi. Sztuka ta nie jest w pełni alegorią, tragedią lub komedią. Najbliższe jej odpowiedniki to *Cymbelin* i *Perykles*, ale wyróżnia ją fakt, że bohater nie tylko staje na skraju katastrofy, lecz także przechodzi ją i poza nią. Jakkolwiek go nazwać, istotą tego gatunku jest powaga konfliktu, który wynika z problemu moralnego i rozwiązuje się pomyślnie, a jest ujęty w terminach alegorycznych.

Rozpoznanie tego gatunku jako czegoś odrębnego, trudne z powodu jego rzadkości, niekoniecznie musi prowadzić do uznania jego wartości. *Opowieść zimowa* zawiera wiele niezręczności w przekazywaniu informacji, zbytecznych powtórzeń, nieprawdopodobieństw i niewykończonych szczegółów, które nie wynikają z założeń kompozycji gatunku. Poza tym depersonalizacja charakterów odbiła się ujemnie na ich psychologii, realizmie przedstawienia i wzajemnych ich stosunkach. Są to postacie dramatycznie mniej ciekawe niż analogiczne postacie w innych sztukach (por. *Leontes* i *Otello*), a całość sztuki ma dość słabe napięcie dramatyczne. W wyniku depersonalizacji ucierpiała również indywidualność i odpowiedniość stylu wypowiedzi osób dramatu. *Happy end*, konieczny dla idei sztuki, polega na uprzednim wprowadzeniu publiczności w błąd. W scenie mianowicie z posągami poeta chciał osiągnąć efekt cudowności bez wprowadzania jednak nadprzyrodzonej na planie akcji. Dało się to osiągnąć tylko przez oszukanie publiczności wcześniejszym oświadczeniem Antigonusa (III, 3, 15).

Nawet jeśli się przyjmie, że *Opowieść zimowa* jest kompletnie zadowalająca, jest to osiągnięcie nie do powtórzenia. Realizm, symbolizm i nadprzyrodzoność pozostają w niej w równowadze niepewnej. Gatunek ograniczał siłę rysunku charakterów i siłę języka Szekspira i podsuwał poecie pokusę osłabiającej niedbałości technicznej.

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