

“Browsing of Ivy”: The Winter’s Tale

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MORE so than other plays, *The Winter’s Tale* has been attacked and then defended on the score of unity — its parts fitting together apparently with some difficulty if at all.¹ A large gap in time must be assumed at the beginning of Act IV, plainly violating the “unity of time,” and the scene shifts several times, plainly violating the “unity of place.” But as “unity of action” is the only “unity” specified by Aristotle (*Poetics*, VIII) and perhaps the only one that need be considered, critics such as Nevill Coghill, John Lawlor, J. H. P. Pafford, Northrop Frye, and William Blissett (each cited in the notes to this paper) have defended the play despite its jumps in time and place. The present essay is also an attempt to discover the unity of the play rather than to complain of its disunity, for unity is an assumption we ought to make in criticism, it seems to me — rather than a criterion serving to reveal the shortcomings of the critic more often than those of the author. Every datum has hypothetically some relevance; and when a critic is tempted to call something extraneous or irrelevant he ought instead to say, “I have not yet seen the relevance of it.” Certainly we have all learned over the past generation to see the relevance of imagery which criticism had previously assumed to be arbitrarily ornamental. But we remain uncertain of the function of some passages, even of some characters, within their plays. In *The Winter’s Tale*, for instance, the “saltiers” (jumpers) or satyrs, who enter the famous sheep-shearing scene, do a dance, and depart forever without a word, are offering us perhaps the tiniest play within a play. Though I think Shakespeare capable of dragging in a group of available dancers for a mere diversion, they may also figure somehow in a plan I cannot yet envisage. Meantime I offer here the plan I

can envisage, filled out here and there with speculation, without which criticism could not live up to its obligation to account for as much as it can. Northrop Frye writes of hearing "some very curious echoes" in the play, though he gives only one example.² Further echoes, or relationships and parallels, may be adduced to illustrate both the unity of the play and Shakespeare's special treatment of "The Triumph of Time."

Archidamus has only seven speeches in the first scene of the play and never reappears. Why should he (and Camillo) be named in this scene, when the gentlemen of V.ii remain almost nameless? Lawlor thinks the two scenes balance one another, and Coghill says they are "in the same dialect of early seventeenth-century refinement and wit."³ But Archidamus is characterized further than any of the courtiers I have mentioned by his experiments on the limits of wit. It is conventional to say, We can never duplicate the reception we've had here when you visit us; it is another matter to say, "We will give you sleepy drinks, that your senses (unintelligent of our insufficiency) may, though they cannot praise us, as little accuse us" (I.i.13-16).⁴ It is conventional to say the young prince Mamillius gladdens the hearts of young and old; but Camillo adds, "they that went on crutches ere he was born desire yet their life to see him a man." This may be exaggeration of the sort Archidamus used with his "sleepy drinks," but now he offers a witty probe of the exaggeration: "Would they else be content to die?" Obviously, life is sweet and they would want to live, prince or no prince. But Camillo brazens out his exaggeration: "Yes; if there were no other excuse why they should desire to live." There are always other excuses or reasons to remain alive, however, and Archidamus closes the scene tartly: "If the king had no son, they would desire to live on crutches till he had one" (39-45). Camillo himself, who reappears in many scenes, is never so interestingly characterized. It seems to me Shakespeare must originally have intended a further role for Archidamus and so bothered to

name him and characterize him. It appears from this scene that he intended to carry through Archidamus as Polixenes' courtier and Camillo as Leontes', but later found the plot required Camillo for both.

Camillo has many speeches and appearances in the play, but he functions primarily as an agent of the plot and the generalized ethos of the play: his "character" is simply a composite of what keeps the play on its ethical track. He is the advisor, so trustworthy that he knows the king's (Leontes', Polixenes') mind better than the king himself does. Twice he betrays a trust, hopeful that he works towards the king's own eventual best interests: Leontes will be glad Camillo did not murder Polixenes but helped him to escape to Bohemia; Polixenes will be glad Camillo encouraged Florizel's match with Perdita and helped them to escape to Sicilia. His one brief soliloquy is an attempt to square his honor, which Polixenes and he several times insist on, with the demands the plot makes on him: he decides he cannot kill Polixenes as he has sworn to do (I.ii.351-64). He tries to dissuade Leontes from his unreasonable fury at Hermione and Polixenes; when Polixenes becomes furious at Perdita and Florizel there is no attempt to dissuade him, but there is the same assumption the king must be circumvented for the present: "Gracious my lord, / You know your father's temper" (IV.iv.468). Florizel indicates Camillo's function when he calls him "Preserver of my father, now of me" (IV.iv.587). And Camillo indicates his function himself when he tells Polixenes, "Therefore mark my counsel. / Which must be ev'n as swiftly follow'd as / I mean to utter it" (I.ii.408-10). It is a function which is still unchanged three acts, and many years, later, when he tells Florizel of Polixenes what he might almost have said to Polixenes of Leontes: "Well, my lord, / If you may please to think I love the king, / And through him what's nearest to him, which is / Your gracious self, embrace but my direction" (IV.iv.521-24). Finally he reassures Florizel and also specifies his function as stage-manager: "it shall be so my care / To have you

royally appointed, as if / The scene you play were mine" (IV.iv.592-94).

The next courtier who approaches Archidamus in importance to the play is Antigonus, who, especially as his name resembles Archidamus', may be considered a second sketch at an interesting functionary, and whose role partly overlaps with Camillo's. As Antigonus becomes Leontes' advisor after Camillo's departure from Sicilia, so Camillo becomes Paulina's husband after Antigonus' death. Apparently they are about the same age. At least Polixenes tells Camillo he will respect him as a father (I.ii.461), and Leontes tells Antigonus he may be "most ignorant by age" (II.i.173), calls him a "dotard" (II.iii.74) and mentions his gray beard (161). Antigonus talks in a horsey dialect so racy that critics have not fully understood him. He says, if Hermione proves to be guilty, "I'll keep my stables where / I lodge my wife" (II.i.134-35). Perhaps he means, as Pafford understands him, that he will lock her up as he locks up his mares separately from his stallions. He also threatens to "geld" his three daughters, to "glib" or geld himself, and to "land-damn" whoever has convinced Leontes of Hermione's guilt (140-50): again he may be remembering horses in these references, the latter a form of "lambaste."⁵ In his next scene he offers a horsey account of Paulina's freedom of action: "When she will take the rein, I let her run; / But she'll not stumble" (II.iii.51-52). When Leontes blames him for not silencing Hermione he offers a self-deprecating lament: "Hang all the husbands / That cannot do that feat, you'll leave yourself / Hardly one subject" (109-11). But he also is capable of some nobility of sentiment and protests the innocence of Hermione, of himself, and of the baby Paulina has brought: "I'll pawn the little blood which I have left, / To save the innocent — anything possible" (165-66). He does remain somewhat gullible, however, for when Hermione appears to him in a dream and tells him to leave the baby in Bohemia, he becomes convinced of her guilt, follows her directions, and, as everyone recalls, is chased off

the stage by a bear — ironic, since he had said wolves and bears, like kites and ravens, sometimes perform “offices of pity” (II. iii.188).

The bear, and the death of Antigonus, does not strike me as tragic, though it officially ends the tragic or serious part of the play. Earlier Antigonus himself closed a scene with a mythically prophetic remark. When Leontes says “this business / Will raise us all,” Antigonus adds an aside: “To laughter, as I take it, / If the good truth were known” (II.i.198-99). So it is appropriate that his death or exit should mark the end of tears and, with the shepherd and clown, the beginning of laughter in the play. The bear, whether real, or, as I suspect, obviously artificial, would probably arouse an audience to laughter if only by its theatrical improbability.

There are two kings in the play, but they are not necessarily best differentiated as Leontes and Polixenes. There is Leontes of the opening who urges his old friend to stay longer, who recalls the difficulty of wooing Hermione, who is a fond father to Mamillius. It is the same Leontes who relents when he hears of the deaths of his son and wife and vows to visit their graves daily, who sixteen years later is still penitent and unwilling to consider a new wife, who greets Florizel with fresh remorse over the wrongs done to his father, who wonders at the statue of Hermione, and who insists that Hermione and Polixenes look upon each other, with no fear that he will suspect their “holy looks” again. Then there is Leontes *furioso* as he appears in a species of role-playing almost rightly named by Hermione when she first encounters it: “What is this? Sport?” (II.i.58).

Polixenes is usually also the gentle king, and his equivalence to Leontes is often stressed by the use of the word “brother.” He is as fond a father as Leontes and becomes as kind a master to Camillo. Like Leontes he is reluctant to let his guest, Camillo, return to his home. The difficulty of IV.iv. is that he is called upon to play the gentle king to Perdita, assuring her that it mends nature to marry the

nobler to the baser, and later to play the furious king, a recreation of the Leontes of I.ii and II.i, forbidding the marriage between the nobler Florizel and the supposedly baser Perdita.⁶ Polixenes himself says of Perdita, "nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, / Too noble for this place" (IV.iv.157-59); but later in the scene that "something greater" is not great enough. G. Wilson Knight says that "Polixenes is, perhaps, setting a trap; or may be quite unconsciously arguing against his own later behaviour,"⁷ but the play needs its second, smaller fit of fury so as to give the younger generation a comedic obstacle to overcome, and it seems that his two roles here are simply disparate, more compressed and even less motivated than the similar changes in his brother king Leontes. Several songs and dances provide some insulation between the two roles a single "Polixenes" must play in this scene. The concern with father kings in the play is indicated by the mention of two who do not seem needed at all: the Emperor of Russia, Hermione's father (II.ii.119), and Smalus, King of Libya, the supposed father of Perdita (V.i.155-56).

As there are two dramatized kings in the play, so there are two dramatized queens. There is the Hermione who is playful with Mamillius, who cannot believe her husband mistrusts her, who answers his charges modestly and demurely, who at her trial speaks with quiet self-respect. But there is also the Hermione who—prompted by Leontes, it is true — is so insistent that Polixenes remain in Sicilia she will not take no for an answer and thereby arouses Leontes' suspicions; and the Hermione who appears in Antigonus' dream and threatens he will never again see Paulina for what he is doing to her child. Normally we would say she has a spirited as well as a demure side. But when she is imprisoned her spiritedness is taken up by Paulina, who while not a queen is obviously an agent of the queen and plays toward Leontes the roles not only of wifely advisor but also of shrew. The question of whether Hermione is to be considered dead in her grave or alive in

Paulina's gallery for sixteen years seems a naturalistic one not appropriate to the mood or style of the play; but her reappearance as a lifelike extension of Paulina's magic is a final demonstration of the interrelatedness of the two queens or mothers of the play — not Hermione and Paulina, but the demure and the spirited. Emilia, a name left over from the also falsely suspected Desdemona, is another, lesser agent of the queen who appears only in the prison scene, II,ii.

It might be said, then, that in the overall economy of the play there is one king with two faces and one queen with two faces; similarly it might be said there is one prince, who is Mamillius early and Florizel later on. The equivalence of the two in age and temperament is mentioned several times. Polixenes characterizes his son and his own response to him, and Leontes adds, "So stands this squire / Offic'd with me" (I.ii. 171-72). Paulina says of Florizel, "Had our prince / (Jewel of children) seen this hour, he had pair'd / Well with this lord: there was not full a month / Between their births" (V.i.115-18). Perdita is the only princess in the play, but she is suspected by Leontes and declared by Antigonus to be Polixenes' daughter, though she is really Leontes' true issue, as the queens of the play insist; the plot at any rate associates her with both locations of the play (and their separately named kings) and with the sheep-farm as well. So Florizel serves partly as the son and Perdita as the daughter of both kings. Leontes says when he sees Florizel and Perdita, "What might I have been, / Might I a son and daughter now have look'd on, / Such goodly things as you!" (V.i.175-77), without realizing that both children are mythically his; and the nominal transfer of prince from Mamillius to Florizel is from one viewpoint a device of the plot to obviate any suggestion of incest. Shakespeare had found incest between the king and princess in *Pandosto*, but retained it only as a lustful glance of Leontes at his still unacknowledged daughter; and Leontes adds, as if in partial excuse, that she reminds him of his wife (V.i.222-27).

The first section of the play includes two deaths: the death of Mamillius is a pathetic note at most, a postponement really of our pleasure in the recreated and grown-up prince, Florizel; and the death of Antigonus is not even pathetic. Antigonus, as an agent of the plot, takes Camillo's place after his departure, and is in turn replaced by Camillo as Paulina's spouse. But more importantly the slight note of comic appeal in Antigonus needs to be swelled and fulfilled in the more richly comic section of the play.⁸ It could be said then that when, according to the clown, the bear eats up Antigonus, he does not die but is recreated and transformed (with only a slight change of name) to the multi-colored form of Autolycus; and the bear seems to return as the somber figure of Time the Chorus: the slapstick close to tragedy becomes the serene introduction to comedy, a transition that may be parodied when the clown says, "though authority be a stubborn bear, yet he is oft led by the nose with gold" (IV.iv:803-04) — a possible reference to the "fairy gold" left with Perdita. The clown tells us that the bear tore out Antigonus' shoulder-bone (III.iii.95), and Autolycus still seems to be suffering from the wound when, pretending to have been robbed, he tells the clown, "I fear, sir, my shoulder blade is out" (IV.iii.72-73).⁹ He also claims to be remembering a previous state as courtier when he tells the shepherd and clown, "Whether it like me or no, I am a courtier. Seest thou not the air of court in these enfoldings? hath not my gait in it the measure of the court? receives not thy nose court-odour from me? reflect I not on thy baseness, court-contempt? . . ." (IV.iv.730-34).

Everyone finds Autolycus an ingenious addition to the play, or to the tale as Shakespeare found it in *Pandosto*, but he has only a minimal role in the plot, and the question is not often raised of why his special comic appeal belongs in this play rather than another. Autolycus is not only a more comic Antigonus, but his jokes seem to relate him to the central role in the play, that of the king. Autolycus says of himself, "My traffic is sheets" and "my revenue

is the silly cheat" (IV.iii.23, 27-28): Leontes' revenue is the great or serious cheat, and, while he does not steal sheets, they are the accoutrements of his suspicions. Autolycus says in his opening song, "the white sheet bleaching on the hedge, / . . . Doth set my pugging tooth an edge" (5, 7), and adds, with suggestive illogic, "For a quart of ale is dish for a king" (8): the sight or thought of sheets does prompt Leontes' paranoia and his king's reward for his cheat is not much better than a quart of ale. Autolycus says, "I have a kinsman not past three-quarters of a mile hence, unto whom I was going" and "I will even take my leave of you, and pace softly towards my kinsman's" (78-80, 108-09), suggestive of the visits and proposed visits of the "brother" kings of the play. He seems to give a parody-hint of Leontes and the female voices of the play ("Hermione" and "Paulina") when he says, "A fellow, sir, that I have known to go about with troll-my dames" (84-85), and he sings of "summer songs for me and my aunts/While we lie tumbling in the hay" (11-12). Among the activities he reviews to the clown are these: "he hath been since an ape-bearer, then a process-server (a bailiff), then he compassed a motion of the prodigal Son, and married a tinker's wife within a mile where my land and living lies" (91-95). The ape may be a metaphor for Leontes' ugly suspicions, the process-serving for the formal charges against Hermione; and of course Leontes married and settled some distance from his friend; and, between the two of them, the kings of the play manage to cast off and welcome back a son whose prodigality is richly expressed toward Perdita. The clown cries out, when he hears the name Autolycus: "Out upon him! Prig, for my life, prig! He haunts wakes, fairs, and bear-baitings" (98-99): wakes is a possible shorthand for the first part of the play, the supposed deaths of Hermione and Mamillius;¹⁰ fairs for the sheep-shearing and following; and bear-baiting for the choral transition between the two. Autolycus volunteers, "And indeed, sir, there are cozeners abroad; therefore it behoves men to be

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whereas the plot does insure that he will bring them good fortune; and the lines also reverberate with relevance to Polixenes and Florizel toward Leontes. Autolycus' own summing-up of their relationship is also appropriate to Leontes: "Here come those I have done good to against my will" (V.ii.124-25), for Leontes' bizarre actions do somehow bring about a happy ending for prince and princess, for king and queen.

As Autolycus parodies Leontes in his furious state, so the old shepherd parodies him in his gentle state, officiating at the sheep-shearing festivities; and shearing sheep is a metaphor of renewing life, as in the play kings and queens are renewed in princes and princesses. The shepherd's fond recollections of his wife at their table (IV.iv.55-62) is a distinct anticipation of Leontes and Paulina recalling the many virtues of Hermione in V.i. The clown's love for Mopsa parodies Florizel's love of Perdita; Mopsa has been promised "certain ribbons and gloves" and Dorcas adds, "He hath promised you more than that, or there be liars" (IV.iv.235-40). The clown himself best expresses these dramatic relationships: "the king's son took me by the hand, and called me brother; and the the two kings called my father brother; and then the prince, my brother, and the princess, my sister, called my father father . . ." (V.ii.140-44). The clown and shepherd usher in Time himself, and the shepherd's remark on the death of Antigonus and the discovery of the baby Perdita is often cited to indicate the play's own recognition of its transformation from tragedy to comedy: "thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born" (III.iii.112-13).

The shepherd also introduces some of the curious arithmetic of the play. As has often been noted, Shakespeare took seriously Greene's subtitle to *Pandosto*, "The Triumph of Time," and hinged his play over a sixteen-year gap which would bring about a triumph in the fortunes of the principals. At least Time says he slides over sixteen years, but in the next scene Camillo says, "It is fifteen years since I saw my country" (IV.ii.4). In the first act Leontes says

of Mamillius, "Looking on the lines / Of my boy's face, me-thoughts I did recoil / Twenty-three years . . ." (I.ii.153-55), which might mean Mamillius is ten and Leontes is thirty-three. As Leontes looks back twenty-three years, the forward-looking prophecy of Apollo's oracle takes Cleomenes and Dion an absence of twenty-three days to return with: "'tis good speed; fortells / The great Apollo suddenly will have / The truth of this appear" (II.iii. 198-200). The days in this gratuitous specification may stand for the years of Florizel when he arrives at maturity, for the prince as well as the princess is suggested in the prophecy: "the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found" (III.ii.135-36). Fifteen or sixteen years later, when Leontes sees Florizel, who is not only the same age but almost the same character as Mamillius — "there was not full a month / Between their births" (V.i.117-18) — he says, "Were I but twenty-one, / Your father's image is so hit in you, / His very air, that I should call you brother" (125-27). But an arithmetic in which ten and fifteen make twenty-one seems altogether fitting to such a tale as *The Winter's Tale*: perhaps by that time Florizel's age needs to be closer to Perdita's fifteen or sixteen. Pyle, counting backwards, makes Mamillius five at the start,¹¹ which seems a little young for an Elizabethan actor, or a child capable of the jokes in Act II. And the clown, who is apparently a grown clown when he sees Antigonus eaten by the bear, is fifteen years later courting along with Florizel, so that the intervening time has added even fewer years to his age. The shepherd, entering just after Antigonus is "*pursued by a bear*" seems to comment on the time-gap of the play: "I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest" (III.iii. 59-60) — the gap between Mamillius and Florizel, slept out in the stage-business between the bear and Time. But as he complains of the "boiled-brains of nineteen and two-and-twenty" he offers an analogy of the prince and princess of the play: "They have scared away two of by best sheep, which I fear the wolf will sooner find than the master: if

anywhere I have them, 'tis by the sea-side browsing of ivy" (III.iii.65-68) — perhaps a better activity for passing away fifteen years, and apparently a diet that insures a full triumph of time. The shepherd's statement parallels what Leontes says to Florizel and Perdita: "I lost a couple, that 'twixt heaven and earth / Might thus have stood, begetting wonder as / You, gracious couple, do" (V.i.131-33). As soon as the shepherd has lamented his lost sheep he discovers the baby Perdita.

The first words of Autolycus, the other parody-king, seem equally pertinent to the process of the play:

*When daffodils begin to peer,
With heigh! the doxy over the dale,
Why then comes in the sweet o' the year,
For the red blood reigns in the winter's pale.* (IV.iii.1-4)

Though "doxy" is not a very flattering term for a girl, she and "the sweet o' the year" suggest Perdita, who "reigns in the winter's pale" of the play. The time-gap in the play is a way of insuring the proper mixture of both tragedy and comedy, which the play itself sometimes reminds us is its goal. The clown says, "I love a ballad but even too well, if it be doleful matter merrily set down; or a very pleasant thing indeed, and sung lamentably" (IV.iv.189-91). Paulina's steward tells how she responds to the discovery of the lost child, "O, the noble combat that 'twixt joy and sorrow was fought in Paulina!" Earlier the same gentleman tells how all responded to their mutual discoveries, in a comment which is almost a directive to the audience: "There might you have beheld one joy crown another, so and in such a manner that it seemed sorrow wept to take leave of them, for their joy waded in tears" (V.ii.72-74, 44-47). And Autolycus' song is perhaps the best advice to kings and men who strangely imagine evils where there are none:

*Jog on, jog on, the foot-path way,
and merrily hent the stile-a:
A merry heart goes all the day,
Your sad tires in a mile-a* (IV.iii.119-22)

NOTES

- ¹William Blissett speaks of "The old debate, the only one" on the play in "This Wide Gap of Time: *The Winter's Tale*," *English Literary Renaissance* I (1971), 52.
- ²Northrop Frye, *A Natural Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 115.
- ³John Lawlor, "Pandosto and the Nature of Dramatic Romance," *Philological Quarterly* XLI (1962), 108; Nevill Coghill, "Six Points of Stage-Craft in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Survey* 11 (1958), 39.
- ⁴Citations are from the New Arden text (London: Methuen, 1963), edited by J. H. P. Pafford.
- ⁵See Pafford's notes, pp. 36-37.
- ⁶See D. A. Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Last Phase* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1954), p. 145.
- ⁷G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life* (London: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 105.
- ⁸Blissett, p. 54.
- ⁹Frye, p. 115.
- ¹⁰Pafford glosses "wakes" as "festival, revel" from the *OED*, but the *OED* also lists "The watching . . . of relatives and friends beside the body of a dead person from death to burial" back to 1412.
- ¹¹Fitzroy Pyle, *The Winter's Tale: A Commentary on the Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 14n.