

# Transgenerational redemption in the winter's tale



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Shakespearean romances are characterized by conclusions in which all conflicts are happily resolved. It is easy to see these resolutions as humorous but unlikely contrivances which the author invents to neatly tie together loose ends. There is sometimes, though, a deeper structure of conflict and resolution than may at first be obvious; such is the case in *The Winter's Tale*. The central conflict in *The Winter's Tale* is the violation of Nature on the part of the patriarch of the old generation, Leontes. Nature in *The Winter's Tale* is best understood as the ordered character of the universe. This is expressed in a three-tiered, hierarchically ordered structure with the divine at the apex, the monarch next, and the common man at the base. Nature is essentially static in a vertical direction, that is, an individual cannot rightly move from a lower level to a higher or vice-versa. Nonetheless, Nature does require a horizontal mobility demonstrated through the continuance of time. A violation of either vertical stability or horizontal perpetuation affronts Nature and will be punished. While Leontes' first violation is vertical in nature, it is his horizontal violation which is the greater problem.

Leontes, consumed by pride, dismisses the voice of the oracle when it challenges his conception of truth. He indignantly declares, "There is no truth at all i'th' oracle. This is mere falsehood" (III. ii. 138). This declaration marks a vertical infraction against Nature. Leontes, as monarch, ignores the voice of heaven and Apollo strikes down his son in response. This loss of a son and heir is Leontes' more important transgression, the violation of the horizontal continuity of nature. The monarch, the second level of ordered nature, cannot continue forward in time. This is the essence of Leontes' tragedy.

Redemption from this tragedy can only occur through the stabilization of the natural order. The vertical transgression against the divine requires only recognition of the transgression for it to be overcome. In *The Winter's Tale* this recognition comes directly after the death of Mammilius. Leontes says, "Apollo, pardon my great profaneness gainst thine oracle" (III. ii. 152). With these words and his proposed visitation to the graves of his family, Leontes has done what he can to personally reconcile himself with the god. He has not, however, been redeemed from his second, more profound, transgression, his lack of children. This infraction is not personal; it can only be overcome by reinitiating the halted horizontal movement. In other words, it can only be accomplished through another person, an heir to Leontes' throne. Only a second, new generation can resolve this problem, redeem Leontes, and set the natural order aright.

There is much evidence for such a transgenerational redemption in *The Winter's Tale*. The structure of the play demonstrates this clearly. The play is organized into two distinct sections based upon scene and theme. Sicilia, the locale for the first three acts, is a land dominated by court life, the self-constructed realm of man as demonstrated by the consistent location of each scene ('The Palace of Leontes'). The emphasis here is decidedly on man and his action; the external world is summarily ignored. This is the home of the old generation and is appropriately the land of the manmade tragedy. Bohemia, the scene in act four, on the other hand, is a land of resplendent abundance and fertility, populated by shepherds and other rustic folk. The court is shown only once. Moreover, Bohemia is associated with the new generation sixteen years have passed when the play first shifts

to Bohemia. Tragedy is the legacy of the sterile land of the old generation, Sicilia, whereas the next generation is bred in Bohemia. The move to Bohemia places the emphasis on the new and leads ineluctably to the play's happy conclusion.

Further evidence of the importance of the second generation is found in the prominence of the children of the two estranged rulers in the final resolution of the play. It is not until Perdita returns to Sicilia that the play can successfully end. The two lovers flee to Sicilia, the site of the original transgression, from an inhospitable Bohemia where their relationship is “opposed, as it must be, by th' power of the King” (IV. iv. 37). The fifth and final act takes place in the same, stained land as Leontes' initial sin. The new generation reunites with the old in order to stabilize the twisted axes of the natural order.

The decisive acts of the second generation are not, however, made independently. The servants of the old generation, Antigonus and Camillo, serve as intermediaries between the old and the new. Antigonus, charged by Leontes to abandon the infant Perdita, leaves a scroll indicating her royal heritage along with a chest of jewels, clearly intending for the child to be rescued. As he says, “There these, which may, if fortune please, both breed thee, pretty, and still rest thine” (III. iii. 47-49). Antigonus refuses the extreme imperatives of his enraged sovereign and thereby ensures the survival of the next generation without which there could be no redemption. Camillo also plays a vital role in facilitating the old generation's redemption by the new. Early in the play Camillo recognizes the absurdity of Leontes' action and flees to Bohemia with Polixenes rather than remain subject to the

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irrational mandates of his king. In addition to this, it is Camillo who convinces Florizel and Perdita to flee Bohemia when Polixenes denies their betrothal. Antigonus ensures the life of the second generation while Camillo reunites it with its predecessor.

Besides the evidence offered by the larger plot, the words of the characters also demonstrate the second generation's role in reinstating the natural order. At the beginning of Act 5, Leontes, Cleomenes, Dion, and Paulina speak to each other about the monarch's condition sixteen years after his original transgression. Cleomenes begins the act by saying, " Sir, you have done enough – No fault could you make which you have not redeemed" (V. i. 2-3). Leontes, however, still suffers. He replies to Cleomenes, " I cannot forget my blemishes – and so still think of the wrongs I did myself" (V. i. 8). His penance has absolved him from his vertical infraction against the god, but this is obviously not enough. Dion later refers to the " dangers, by his highness' fail of issue, [that] may drop upon his kingdom" (V. i. 27-28). Paulina characterizes the situation best in referring to the " tenor of the oracle." She says, " King Leontes will not have an heir till his lost child be found" (V. i. 37-40). This preoccupation with Leontes' lack of issue provides the response to Cleomenes' original concern. Leontes has done enough for his personal redemption, but the situation cannot be fully righted until the future of the monarchy, its horizontal perpetuation, is assured through an heir.

In the next scene three gentlemen discuss the reunion of Leontes with Polixenes and his daughter. The second gentleman declares that " the oracle is fulfilled. The king's daughter is found" (V. ii. 21). The monarchy has been saved and the natural order is thus restored. Leontes' response to this

discovery indicates a clear change of mood. According to the third gentleman, “our king [was] ready to leap out of himself for joy of his found daughter” (V. ii. 44). The dramatic shift in Leontes’ character testifies to the profundity of this event in redeeming both the king and Nature.

The above demonstrates that the tragic first generation is redeemed by a second generation, stabilizing the natural order which their parents contravened. A close examination of the natural model of the play and the transgenerational redemption yields interesting and important observations as to the philosophical underpinnings of Shakespeare’s drama. The kind of regeneration/renewal schema invoked by the play is largely naturalistic and deterministic. The new generation does not actively seek to reconcile the problems of their father’s generation. This is underscored by the fact that the children do not know their true identity and, hence, do not understand the problems of the old generation which they must address. They fulfill their objective function, renewing the natural order, simply by satisfying their subjective, personal egos; by turning to their individual concerns, love in this case, the new generation unwittingly acts to ameliorate the tragedies and conflicts of the past.

What is at stake in this play is not so much a reconciliation of man by man Leontes’ redemption from the vertical transgression but a reconciliation of Nature by Nature itself with man as an agent of natural will. Man ignores Nature, contradicts the directionality of its model, and then Nature asserts itself by ensuring that the next generation will rectify the mistakes of their predecessors. What I am here proposing is that Shakespeare injects a distinctively religious world view into his drama. Nature, the divinely

ordained order of the cosmos, remains supreme over the individual agency of man. Providential will is independent and above man's will. Disrupt the natural order, and Nature will utilize people, usually those with some relation to the offender, in correcting itself. This is the world view implicit in *The Winter's Tale*.