

The Winter's Tale is, significantly, contemporary with Ben Jonson's masque Oberon. The latter was first performed at court for James I on January 1st, 1611, while the former, although its date of composition is normally calculated as 1610-11, was first performed (as far as can be determined) on May 15th, 1611 and performed at court in November the same year. Jonson's panegyric, replete with the paraphernalia of conventional pastoral - satyrs, stately dances, etc., explicitly associates the Prince's father with qualities of this sort:

For this indeed is he,
 My boys, whom you must quake at, when you see,
 He is above your reach...
 Before his presence you must fall or fly.
 He is the matter of virtue, and placed high...
 He is a god o'er kings; yet stoops he then
 Nearest a man, when he doth govern men;
 To teach them by the sweetness of his sway,
 And not by force...
 'Tis he that stays the time from turning old,
 And keeps the age up in a head of gold.
 That in his own true circle still doth run;
 And holds his course as certain as the sun.
 He makes it ever day, and ever spring,
 Where he doth shine, and quickens everything,
 Like a new nature: so that true to call
 Him, by his title, is to say He's all. (698-9)

Jonson's use of the Arcadian cult of Pan (a move that he repeats in Pan's Anniversary) depicts a supreme, quasi-divine and awe-inspiring royal authority administered with benevolence, and portrays the golden age ushered in by the monarch's reign as an eternal spring-like present centred around the transcendental presence of the king. These elements, I would suggest, all find their echoes in The Winter's Tale, to different effect, however.

This play deconstructs the notion of stasis by foregrounding the operations of time as a constant force of renewal and the concept of a 'natural', providentially-sanctioned and thus incontestable social order by emphasising the fictive role of art in fashioning such a humanly-constructed concept.

The role of providence purports to be significant to the ideological closure of a play where the restoration of a stable and peaceful society hinges, in actuality, on the fortuitous. The intervention of the oracle, its dismissal by Leontes and the consequences that follow ostensibly suggest a wider order embracing human affairs that cannot be crossed. The potentially tragic is cloaked in a screen of teleological purposiveness, indicative of a beneficent cosmos, that ultimately restores each person to his/her 'proper' "place" (2.1.83). Patriarchy undergoes an apotheosis: through the adoption of a suitably penitent and humble attitude on Leontes' part towards the workings of an authority higher than his own (it is required, Paulina tells him, "You do awake your faith" (5.3.95)), the crisis of succession that Dion alludes to when he stresses "What dangers by his Highness' fail of issue / May drop upon his kingdom" (5.2.27-8), is worked out to the advantage of both monarchies.

This is a play where any and everything is understood in terms of the workings of providence. Florizel, for example blesses "the time / When my good falcon made her flight across / Thy father's ground" (4.4.14-6). Perdita's recovery, her restoration to her

natural rank (the signs of which are innately recognisable) and her strategic marriage to Florizel are treated in terms no less than miraculous. "Every wink of the eye some new grace will be born" (5.2.110-1), we are told and Florizel is one "whom heavens directing / Is troth-plight to" (5.2.150-1) Perdita. The Clown and his father are depicted as instruments of fate and the dissolution and reconstitution of the ruler's family is characterised as the work ultimately of Destiny: it tends not only to the preservation of a state endangered by the absence of an heir but also to its fortification through a strategic merger with Bohemia that creates an expanded power base for them both.

In a play in which, Hotine contends, the parallels between Leontes' behaviour and that of James I would have been obvious to the theatre-going public of the day, both the chastisement and the gratifying resolution would arguably not have passed unnoticed by the monarch. James' early reign was marked by the obsessive desire to unite England and Scotland to form a Greater Britain and, consequently, furious impatience at the reluctance of parliament to approve of the scheme summed up in his motto: "Unus rex, unus grex, unus lex". James' unification project was the subject of numerous literary works of the period, including Jonson's Hymenai, which also uses the motif of a wedding to celebrate aspirations of unity. As Marcus puts it, too, "any court marriage important enough to be celebrated with a wedding masque at all was celebrated as a particular instance of the king's wider project for uniting England

and Scotland" (122).

Patriarchy undoubtedly is restored but it is the manner of this which begs to be remarked upon. The constant efforts to 'providentialise' what transpires centre on what are actually either humanly-contrived or contingent events. This is apparent in Perdita's conflation of authority with the fates and her fear lest the king should 'happen' to pass by: the king's discovery is neither accident nor destiny, but merely the material consequence of a meticulous policy of surveillance.

The same providence, moreover, that allegedly restores patriarchy also abets con-men: Autolycus claims that "Fortune would not suffer me: she drops booties in my mouth" (4.4.831-2), his pickings are so good. Elsewhere, he exclaims that "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" (673-7). The Clown mistakenly, in reference to Autolycus, pronounces that "We are bless'd in this man" (4.4.827), as does his father: "He was provided to do us good" (829-30). Autolycus, significantly, disappears from the play with nary a slap on the wrist and a cunningly obsequious expression of contrition, not out of character on his part: "I humbly beseech you, sir," he tells the Clown, "to pardon me all the faults I have committed your worship, and to give me good report to the Prince my master." (5.2.149-51). There is no sense of Autolycus having been put in his "place", as is sometimes inferred.

Providence is a sham and statements about its role are repeatedly contradicted by events themselves in the play. The only 'miraculous' element in Hermione's 'resurrection' is the degree to which it exalts the efficacy of art in obfuscating the boundaries between the humanly contrived and the (super)natural. Leontes remarks that "The fixure of her eye has motion in't, / As we are mocked with art" (5.3.67-8); he exclaims too: "If this be magic, let it be an art / Lawful as eating" (110-1). The triumph of illusion consists precisely of the extent to which it is accepted without a murmur that the statue has amazingly come to 'life'. The blurring of the margins between Nature and Art is clear in Perdita's petrified reaction - she is "standing like stone with thee" (5.3.42), Leontes remarks to the statue. This elision between the real and its representation, origin and mimesis, is further emphasised in the figure of Julio Romano who, "had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape" (5.2.97-100), and in the Nature versus Art exchange between Polixenes and Perdita over the gillyvors (4.4.89-97) where Polixenes' philosophy of hybrids expressly subverts his own notion of a 'natural' order of relations that ought to surround the hymen.

Here, what strongly emerges is that Nature is not a static and eternal category containing human activity but is itself subject to human transformation and experiment. Far from being parasitic, Art is nature's supplement and, as such, indispensable to its very

existence. The Nature/art hierarchy inverted by this passage suggests the constructed rather than pregiven nature of the 'natural' and subverts any appeal to Nature as an unchanging, self-present category as the basis for self-legitimation.

The parergonal figure of Autolycus underscores the impossibility of full presence that the play addresses. He is an exile condemned to wander as an outcast, living by thievery on the margins of the Court, skirting fairs, bear-baitings and wakes for the pickings. He is of protean identity, constantly shifting disguises, performing roles designed to gull the naive and evincing an amazing gift of the gab.

The bear is another parergonal figure which occurs at a point almost directly mid-way in the play and mediates between the two chronotopes that the Sicilian court and rural Bohemia, broadly speaking, represent (see Bristol (1991), in this regard¹). In this regard, the Shepherd's comment to his son is significant: "thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born" (3.2.113-4). The bear, Bristol argues, is traditionally a figure of boundaries and transformations, poised between winter and spring, death and life, hibernation and rejuvenation and rest and labour.

Another liminal figure in the play is that of Camillo. He is both remedy, the "Preserver of my father, now of me, / The medicine of our house" (4.4.586-7), Florizel says, and poison, disobedient servant and traitor in Sicilia. He is, according to Leontes, "a hovering temporizer, that / Canst with thine eyes at once see good

and evil, / Inclining to them both" (1.2.302-4).

The yearning for presence is clear in Act Four. Florizel claims that Perdita's "love" (4.4.376) valorises "force and knowledge" (374), in effect transforming her into a kind of transcendental signified that bestows fixed value and worth: "for her, employ them all, / Commend them and condemn them to her service, / Or to their own perdition" (376-8). Unfortunately, such a notion of presence is undermined by the very absence that Perdita's name connotes. Florizel longs to capture Perdita in a moment of stasis:

When you speak, sweet,
I'll have you do it ever; when you sing,
I'd have you buy and sell so; so give alms;
Pray so; and for the ord'ring your affairs,
To sing them too. When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o'th'sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that; move still, still so,
And own no other function. Each your doing
(So singular in each particular)
Crowns what you are doing in the present deeds,
That all your acts are queens (4.4.136-46).

The yearning to arrest time for an eternal non-moment of stasis and plenitude is futile in a play that foregrounds the operations of time, the inescapability of which defers absolute presence.

Only time itself escapes the ravages of time. Change is intrinsic to all things natural, as we have seen, far less social institutions. Only Time itself is simultaneously outside time (and thus beyond its own ravages) and within time (by its very nature):

it is in my pow'r
To o'erthrow law, and in one self-born hour
To plant and o'erwhelm custom. Let me pass

The same I am, ere ancient'st order was,
 Or what is now receiv'd. I witness to
 The times that brought them in; so shall I do
 To th' freshest things now reigning, and make stale
 The glistering of this present, as my tale
 Now seems to it (4.1.7-15).

Time vitiates the notion of stasis and of a plenitudinous moment of self-possession and presence, of a "self-born hour", in short. The present is inevitably marked by differance, the movement of the trace that serves to postpone and dislocate presence even as it makes possible the "presentation of the being-present".

The inevitability of change effectively tarnishes any Jonsonian conception of a Jacobean golden age set in an eternal present. The seasonal cycle alluded to in the very title of The Winter's Tale, far from affirming the rebirth of the status quo, represents an undeniable force for renewal in the sense of alteration and amelioration. Moreover, in blurring the boundaries between the natural and the humanly-contrived (Art, Law, Custom and Culture), The Winter's Tale undermines any recourse to nature as a means of legitimating a power, based on the metaphysics of blood, as universal, inevitable and unchanging. Ironically, the equation of nature with human authority results, through a subtle intersubstitution of qualities, in its firm identification with the transitory, humanly-fabricated, social phenomena of law and custom that are capable, as such, of being "o'erthrown". It is precisely in this sense that The Winter's Tale is ultimately most contradictory of authority.

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ENDNOTES

1. Bristol argues that The Winter's Tale occupies a liminal area between two chronotopes or modes of spatio-temporality: a cursive almanac-oriented notion of time closely related to the cyclical time of nature, and a linear sense of time inherited initially from the liturgical calendar of Christianity and fostered by emerging commercial demands. In contrast to the classical, once-upon-a-time temporality that predominates in the rest of the play (at the Sicilian court and at Delphi), the pastoral chronotope of the fourth act is situated for the most part within a concretised temporal framework of the Here-and-Now, a contemporaneous time frame of sedimented social institutions and customary practices, ballad-mongers, thieves, country feasts and nouveau riche shepherds.