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The Perspective of Comedy: Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale

IT IS COMMONPLACE to speak of the different kinds of Shakespearean comedy. The "happy" or "joyous" comedies, for instance, are contrasted with the "enigmatic" or "problem" comedies on the one hand and the "philosophic" or "divine" comedies on the other. And, among the first group, we are sometimes told that *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* is a less successful "romantic" comedy than *Much Ado About Nothing* or that *Twelfth Night* is pure comedy whereas *As You Like It* incorporates potentially tragic motifs. In a broad sense, of course, the attitudes toward life expressed by comedy can range from the satiric to the sentimental, the farcical to the melodramatic—distinctions invariably based upon the nature of the plot. In any case, however, the spectator's dramatic experience as comedy depends not upon the materials of the plot as such, but upon his relationship to these issues and the characters who give them life. Just as it is not merely the presence of evil and of death which creates a tragedy but rather the spectator's emotional involvement with the characters and with the issues which produce the catastrophe, so also it is not merely an absence of evil and the presence of laughter which creates a comedy but the spectator's detachment from or qualified attachment to the characters and the issues of the plot.

The level of characterization is quite obviously dependent upon the nature of the plot itself. Comedy, for instance, can avoid individual characterization by focusing entirely on the humor of physical action; or it can stress the disparity between appearance and reality—what in his society a character sets himself out to be as opposed to what he is in reality behind the social mask; or it can portray a comic experience involving a spiritual catharsis which transforms a personality or reconstitutes an entire society. In other words, a comic dramatist can depict character to any depth which is appropriate to his narrative. Portrayed on the level of "faith," a character is completely human, inhabiting a stage world in which evil is a reality and involved in ethical and moral decisions through which the spectators see into the foundations of his faith; his experiences—like those of the great tragic figures—involve a basic transformation of values. On the level of "identity," a character is once removed from reality. In this stage world there is no funda-

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mental evil to force the character into decisions which reveal his spiritual or philosophic values. But, on the social plane, we perceive what he pretends to be and what he actually is—and the gap between such appearance and reality has perennially been material for comedy. In this situation the comic experience for the character is frequently one of self-revelation; and it is primarily of such drama that Professor Northrop Frye is speaking when he remarks that comedy "is designed not to condemn evil, but to ridicule a lack of self-knowledge."[1] For those characters delineated only on the level of "physical action," our detachment is complete. The comedy is that of manipulation, and the humor is drawn not from character involvement or character incongruity but rather from our observation of puppet-like characters maneuvered into ludicrous situations.

The fully developed character obviously creates problems for the dramatist who must maintain a comic perspective for the spectator or see his narrative turn to melodrama or tragicomedy. The spectator's involvement with physical action *per se* does not penetrate beneath the superficial laughter that a humorous situation arouses; thus, to the extent that the playwright can maintain this perspective, there is no great difficulty in achieving a comic tone for a situation involving "flat" characters who make no ethical decisions. On the other hand, with greater character complexity, the spectator is easily provoked into emotional identification with character and situation, and his comic perspective is blurred. And, as we have noted, the comic vision is possible only so long as the spectator is either emotionally detached from the characters or, if emotionally involved with them, in possession of such knowledge or provoked into such a mood as to assure him of a happy end accomplished by means which only temporarily appear unpleasant.

Shakespeare in a fascinatingly consistent pattern chose to work with plots which involved an increasingly complex depth of characterization. His earliest works are essentially situation comedies; the humor arises from action rather than character. There is no significant development of the main characters; instead they are manipulated into situations which are humorous as a result, for example, of mistaken identity and slapstick confusion. Thus, the characters are revealed only in terms of what they do, outer action. The Antipholuses and the Dromios of *The Comedy of Errors* are cases in point, manipulated as they are amidst a confused wife, courtesan, kitchen wench, sea captain, and goldsmith. So also the princess with her ladies in *Love's Labor's Lost* are played puppet-like against Ferdinand and his lords who have renounced sex for Academe. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the Athenian lovers—Hermia, Helena, Lysander, and Demetrius—are puppets manipulated into ridiculous self-contradiction by Oberon and Puck. The middle phase of Shakespeare's work sets forth plots in which the emphasis is on character revelation rather than physical action. This revelation occurs in one of two forms; either a hypocrite is exposed for what he actually is or a character who has assumed an unnatural

[1] "The Argument of Comedy," *English Institute Essays*, 1948 (New York, 1949), p. 70. Such characters are "people who are in some kind of mental bondage, who are helplessly driven by ruling passions, neurotic compulsions, social rituals and selfishness. The miser, the hypochondriac, the hypocrite, the pedant, the snob: these are humours; people who do not fully know what they are doing, who are slaves to a predictable self-imposed pattern of behavior."

or abnormal pose is forced to realize and admit the ridiculousness of his position. Of the first type Malvolio and Don John are prime illustrations, their true nature hidden to the other characters for much of the play by their moral hypocrisy. Of the second type, Benedick, Beatrice, and Claudio in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Orsino and Olivia in *Twelfth Night* are characters, for example, whose experiences reveal to themselves as well as to others their true personalities. With individuals of either type, actions are a facade to conceal true identity, and, to the extent that the spectator is aware of this incongruency, the hypocrisy on the one hand and the lack of self-knowledge on the other are ridiculous and the ultimate exposure humorous. And, while there is no fundamental transformation of character, the false pride which blinds one to knowing himself fully is purged. In any case, the emphasis in these comedies is on the ridiculousness of the character, not his danger to society; he is funny, not evil, because in these stage worlds we assume that normality will ultimately prevail and that he will never be allowed to engage in activities of permanent consequence either to himself or to others. In the final comedies, however, involving sin and sacrificial forgiveness, character development is concerned with a revelation of faith.[2] In these stage worlds the power of evil is not harmlessly contained within a circle of wit, and the characters, struggling on the fringe of comedy, must cope with the actual consequences of sin, moral and political. The "comic" transformation of, for instance, Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* or of Antonio, Alonso, and Sebastian in *The Tempest* is the result of a character's conversion to a belief in a universe controlled by the principle of love most fully realized in its redemptive powers.

Following *Twelfth Night*, then, Shakespeare moves steadily toward a vision of comedy involving characters on the level of faith who will experience the complete range of human emotion. Naturally, as his concept of comic character expands, so also does his problem of maintaining a proper perspective for the spectator.[3] In effect, comedy for Shakespeare becomes a vehicle for character growth and transformation—not merely manipulation, ridicule, or exposure; and, while Shakespeare obviously began with plot, not character, the kind of characterization demanded by these plots reveals both his changing interests and his increasing abilities.[4] Whether one

[2] Robert G. Hunter, in a recent study (*Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness* [New York, 1965]), has described the form of these comedies as a secularized pattern of the medieval morality involving sin, contrition, and forgiveness.

[3] Concerning the late comedies Joseph Summers expressed something of this general idea in his comment that "after *Twelfth Night* the so-called comedies require for their happy resolution more radical characters and devices—omniscient and omnipresent dukes, magic, and resurrection. More obvious miracles are needed for comedy to exist in a world in which evil also exists, not merely incipiently but with power" ("The Masks of *Twelfth Night*," *The University of Kansas City Review*, XXII [1955], 32).

[4] Professor Northrop Frye, in "Characterization in Shakespeare's Comedy," *SQ*, IV (1953), 271-77, points out that character depends upon function, function in turn upon structure, and structure in turn upon the category of the play. See also his *A Natural Perspective: The Development of Shakespearean Comedy and Romance* (New York, 1965), p. 14. Miss Josephine Waters Bennett ("*Measure For Measure*" *as Royal Entertainment* [New York, 1966], p. 5) has flatly stated that to discuss character in Shakespearean comedy is to beg the question, and J. Lawlor ("On Historical Scholarship and the Interpretation of Shakespeare," *Sewanee Review*, LXIV [1956], 193) has warned that preoccupation with character may be "disastrous to

labels these late plays "romances," "divine" or "philosophic" comedies, or "pastoral-" or "tragi-comedies," the significant feature is the character's experience with reality and the spectator's attitude toward it. Consequently, this comedy, if it is to succeed, must establish for the spectator a perspective through which to control his attitude toward a narrative in which characters contend with sorrow, evil, and destruction within themselves specifically and within society generally. For Shakespeare now is unwilling—even in comedy—either to abstract the viable force of evil or to deny the pervasive and permanent consequences which human life must suffer as a result of it. To this end he projects his story through certain characters who are fully human in the sense that ethical and moral decisions must be made for which they will suffer the consequences —for instance, Bertram in *All's Well That Ends Well;* Angelo in *Measure For Measure*; Leontes in *The Winter's Tale;* Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio in *The Tempest.* Reacting to their dilemma by making a fundamental choice between the values of good and evil as Shakespeare presents them in the stage world, these nodal characters become victims of lust, ambition, power, wealth, or jealousy; they commit (or attempt to commit) atrocious acts which destroy in some cases the lives, in all cases the honor and happiness, of those around them; through their suffering and the unmerited forgiveness which they receive from those whom they have chiefly wronged, they are ultimately shocked into right reason and come to know themselves for what they are.

In *All's Well That Ends Well* and *Measure For Measure,* Shakespeare sets such characters on the comic stage for the first time. Initially these characters possess a basic integrity; yet in the course of the action their experiences require decisions which reveal to themselves and to others their base and animalistic nature. Eventually some act of love and forgiveness permits them to be resorbed into normal society. In *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure,* however, the playwright has neither clearly established nor consistently maintained a comic perspective which insulates the spectator from emotional involvement. Because Vincentio's motivation is at best ambiguous and at times the spectator questions his ability to control the situation he has provoked, Angelo temporarily assumes the role of villain, and the play a tragic tone. Because of the ambiguous nature of Helena in the early scenes of the play, we react sympathetically to Bertram in his determination to make his own marital decisions, only to find ourselves confusedly committed to an arrant knave bent on lustful and egocentric gratification. The "problem" in these comedies, though admittedly oversimplified by such generalizations, is the perspective; once the spectator loses his comic detachment from action which involves characters existing on a truly human plane and making fundamental moral decisions which endanger the spiritual and physical well-being of themselves

disciplined attention." Nevertheless, as J. H. P. Pafford (ed., *The Winter's Tale,* The Arden Shakespeare [London, 1963], p. lxxi) has observed, Shakespeare's characters "have individuality. . . . [T]he personality of each character has importance whatever its other functions may be." Since above all it is Shakespeare's characterization which shows his artistry as greater than that of his fellow playwrights, an examination of his concept of dramatic character—as the vehicle for setting forth his increasingly complex comic narratives—hardly seems irrelevant.

and others, then the dramatic experience is—for the moment at least—no longer a comic one.

In *The Winter's Tale* the central character—his decisions, the consequences, the eventual transformation—is no less realistic, the evil of man's nature no less viable and destructive. But in this play Shakespeare has provided a perspective sufficient to control the deeper vision of character, primarily through stylization and through a comic pointer or comic controller who is himself involved in the action and yet whose relationships with the other characters or whose actions and comments, by reminding us that the artifice is always at work, abstract the spectator from emotional commitment. As a result, the play is successful as comedy, albeit vastly dissimilar in narrative from his earlier comedies of action and indentity.

Leontes is the single character developed on the level of faith. We observe him in the second scene as the gracious host inveigling Polixenes to prolong his visit in Sicilia. Impulsive and stubborn in his insistence, he is a manifestly intense person, and the passion of jealousy—once he becomes suspicious of his wife's fidelity and his friend's integrity—grows through the first half of the play to overwhelming and frightening proportions. His mind leaps wildly from one fantastic assumption to another, while his jealousy feeds entirely on emotional and circumstantial, not logical and tangible, evidence. Shakespeare, not choosing as in Othello to delineate the slow emergence of the green-eyed monster, presents in Leontes a wrath and fury which suddenly burst forth like searing heat.[5] Indeed he further underscores the abrupt and pathological nature of this emotion through the comments of shock and amazement from the characters who observe it. Camillo, when Leontes first tells him of Hermione's infidelity, warns the king to "be cur'd /Of this diseas'd opinion, and betimes; / For 'tis most dangerous" (I, ii, 296-98)[6] and later in soliloquy speaks of Leontes as one "Who, in rebellion with himself, will have/ All that are his so too" (355-56); the lords in attendance at court flatly assert that the "Queen is spotless" (II,i, 131), and Antigonus proclaims that "ever

[5]A few critics have objected to the rapidity with which the obsession develops. E. C. Pettet, for instance, who describes the characters of the romances as "thinner" and "half pasteboard," maintains that Leontes as a character is absurd (*Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* [London, 1949], pp. 166, 177, 179), and A. Thorndike (*The Influence of Beaumont and Fletcher on Shakespeare* [Worcester, 1901], p. 137) and A. Quiller-Couch (ed., *The Winter's Tale* [Cambridge, 1950], p. xxiii) emphasize the implausible motivation. The weight of critical opinion, however, affirms Leontes' dramatic credibility. "The jealousy of Leontes, though rash and irrational, is not unnatural in a hasty and willful man" (T. Campbell, *Dramatic Works of Shakespeare* [London, 1838], p. lxii; see also Hartley Coleridge, *Essays and Marginalia* [London, 1851], II, 148). His mind is "like a fiery furnace at such a temperature that everything introduced into it—combustible or not—becomes fuel" (H. C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* [Chicago, 1951], II, 262). Leontes is "a powerfully realistic portrait" (T. M. Parrott, ed., *Shakespeare: Twenty-Three Plays and The Sonnets* [New York, 1938], p. 1011), who "infests the first three acts" (Mark Van Doren, *Shakespeare* [New York, 1939], p. 272), a victim of temporary insanity (A. Symons, ed., *The Henry Irving Shakespeare* [New York, 1890], VII, 320), caused—according to John Ellis—by his sublimated love for Polixenes ("Rooted Affection: The Genesis of Jealousy in *The Winter's Tale*," *College English*, XXV [April, 1964], 546; see also P. Siegel, "Leontes a Jealous Tyrant," *RES*, I [1950], 302-07; and R. Trienens, "The Inception of Leontes' Jealousy," *SQ*, IV [1953], 321-26).

[6]All citations to Shakespeare's text are from *The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare*, ed. W. A. Neilson and C. J. Hill (Cambridge, 1942).

dram of woman's flesh, is false / If she be" (138-39).[7] In Leontes' blurred vision, as Hermione swells to the last stages of pregnancy, her friendly courtesies to Polixenes he sees as lechery, the Bohemian King's nine-months' visit as an odious explanation for the queen's conception.

With astounding rapidity Leontes' jealousy assumes awesome proportions. The least civility between his wife and friend becomes conclusive proof of his cuckoldry:

> Too hot, too hot!
> To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.
> I have *tremor cordis* on me; my heart dances,
> But not for joy; not joy.
> (I, ii, 108-11)

The images of decadency and corruption which permeate Leontes' asides and his comments to his young son reflect the depths of his diseased passion. He speaks of his "brows" growing "shoots" (I, ii, 119, 128), of the "hardening of my brows" (146), of himself as "Inch-thick, knee-deep, o'er head and ears a fork'd one" (186), of his "Cuckold's horn" (296). No longer certain of his son's legitimacy, he calls him "my bawcock" (121), a "wanton calf" (126), "sweet villain" (136) and brands his wife "slippery" (273), "a hobby horse. . . / As rank as any flax-wench that puts to / Before her troth-plight" (276-78). Of his wife and Polixenes he observes their "paddling palms" (115), "pinching fingers" (115), "practis'd smiles" (116), "virginalling / Upon / the palm!" (125-26).

> There have been,
> Or I am much deceiv'd, cuckolds ere now;
> And many a man there is, even at this present,
> Now while I speak this, holds his wife by th' arm,
> That little thinks she has been sluic'd in 's absence
> And his pond fish'd by his next neighbour, by
> Sir Smile, his neighbour. Nay, there's comfort in 't
> Whiles other men have gates and those gates open'd,
> As mine, against their will.
> . . .
> Be it concluded,
> No barricado for a belly; know 't;
> It will let in and out the enemy
> With bag and baggage.
> (190-98, 203-06)

Sensing guilt and duplicity in the smallest gestures, he fears he has become the laughing stock of the court:

> They're here with me already, whispering, rounding
> "Sicilia is so-forth." 'Tis far gone,
> When I shall gust it last.
> (217-19)

As his private suspicions grow and he is content to provide his own answers, Leontes is compelled to make public his charges against his wife, and his rage becomes ungovernable. Demanding revenge upon both Hermione and his erstwhile friend, he commissions Camillo to poison Polixenes, but so uncontrollable has his passion become that he is unable to "seem friendly" to Bohemia, lest the scheme be foiled. Later, his worst suspicions apparently confirmed by the flight of Polixenes and Camillo, he again cannot restrain himself as he publicly denounces his pregnant wife;

[7] See also Camillo's remark, "I cannot/Believe this crack to be in my dread mistress (I, ii, 321-22), and his observation to Polixenes that "There is a sickness/Which puts some of us in distemper" (384-85); Paulina's comments (e.g., II, iii) serve a similar function.

no longer content to brand her "an adultress" (II, i, 78) and a "bed-swerver" (93), he leaps to a broader accusation:

> There is a plot against my life, my crown....
> More, she's a traitor, and Camillo is
> A [fedary] with her.
> (47, 89-90)

When his shocked courtiers refuse to sanction such charges, the infuriated Leontes, in true tyrannic fashion, rejects his counsellors out of hand.

> Our prerogative
> Calls not your counsels, but our natural goodness
> Imparts this; which if you, or stupefied
> Or seeming so in skill, cannot or will not
> Relish a truth like us, inform yourselves
> We need no more of your advice.
> (163-68)

Ordering Hermione to prison without providing her an opportunity for self-defense, he proclaims that "He who shall speak for her is afar off guilty / But that he speaks" (104-05). In his ultimate act of defiance he scoffs at the need of the oracle to confirm his suspicions, "yet shall the oracle / Give rest to th' minds of others.../ Whose ignorant credulity will not/ Come up to th' truth" (190-93).

His mental perturbations have, at this point, destroyed his ability to rule either himself or his kingdom. When Paulina takes the newborn daughter before the King in hopes of moderating his wrath, she is subjected to name calling and threats and is physically shoved out of the room. As for the child, Antigonus is ordered, on pain of death to himself and to Paulina, to "carry/ This female bastard hence" (II, iii, 174-75) to some "remote and desert place" and to abandon it without mercy. Informed that messengers from the oracle have returned, Leontes summons a session and asserts that Hermione shall have "just and open trial"; "Let us be clear'd / Of being tyrannous, since we so openly / Proceed in justice" (III, ii, 4-6). But the words become mockery as he formally arraigns and sentences her. Judge and jury, he maintains that, just as she is past all shame, so she is past all truth; to deny the charges is futile: "Look for no less than death" (92). Having delivered his ultimatum, he is mentally unable to accept the oracular statement which clears Hermione—and can only thunder: "There is no truth at all i' th' oracle./ The sessions shall proceed; this is mere falsehood" (141-42).

The immediate flurry of events—capped by Mamillius' actual and Hermione's apparent death—brings Leontes quickly to his knees. From his first statement of his folly ("Apollo's angry; and the heavens themselves /Do strike at my injustice" [III, ii, 147-48]), which immediately precedes Hermione's fainting, there follows through the remainder of the play a succession of progressively contrite confessions of guilt as the king becomes painfully aware of his folly and stupidity. Indeed, his repentance is no less intense than his previous passion. His initial intention is to woo his queen anew, to recall Camillo, and to reconcile himself with Polixenes. This plan the reported death of the Queen annuls, and in utter despair Leontes calls for all tongues to punish him through bitter talk and promises, in penance, once a day to visit the chapel where lie his son and wife; "tears shed there/ Shall be my recreation" (240-41).

Sixteen years later, in Act V, he is no less contrite: his passion has made his kingdom heirless and "Destroy'd the

sweet'st companion that e'er man/ Bred his hopes out of" (i, 11-12); had he taken counsel from Paulina, "even now/ I might have look'd upon my queen's full eyes,/ Have taken treasure from her lips" (52-54). His repentance confirmed, he can now say with utter sincerity that the destruction was "All mine own folly" (135). "I have done sin" (172). Equally significant, motivated by love he is able in two instances in this scene to act in behalf of another. On the one hand he comforts Paulina by subjecting himself to her as a living memorial to his wife; as he had earlier implicated her in Hermione's corruption (II, ii, 130 ff.), so now as a token of repentance he agrees that she shall decide whether he shall ever marry again. On the other hand, confronted by Florizel as an exile from father and country, he agrees to attempt to mediate the differences between the young prince and Polixenes and to effect a happy union between the youth and Perdita. The incidents are not unimportant; the first selfless acts of which Leontes has been capable, they reflect a stage of spiritual growth more advanced than contrition *per se*. In the final scene, facing what he assumes to be Hermione's statue, he is "pierc[ed] to my soul. . . ./ There's magic in thy majesty, which has /My evils conjur'd to remembrance. . . ." (34, 39-40). As he envisions the lifelike statue, his love for Hermione is poignantly rekindled: "this affliction has a taste as sweet / As any cordial comfort" (76-77). The crowning achievement of his love is articulated by Paulina, who commands the statue to "descend; be stone no more"; "from [death] / Dear life redeems you" (99, 102-03).

Hardly the normal material for comedy, Leontes' experience—as in Shakespeare's tragedies—reflects both the worst and the best of humanity.[8] In effect, the playwright has sketched a character who in fully human terms must face problems

[8] Leontes' repentance has, of course, been of paramount significance to recent critics of the play. Obsessed in the last plays with the idea of reconciliation (Quiller-Couch, p. xix), "Shakespeare's love intuition . . . was close to, if not identical with, the Christian statement" (G. Wilson Knight, *The Christian Renaissance* [New York, 1962] p. 208). The pattern of Leontes' experience is from prosperity through destruction to repentance (E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* [London, 1951], p. 25). "As in Mamillius Leontes died to sin, so Perdita in his new life, and Florizel and Perdita recapitulate Leontes and Hermione, but with a difference, for they represent the positive, redeeming principle spontaneously active, whereas Leontes and Hermione must tread a bitter road to the final understanding" (S. L. Bethell, *"The Winter's Tale": A Study* [London, 1947], p. 76). With its theme of "Grace and Graciousness" (F. Tinkler, *"The Winter's Tale," Scrutiny*, V [1937], 344), the play sets forth the "association of human growth, decay, and rebirth with the vital rhythms of nature at large" (F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* [New York, 1964], p. 180; see also F. Hoeniger, "The Meaning of *The Winter's Tale*," *UTQ*, XX [1950], 11-26). The recognition scenes of the romance supply a "sense of an irresistible power, whether of divine or human agency, making for a providential resolution" (Northrop Frye, "Recognition in *The Winter's Tale*," *Essays on Shakespeare and Elizabethan Drama in Honor of Hardin Craig* [Columbia, Missouri, 1962], p. 239). Professor D. A. Traversi describes the play as a kind of parable of resurrection, healing, and unity (*Shakespeare: The Last Phase* [London, 1954], pp. 189-90), and the extreme archetypal view is expressed by Joseph A. Bryant: Leontes and Mamillius = Judaism, Perdita = true church, Polixenes = the Gentiles, Paulina = St. Paul, Hermione = Christ ("Shakespeare's Allegory: *The Winter's Tale*," *Sewanee Review*, LXIII [1955], 202-22). This view is countered by Pafford, who asserts that it is ridiculous to reduce the play to allegory: "The play is in a pre-Christian era and should therefore not refer to an Emperor of Russia, the betrayal of Christ, Whitsun pastorals, a Puritan singing songs to hornpipes, a Christian burial custom, or Julio Romano" (p. li). For similar reservations against resurrection and myth, see Adrian Bonjour, "The Final Scene of *The Winter's Tale*," *English Studies*, XXXIII (1952), 193-208.

involving the ultimate values of life, of faith itself. Consequently, his fundamental challenge is to create a dramatic structure by which to maintain a comic vision for the spectator. Unlike *The Tempest*, there is here no *deus ex machina* character to explain that the evil is only apparent or to anticipate certain events and thereby suggest that the unhappiness is merely temporary. Indeed, whereas Shakespeare's normal procedure is to capitalize on dramatic irony by keeping the spectator one step ahead of the character, in this play he deliberately conceals information from his audience and thereby creates a situation which would ordinarily stifle the potential comic tone by forcing the spectator to assume the reality of certain tragic events.

Nevertheless, the play does establish a successful comic tone through the devices of the stylization of both character and action—and through the function of Paulina and Autolycus as comic pointers. While we observe Leontes' initial happiness turn to suspicion, its consequences, his repentance and eventual forgiveness, we remain at a safe emotional distance because of the heightened tone of improbability which surrounds the stage world and the characters who inhabit it.[9] The problem is not one of credibility—nothing is burlesqued through caricature as, for example, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and nothing which occurs is literally impossible. But the tone is unequivocally fictional, and Shakespeare takes pains that his spectators never forget they are observing actions on a stage—and consequently that they never become totally emotionally involved with Leontes and his suffering. The title itself suggests an entertaining fiction for passing time; Mamillius' comment that "a sad tale's best for winter" sets the stage for a narrative he never lives to enjoy.

More specifically, most of the characters surrounding Leontes are highly stylized; they are "flat" or one-dimensional and, consequently, artificial. Hermione, in her Griselda-like patience, is perhaps the most striking illustration. Utterly lacking the very quality of passion which in excess virtually destroys her husband, she has no apparent depth. To Leontes' charge that she should help him convince Polixenes to prolong his visit, the queen submissively replies: "I had thought, sir, to have held my peace until / You had drawn oaths from him not to stay" (I, i, 28-29), after which she does her husband's bidding. Later she banters lovingly with Leontes concerning the two occasions on which, according to him, she has spoken to good purpose. In short, her first appearance confirms her as the passive wife, gracious and obedient. This passivity, as emphasized in her next appearance, establishes the incredulity of her character. Charged without forewarning of marital infidelity and treason, she replies to Leontes with apparent placidity:

> How will this grieve you,
> When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that
> You thus have publish'd me!
> (II, i, 96-98)

Assuming that some "ill planet reigns" as she is hauled off to prison, she exclaims, "I must be patient till the heavens look/ With an aspect more favourable

[9]As Professor Bethell has observed, Shakespeare obtrudes matters of technique upon the audience. "By deliberately drawing the audience's attention to technique Shakespeare was able to distance his story and to convey a continual reminder that his play was after all only a play" (p. 52).

..../ The King's will be perform'd" 106-07, 115). In the courtroom scene, denied even a semblance of a fair trail, she shows no sign of vindictiveness. She remarks, for instance, that, were her father (the emperor of Russia) alive, she would want him to look upon this scene with "pity, not revenge" (III, ii, 124). In her final appearance, following her "resurrection" after sixteen years, she speaks an incredibly brief seven lines—not even mentioning Leontes, who stands before her in penitent shock.

Appearing in only four scenes, Hermione is frankly a passive pawn who is acted upon but who exerts no positive force.[10] And, in effect, the same is true of the other principals. Polixenes, insofar as we see him in the play, has never outgrown the innocence of his boyhood friendship with Leontes. When Camillo informs him of Leontes' suspicions, there is not the least word of rancor or retribution. In like manner, the argument which later develops between Florizel and his father is presented as more apparent than real. Polixenes through his disguise tricks his son into proclaiming a greater love for Perdita than for his father or the throne. Even so Florizel does not verbally strike back at his father; he simply makes plans to abandon father, kingdom, and land for the sake of his love. Even Camillo—twice branded a traitor, by Leontes and by Florizel—faces the charge without rancor; there are occasional expressions of pity for Leontes, but never does he describe the King's folly in terms which would suggest total alienation; as for his motivations for treason, rather than ambition or lust, they are an antipathy to murder and homesickness.[11] Later, the Bohemian shepherd and his clown-son suggest a rustic innocence worthy of prelapsarian man!

With Paulina and Autolycus reserved for special comment, most of the characters surrounding Leontes are simply not human; as a direct result of their idealization or superficial development, the spectator views them as stage pawns. The result is that Leontes' human experience takes place in a stylized environment; the play hovers, so to speak, between playful make believe and the reality of human experience. And, consequently, while the spectator observes Leontes' agony and transformation, he is forced to do so through a heavy veil of stage fiction.

As for the action of the play, the general alterations from Robert Greene's novel *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time*, while they provide for the comic resolution by keeping Hermione (Bellaria) secretly alive and eliminating Leontes'

[10] Critics, though not addressing themselves to the one-dimensional quality of her character, have implied as much through their praise of her perfection. She is "never betrayed into the least sign of anger or impatience or resentment, but maintains, throughout, perfect order and fitness and proportion in act and speech" (H. N. Hudson, ed., *The Works of Shakespeare* [London, 1880], p. 21). "[D]ignity without pride, love without passion, and tenderness without weakness" (Anna Jameson, *Characteristics of Women* [London, 1833], II, 2), she is "in sunshine a butterfly, in misery a martyr" (Hartley Coleridge, II, 148). Her serene dignity raises her above pity (Neilson and Hill, p. 561). Professor Tucker Brooke approaches my present point more directly in his observation that Shakespeare's modifications of Bellario's role tend to stylize the queen (ed., *Shakespeare's Principal Plays* [New York, 1935], p. 855).

[11] Camillo, with his sudden shifts in allegiance and the geographic displacement which results from them, reminds us that artifice is constantly at work in this stage-world. O. J. Campbell (ed., *The Living Shakespeare* [New York, 1949], p. 1104) describes him as "a sort of stage manager bent on bringing about the reconciliation and forgiveness.

(Pandosto's) suicide, at the same time heighten the fictional tone.[12] Bellaria, for example, is a more credible character than Hermione; her reaction to her husband's unfounded jealousy is forthright and vocal; and their alienation builds more slowly and predictably. Then, too, the transfer of the action from one kingdom to another is less contrived in Greene. When Dorastus (Florizel) has infuriated his father Egistus (Polixenes) by doting upon a common shepherdess Fawnia (Perdita), Capnio (Camillo) befriends him and accompanies the young lovers in their flight. Bound for Italy, they arrive at Pandosto's kingdom only by accident when a violent storm blows them off course. In Shakespeare's version, Camillo fondly yearns to return to his homeland after sixteen years and "frames" Florizel and Perdita "to serve [his] own turn," urging them to flee to Sicilia and meanwhile secretly informing Polixenes so that the inevitable pursuit will get him home.

The hyperbolic tone is set—through the conversation between Camillo of the Sicilian court and Archidamus of the Bohemian court—before the spectator meets any of the principals of the play. Both the entertainment provided the Bohemian royal visitors and the long-lived and powerful bond of friendship between the two Kings are described in terms so extravagant as to suggest artificiality. Archidamus fears Leontes' return visit to Bohemia "shall shame us."

> We cannot with such magnificence—in so rare—I know not what to say. We will give you sleepy drinks, that your senses, unintelligent of our insufficience, may, though they cannot praise us, as little accuse us. (I, i, 13-17)

As for the renowned friendship, Leontes and Polixenes "were train'd together in their childhoods, and there rooted betwixt them then such an affection, which cannot choose but branch now ....I think there is not in the world either malice or matter to alter it" (24-27, 36-37).

Throughout the story one device after another confirms this fictional tone for the spectator: the Oracle from Delphos, Antigonus' premonition through a dream as he prepares to abandon Perdita, the old shepherd's conviction that the fairies have marked him for special favor when he discovers the abandoned child, the elaborate disguises and counter-disguises of the last two acts and in the midst of them a masque at the shepherd's cottage, the spectacular "resurrection" of Hermione after sixteen years, and the contrived reunion of "lost" daughter with "dead" mother—all of this presided over by Time as a choral figure who bridges the two generations. Granted,

[12] Shakespeare has been attacked on this very point by critics who fail to see his concern, for comic distancing through a stylized plot. Mrs. Lennox, for instance, (*Shakespeare Illustrated* [London, 1753], II, 75) asserts that Shakespeare's adaptation of Greene transformed bad to worse; "we shall find the original much less absurd and ridiculous. . . . [Shakespeare] entirely destroys the little probability the Novelist had preserved in the relation." The same condemnation is levelled by Heinrich Bulthaupt (*Dramaturgie der Classiker* [Oldenburg, 1884], II, 378). Jerry H. Bryant ("*The Winter's Tale* and the Pastoral Tradition," *SQ*, XIV [Autumn, 1963], 394) is more to the point—that Shakespeare creates an artifice as a comic vehicle for serious matter, using the pastoral tradition to comment "seriously upon the theme of reality and experience and its importance to the conduct of a king." On the same point, see John Lawlor, "*Pandosto* and the Nature of Dramatic Romance," *PQ*, XLI (1962), 113. Bertrand Evans (*Shakespeare's Comedies* [Oxford, 1960], p. 298) calls this scene a critical one which determines whether the play will ultimately turn to tragedy or comedy. While Shakespeare's comic perspective has long since been firmly established, Evans does appreciate the comic momentum of the scene.

many of these devices are straight from the "romance" material of medieval prose fiction. This does not alter the fact that Shakespeare has amassed them in such fashion as to create a chimerical narrative to serve as a comic backdrop for an all too credible human passion. The Oracle of Delphos is mentioned early in Act II, following Polixenes' flight and Leontes' charge of infidelity against Hermione. Though he personally needs no confirmation of her guilt, Leontes asserts that he has "dispatch'd in post/ To sacred Delphos, to Apollo's temple, / Cleomenes and Dion" (II, i, 182-84). Two scenes and twenty-three days later, the messengers have returned with Apollo's fateful decree through which it is assumed that divinity has corresponded directly with the human society and has dictated the terms of its harmony. Similarly, Antigonus—when he dreams Hermione's spirit appears before him to name the infant Perdita ("lost one") and to inform him to abandon the child in Bohemia—believes that "the spirits o' the dead/ May walk again" (III, iii, 16-17), that it is Apollo's behest that the child "here be laid, / Either for life or death." Evan Antigonus' death is related in such a bizarre fashion that the incident—while it reminds us again of the inescapable consequences of immoderate passion—seems unreal and grotesquely humorous.[13]

The final act capitalizes on the *coup de theatre* of Hermione's statue coming to life.[14] So as to provide maximum dramatic focus on this event, Shakespeare does not dramatize the reunion of the two kings and the reunion of father and daughter (Leontes and Perdita).[15] Instead, Autolycus and several gentlemen in a lengthy conversation describe the moment as "a sight which was to be seen, cannot be spoken of. There might you have beheld one joy crown another, so and in such manner that it seem'd sorrow wept to

[13] This scene vividly illustrates the division between those critics on the one hand who from the disarming perspective of the armchair take particular aim at those scenes to which they subjectively object or who absorb themselves in the high seriousness of the theme and those on the other hand who keep at least one eye on the stage and Shakespeare's comic devices. Mrs. Jameson (II, 75) predictably proclaims the bear scene the worst of all, and Sir Walter Raleigh (*Shakespeare* [London, 1953], pp. 137-138) agrees that the incident is handled recklessly and carelessly, merely an expedient for eliminating Antigonus. G. Wilson Knight (*The Crown of Life* [London, 1947], p. 101 ff.), equally predictably, insists on the profound solemnity of the event, and in like fashion Dennis Biggins views the scene with symbolic significance: the bear is an instrument of divine wrath; Antigonus himself, pursued and killed by the gods, symbolizes man degenerated to the level of a beast ("'Exit Pursued by a Bear': A Problem in *The Winter's Tale*," *SQ*, XIII [Winter, 1962], 7). Thomas Mark Parrott (*Shakespearean Comedy* [New York, 1962], pp. 385-86) reminds us that Shakespeare's company had the use of a tame bear for a production of *Mucedorus* and that Shakespeare might have taken advantage of what he knew would please the audience. Neville Coghill ("Six Points of Stage-craft in *The Winter's Tale*," *Shakespeare Survey 11* [Cambridge, 1958], pp. 34-35) confronts the issue directly in his description of the scene as "wildly or grotesquely comic," though he is not concerned with a discussion of the overall artifice of the action.

[14] This resurrection has been described both as an afterthought in revision (Hardin Craig, ed., *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* [Chicago, 1951], p. 1217) and as "one of the most effective bits of stage business in Shakespeare" (O. J. Campbell, p. 1105; see also Francis Fergusson, ed., *Shakespeare's Comedies of Romance* [New York, 1959], p. 16).

[15] Quiller-Couch (p. xxiii) calls Shakespeare's mishandling of Leontes' recognition of Perdita the "greatest fault in the play," and Van Doren (p. 279) claims Shakespeare was simply "weary of the plot." Most critics, however, agree that the playwright was thereby attempting to gain dramatic focus on the resurrection scene (see, e.g., G. B. Harrison, ed., *Shakespeare: The Complete Works* [New York, 1948], p. 1432).

take leave of them, for their joy waded in tears" (V, ii, 47-50). As for the resurrection scene itself, Paulina directs it with great flourish. Both Perdita and Leontes are so struck with the lifelikeness of the statue that they must kiss it. And, for Leontes, it is a painful remembrance of things past: "[T]his affliction has a taste/ As sweet as any cordial comfort" (76-77). The action delayed to its fullest effect, the statue is then resurrected to the amazement of characters and spectators alike.

The fourth act, with its incredible parade of disguises and musical divertissements, deserves more specific consideration.[16] The scenes are perhaps the most fantastic Shakespeare ever composed. Certainly not since the elaborate confusions of mistaken identity in *The Comedy of Errors* has he so extensively utilized structural devices—rather than character incongruity or hypocrisy—to maintain the comic perspective.

A cursory glance at the activities in scenes three and four boggles the imagination. Autolycus, a clownish and unprincipled knave who has just entered the play, disguises himself as a citizen robbed by one "settled only in rogue. Some call him Autolycus" (IV, iii, 107). This ploy he utilizes to pick the pocket of the clown (the son of the old shepherd), who attempts to help him. As we move to the shepherd's cottage, we see Perdita decked as Flora, the Goddess of flowers, for the sheep-shearing feast and Florizel the Prince as Doricles, a young swain. To this feast come Polixenes and Camillo, both disguised as rustics for the festival. Next in appearance is Autolycus, now disguised as a peddler vending the newest ballads. In the closing moments of the act Florizel, determined to win Perdita even if it means defying his father and the throne, disguises himself by exchanging clothes with the peddler (Autolycus), and Perdita dresses herself as a country wench. Autolycus in his court finery now in turn displays his authority to the terror of the shepherd and the clown. Amidst this veritable charade the spectator has enjoyed a village dance of shepherds and shepherdesses, a round of ballad singing, and an elaborate masque of satyrs (three carters, three shepherds, three neatherds, three swineherds).

The stage, then, is replete with improbabilities which create a detached perspective for the spectator. Aside from this stylization of character and action, Shakespeare utilizes Paulina (in Sicilia) and Autolycus (primarily in Bohemia) to heighten the comic tone of the play. As a variation of the comic pointer Paulina serves both to provoke laughter (even during Leontes' bitterest moments) and also to manipulate and direct—almost like a play within the play—the final climactic moments of the action;[17]

[16] The act has been branded a lengthy interlude for its own sake by E. K. Chambers, "an exercise in pastoral" (*Shakespeare: A Survey* [London, 1925], p. 299). To others the act is the second movement in the structure of the play which Goddard (II, 267) describes as thesis (Corruption), antithesis (Innocence), Synthesis (Atonement); Ernest Schanzer ("The Structural Pattern of *The Winter's Tale*," *RES*, V [April, 1964], 73) as the father, the grown daughter, the reunion; and Inga-Stina Ewbank ("The Triumph of Time in *The Winter's Tale*," *RES*, V [April, 1964], 85) as a "vehicle for the exploration of the meaning of time—in a sense of what time does to man." In perhaps the earliest examination of the play's structure, T. R. Price ("The Construction of 'A Winter's Tale,'" *Shakespeariana* [London, 1890], pp. 195-207) describes the play as a diptych—a tragic followed by a comic element, fused into a whole, a romantic play.

[17] Apparently only Professor Bethell has clearly recognized Paulina's comic possibilities

Autolycus through mockery intensifies the fictive nature of the society through his assertions that honesty is a foregone impossibility so long as he is surrounded by such naive gulls.[18]

For Paulina's first appearance on stage, in which—child in hand—she bursts in upon Leontes and subjects him to a furious tongue lashing, much depends upon the skill of the actor/actress interpreting the role. Surely Shakespeare intended her to be angry and indignant, profoundly concerned for the welfare of her queen and newborn princess. But just as surely she should be a termagant infuriated by the masculine tyrant who dispenses judgment with such preposterous casuistry. The result is a character totally functional in the narrative itself, but also one who by her loquacity provides for the spectator a release from tension in the midst of Leontes' wrath. As she prepares to see the King, she asserts that only a woman willing to use a harsh tongue will fit the occasion:

> He must be told on 't, and he shall. The office
> Becomes a woman best; I'll take 't upon me.
> If I prove honey-mouth'd, let my tongue blister
> And never to my red-look'd anger be
> The trumpet any more.
>
> (II, ii, 31-35)

Her performance does justice to her overture! Successfully breaking through her husband Antigonus and several lords who attempt to restrain her, she assaults Leontes unmercifully with a verbal barrage. When Antigonus is unable to silence her, the King exclaims, "Thou art woman-tir'd, unroosted/ By thy Dame Partlet here. . . .[L]ozel, thou art worthy to be hang'd/ that wilt not stay her tongue" (II, iii, 74-5, 109-10). Despite the context Antigonus' reply can hardly fail to raise a chuckle:

> Hang all husbands
> That cannot do that feat, you'll leave yourself
> Hardly one subject
>
> (110-12)

Branding her a "gross hag," "Lady Margery," "a callat of boundless tongue," "a lewd-tongu'd wife," Leontes implores his companions to get rid of her by any means whatever. The dramatic moment is powerful: Leontes, at the height of his fury, commands first that the infant be "consumed with fire," later that it be abandoned in a remote place; clearly, though, Shakespeare through Paulina's garrulousness is strengthening the comic perspective for the spectator at a moment when the tragic overtones most seriously impinge upon it.

So also, Paulina in the final scene prepares Leontes for the reunion with Hermione by providing the final test of his love—his agreement never to marry again except by her permission. Her reply, "that/ Shall be when your first

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in his description of her as a shrewish scold (p. 59). Traditionally, critics speak of her vehement temper (Georg Brandes, *William Shakespeare* [München, 1896], p. 924) which personifies Leontes' conscience and prepares us for the resurrection (Knight, *The Crown of Life*, p. 115). To A. Mezières (*Shakespeare, ses Oeuvres* [Paris, 1865], p. 428) she "fills the most noble role in the play."

[18]Evans (pp. 307, 309) calls Autolycus a manipulator who "insinuates into our minds the comforting idea of a controlling force." He is otherwise described as lighthearted irresponsibility (Pafford, p. ix), a "most admirable rascal (Henry Giles, *Human Life in Shakespeare* [Boston, 1868], p. 199), a "true Artist . . . *musically*, as far as his style of song is concerned" (Alfred Roffe, *A Musical Triad* [London, 1872], p. 14). Knavery sublimated into play, . . . he is like the childlike and elfin half of Falstaff come back to a world freed of all ethical complications—and excess fat" (Goddard, II, 275).

Queen's again in breath," anticipates Hermione's resurrection. From the unveiling of the statue, to the first touch, to the command that it descend and take life, Paulina dramatically forces Leontes to recreate the experience of his repentance and thus to reiterate the major statement of the drama. Again, however, Shakespeare creates emotional distance by forcing us to observe these emotions through Paulina, as she, like a puppet-master, stages her greatest scene.

Whereas Paulina is utilized to bolster the comic perspective in the two most powerfully dramatic scenes, Autolycus provides vital comedy in the lengthy fourth act which delineates the romantic interests of the second generation. Certainly the most conventionally comic character in the play, this rogue blandly announces his lineage at his first appearance:

> My traffic is sheets.... My father nam'd me
> Autolycus, who, being, as I am, litter'd under
> Mercury, was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles.
> (IV, iii, 23, 24-26)

With callous disregard of those whose honesty makes them susceptible, he tricks the clown into a merciful act during which he picks the pocket of his Samaritan, disguises himself as a peddler and to his good profit extemporizes sensationalistic ballads for Mopsa and Dorcus, and finally exchanges his peddler's rags for Florizel's court finery—again to his good profit. The opportunity for dishonest profit arises at every turn, as Autolycus tells the audience in his private conversation carried on through asides: [19]

> I see this is the time that the unjust man doth thrive....
> Sure the gods do this year connive at us, and we may do
> anything extempore.... If I had a mind to be honest, I see Fortune would not suffer me.
> (IV, iv, 687-88, 690-91, 861-62)

Among his antics he seems to delight most keenly in masking as a courtier in Florizel's apparel, allowing the clown and the shepherd to bribe him to speak a good word for them at court. Just so, in the best of comic traditions the dupe is victimized by his own trickery in the final act when, reconciliations accomplished and the shepherd and the clown established as gentlemen, Autolycus must beg their favor at court.

> I humbly beseech you, sir, to pardon me all the faults I have committed to your worship, and to give me your good report to the Prince my master. (V, ii, 160-62)

But, no doubt, his promise to amend his life is the rogue's most profitable move!

Paulina, then, is an integral part of the narrative, Autolycus entirely peripheral. But to the story as drama the two serve a similar function as comic pointer. Combined with the general stylization, these characters help to create a perspective through which Shakespeare presents a comic, yet profound, observation on human nature. It is true that the play contains a "comic" resolution—a general reconciliation of characters and a solution of all problems. But the comic experience represents more than the final moments; the transformed character is

[19] Of the broad comic possibilities in this melange of theatrical devices, Bethell comments: "Now it is hard to believe that Shakespeare—even if tired, bored, cynical, in despair and dead drunk at the time—could repeat a crudely amateur device like this 'talking aside' or 'walking before' four times in a few minutes and not intend something by it" (p. 49).

what he is, not because he has lived through, escaped, and forgotten his past experiences, but because he has been molded and transfigured by them. His past suffering has provided a kind of wisdom by purging his vision and by making him aware of true values, especially of redemptive and forgiving love. Even so, the values of life itself—and the love which makes it worthwhile—are inexpressible and, once lost or neglected, not totally recoverable. The Sicilian ruler cannot recapture totally what his folly has cost him. He might regain his wife, his daughter, and his friendship with Polixenes. But Hermione is now old, their marriage wasted in the green years; Perdita is grown, the joys of parenthood sacrified to his withering wrath; Polixenes, like him, is willing to articulate his friendship but in actuality is capable only of crawling toward the grave; Mamillius, his son, and Antigonus, his courtier, are dead. Through his irascible passion he has made himself fortune's fool, the consequences have been inescapable, and he faces a future tinged with the waste of past years. Shakespeare finds the most effective statement of this comic ambivalence through depicting a new generation which, without the waste of past years, can presumably profit from the lessons which the parents have so painfully learned.

In sum, characterization in comedy has reached realistic depths; Shakespeare has involved his character in issues and events which force decisions literally touching the emotional strings of tragedy. Yet, he has maintained the spectator's detachment—or withheld the spectator's total emotional commitment, thus producing an art form which on occasion resembles tragedy in terms of narrative but is quite distinct from it in terms of the relationship between the character and the spectator. The result is, along with *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's most complex comedy. That which he and his age inherited from Plautus and Terence as well as from the village green has become significant not for action alone, but also for character growth and transformation resulting from an exposure to love and forgiveness. Ben Jonson spoke of himself as a vatic poet when, through his satiric comedy, he took therapeutic aim on the human race. Despite their vast differences, Shakespeare in his final characterizations on the level of faith has utilized comedy for no lesser purpose.