

Structure and absurdity in the winter's tale



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It is easy to accuse Shakespeare of absurdity and shapelessness in *The Winter's Tale*, because, as a play, it shifts between genres (tragedy and comedy) and certain events are beyond reality. However, *The Winter's Tale* is a work of art, and a well-crafted one, with a strong, convincing narrative which develops logically from Leontes' irrational jealousy and rage to his impulsively imprisoning and banishing his wife and daughter to finally being reunited with them, having undergone a psychological or spiritual change whereby he calmly and patiently rediscovers his love for Hermione and rejoins his daughter after sixteen years. In terms of form and shape, the play is structured into two very distinct halves. The settings of Sicilia and Bohemia, and the contrasts between them, divide the play generically: tragedy and comedy. While Sicilia represents Leontes' 'infected' mind, Bohemia is a place of comic relief and happiness. In the festival, Perdita is reminded by Florizel to 'apprehend nothing but jollity': this typifies the overall sentiment of Bohemia, which is in stark contrast to Sicilia, where there is nothing to celebrate and there exists a general feeling of negativity and accusation. Leontes calls his wife an 'adulteress' and 'a traitor' and generally exhibits a comportment most undignified, for example when he petulantly accuses Camillo 'you lie, you lie!' and then tells him 'I hate thee', again demonstrating an extremely indecorous manner for a king of such high status. This structure, therefore, shows Shakespeare's experimentation with genre and form, which he achieves through a shaped and developed narrative. Perhaps one of the most absurd stage directions in the play is Antigonus' final exit, 'pursued by a bear'. This sudden killing-off of a character might be argued as lazy or illogical on Shakespeare's part, and it certainly seems absurd and unusual. However, this striking moment

signposts a dramatic shift in mood and genre. In terms of form and structure, this is a pivotal point in the play, marking an end to a period of darkness, jealousy and accusation, and the fresh beginning of a much more positive, warmer stage in the play. The 'bear' is emblematic, employed by Shakespeare as a symbol of fear, alluding to the 'sprites and goblins' of the tale Mamillius tells in Act Two Scene One, where he suggests 'a sad play's best for winter'. 'Bear' also nods towards Hermione's act of 'bear[ing]' a child: a child that causes anger for Leontes and sixteen years of suffering for Hermione. Therefore, Antigonus' death, which leads-off this symbolic bear, represents the end of this fear, jealousy and negativity. Shakespeare cleverly manipulates his structure here: the Shepherd enters immediately afterwards, bringing comic relief and a tone of jollity and fun, which have been absent thus far. He discusses openly (presumably with the audience) the sexual misconduct, or 'some scape', which resulted in this 'pretty bairn' being here before him. Another seemingly absurd moment in the play is the final scene, in which Hermione's 'statue' is revealed by Paulina and Leontes rediscovers his love for her. Nonetheless, Leontes' confusion regarding the statue's 'wrinkled' appearance serves as a reminder of Hermione's sheer patience. She has waited in silence for sixteen years for this moment of reconciliation and has, of course, aged in the process. This is an important theme in the play, hence Paulina's apostrophising it in this final scene: 'O patience!' Shakespeare invests his three principle female character with this quality of patience, which contrasts with Leontes' impulsiveness, as perhaps first illustrated through his disjointed and exclamatory utterance, 'too hot, too hot'. The statue motif is, of course, a symbol of art itself, the boundaries of which Shakespeare is exploring in *The Winter's Tale*. Leontes is 'mocked by

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art' and is described by Paulina as 'transported' by it: Shakespeare suggests an almost magical quality to art here, which is developed by Paulina's fear of Leontes' accusing her of being 'assisted by wicked powers' and then justifying her 'spell' as 'lawful'. Looking at this in the wider context of the artifice of the play itself, references to 'an old tale' and 'draw the curtain' in this final moment draw attention to the fact that this is an artistic construction. Art is absurd; it is not reality. Therefore, under what obligation is Shakespeare to reflect reality in what is a highly self-conscious work of art? Another main example of apparent absurdity in the play is coincidence: critics might argue that it is totally unrealistic how the Shepherd simply happens to be looking for his two lost sheep immediately after Antigonus' death, and so just happens to discover Perdita. Equally, the flight of Florizel's falcon across the Shepherd's farm is an unlikely coincidence, allowing Florizel and Perdita to meet. Firstly, dealing with the Shepherd's discovery of Perdita, his shocked response 'what have we here?' is almost comical in terms of timing and coincidence, as the baby has been on her own there for no longer than approximately five or six seconds, before being discovered and protected again. Secondly, considering the first meeting between Florizel and Perdita, Florizel claims to 'bless the time' his 'good falcon' flew over the Shepherd's land. The verb 'bless' is suggestive of divine intervention, or providence. The final example of providence is Autolycus' bumping into the Clown: when he ironically claims to expect a place in God's 'book of virtue' after directing the Clown, the irony does, in fact, ring true, in the sense that Autolycus is employed as an instrument of fortune. He is selfishly motivated but, out of this selfishness, something good happens: in the words of the Shepherd, 'he was provided to do us good'. Therefore, all of

these absurdities and coincidences do, in fact, work together to create a unified plot. It must be remembered that *The Winter's Tale* begins a tragedy but ends a comedy, so a positive ending is to be expected; this gradual unfolding of providence leads to the final reunion at the end of the play, which demonstrates a careful and conscious plot development on Shakespeare's part. All well-structured plays reveal a gradual journey (be it a literal or a figurative one) of individual characters. *The Winter's Tale* is no exception: Leontes has changed over the sixteen years of guilt and imposed 'patience' upon him. In the final scene of the play, the entire register and semantic field of his speeches to Paulina about Hermione's statue directly contrast with his aggressive, 'diseased' characterisation in the play's beginning. For example, he describes Hermione's statue as displaying 'infancy and grace': this is interesting, as here he recognises the positive connotations of purity and innocence of 'infancy' and childhood, which he fails to see at the beginning of the play when he calls Perdita a 'bastard' and a 'brat'. Leontes has, ultimately, undergone a journey of character and has changed as a result of his self-inflicted experience. This is a very grounded, realistic message from Shakespeare about everyday domestic and family life: jealousy and impulsiveness, as well as mistrusting those who are close to us, can be overwhelmingly destructive.