Poetry and Plot
In The Winter's Tale

RUSS McDONALD

THE WINTER'S TALE, IT IS GENERALLY AGREED, is difficult to read. To move from Macbeth or Antony and Cleopatra into the world of Sicilia is to enter strange territory where a peculiar dialect is spoken. When Leontes steps apart from Hermione and Polixenes, turns to the audience, and utters his meditation beginning "Too hot, too hot," listeners and readers alike are apt to be mystified. We ought to be disturbed, of course, by the king's logic and conclusions; but more to the point, we are immediately confused by his language, and the trouble encountered in these early speeches is characteristic of the play as a whole and of the romances in general. Shakespeare's late verse is different from his earlier poetry—more complicated, elliptical, and irregular. J. M. Nosworthy, referring particularly to Cymbeline, describes the late style as follows: "Blank verse is handled with the utmost freedom, and run-on lines, light, weak, and double endings are marked characteristics. Ellipsis and elision contribute greatly to stylistic economy, and short speeches are so concentrated as to be perplexing. . . ."1 The complexity of the late verse is a critical commonplace; the sources and functions of its syntactic and prosodic complexity are less well known.2

I wish to propose a correspondence between Shakespeare's command of a new kind of blank verse in The Winter's Tale and his treatment of dramatic

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RUSS McDONALD, member of the English Department at the University of Rochester, is currently at work on a book about the structure of Shakespeare's late verse.
action and theatrical effects. Moreover, I think I can demonstrate that the structure of the late style is, like the shape of the plots, determined by Shakespeare's tragicomic conception of the structure of human experience. The relation between verse and character has long been acknowledged; the agitation of Leontes' speech attests to the disorder of his mind. Yet to say this does not take us very far toward defining the particular stylistic qualities of this or the other romances. That connection, after all, is obvious in a host of other works, notably Othello. What distinguishes The Winter's Tale is that much of the poetic language is organized periodically: convoluted sentences or difficult speeches become coherent and meaningful only in their final clauses or movements. A similar principle governs the arrangement of dramatic action: the shape and meaning of events become apparent only in the final moments of the tragicomedy. Obviously every sentence is to some extent periodic. So, too, every play needs an ending to give it meaning. In both respects, however, the late plays are distinctive. Shakespeare has exaggerated the grammatical means of suspension so that sentences or passages in these plays gain momentum and then "discharge" powerfully or unexpectedly. Likewise, in each case the significance of complex actions is altered and clarified by a surprise ending. In other words, we find a parallel between syntactical and narrative satisfaction, between small and large units of dramatic structure, and such consistency is a function of the tragicomic vision that has generated both story and style. The late plays present a world that is not immediately comprehensible, but one that eventually rewards bewildered characters and spectators with understanding and happiness. By analyzing the words used to create that world, I will try, in the pages that follow, to demonstrate the truth of Derek Traversi's observation that in the plays of the final period "Shakespeare's power of uniting poetry and drama is now such that the plot has become simply an extension, an extra vehicle of the poetry." 

The reader will recognize here a fundamentally structuralist argument, an attempt at "locating and analyzing relationships between . . . one part of a text and another." In identifying these relationships and exploring their artistic implications I have followed the lead of Tzvetan Todorov, who has written persuasively on structural unity—the identity of narrative and style—in the fantastic tales of Henry James:

The Jamesian narrative is always based on the quest for an absolute and absent cause. Let us consider the terms of this phrase one by one. There exists a cause: this

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3 My attempt to connect language with action rather than character finds support from a recent article by Anne Barton, "Leontes and the spider: language and speaker in Shakespeare's Last Plays," in Shakespeare's Styles: Essays in honour of Kenneth Muir, ed. Philip Edwards, Inga-Stina Ewbank, and G. K. Hunter (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 131-50: "Shakespeare not only does not try to conceal, he positively emphasises the fact that his material is the archetypal stuff of legend and fairy-tale. That we respond to it as something far more powerful and engaging than 'Cinderella' or 'Beauty and the Beast' testifies to the subtlety with which Shakespeare has adjusted his language and dramatic art to the demands of a new mode: one in which plot, on the whole, has become more vivid and emotionally charged than character" (p. 149). Also see Marion Trousdale, "Style in The Winter's Tale," Critical Quarterly, 18 (1976), 25-32.

4 For a discussion of the way that sentences can "discharge," see Eric S. Rabkin, Narrative Suspense (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1973), pp. 85-89. My use of the term is somewhat less specific and complex than his; although his comments are revealing, they seem unnecessarily dependent on jargon.


word must here be taken in a very broad sense; it is often a character but sometimes, too, an event or an object. The effect of this cause is the narrative, the story we are told. It is absolute: for everything in this narrative ultimately owes its presence to this cause. But the cause is absent and must be sought: it is not only absent but for the most part unknown; what is suspected is its existence, not its nature. The quest proceeds; the tale consists of the search for, the pursuit of, this initial cause, this primal essence. The narrative stops when it is attained. On one hand there is an absence (of the cause, of the essence, of the truth), but this absence determines everything; on the other hand there is a presence (of the quest), which is only the search for an absence. Thus the secret of Jamesian narrative is precisely the existence of an essential secret, of something not named, of an absent and super-powerful force which sets the whole machinery of the narrative in motion.  

Having firmly established the presence of this absence in tale after tale, Todorov goes on to show that “the complexity of James’s style derives entirely from this principle of construction and not from a referential (for instance, psychological) complexity. ‘Style,’ ‘feelings,’ ‘form,’ and ‘content’ all say the same thing, all repeat the same figure in the carpet.” Todorov’s argument moves from narrative cause to stylistic effect. I prefer, in treating The Winter’s Tale, to reverse the process, to offer a descriptive survey of some major stylistic traits and then to relate them to the vision informing Shakespearean tragicomedy, the dramatist’s confidence in the Providential ordination of human affairs. It must be significant that the poet’s creation of a new style coincides with the playwright’s mastery of a new mode and with the imagist’s revised conception of experience. In The Winter’s Tale, even the syntax is tragicomic.  

I

Inch-thick, knee-deep; o’er head and ears a fork’d one.  
Go, play, boy, play: thy mother plays, and I  
Play too; but so disgrac’d a part, whose issue  
Will hiss me to my grave: contempt and clamour  
Will be my knell. Go, play, boy, play.  

(I.ii.186–90) 

The most immediately striking feature of Leontes’ poetry is its unpoetic sound. The crucial early speeches are rough, harsh, even cacophonous. In this passage consonants assault the ear, especially k’s, d’s, p’s, and t’s, letters that stop the line and compel the speaker to start over, as in “Inch-thick.” Sounds normally euphonious here create the opposite effect: in the clause “whose issue / Will hiss me to my grave,” the sibilants and internal rhyme produce a decidedly sinister mood. The choppy rhythms are characteristic of the liberal approach to meter in Shakespeare’s late style. Caesurae intrude repeatedly to disrupt the

8 Ibid., p. 154.  
flow, as the heavy punctuation implies. Although the lines submit to ordinary scansion, their harsh music arises from a disjunction between the familiar beat of the blank verse and the violent irregularity of the spoken rhythms, so that the chief impression they convey is one of turbulence and strife. And the cacophony of the lines I have quoted is typical. Consider such other instances as “be it concluded, / No barricado for a belly”; or “Come, captain, / We must be neat; not neat, but cleanly, captain”; or “any flax-wench that puts to / Before her troth plight.”

Leontes’ discordant music owes much to Shakespeare’s metrical liberties. It is well established that in the early dramatic poetry the rhetorical unit tends to coincide with the poetic unit—the thought ceases with the line—and that as the poet gains experience with iambic pentameter his use of stops becomes much more liberal and varied. By the time of the romances, Shakespeare uses the caesura to achieve a wide range of effects. Unwilling to wait for the end of the line, he stops early and stops often. A distinctive trick of the late style is Shakespeare’s devotion to the pause in mid-foot:

Why, he that wears her like her medal, hanging
About his neck, Bohemia; who . . .

They’re here with me already; whisp’ring . . .

Make that thy question, and go rot!

Is goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps . . .

Such freedom with pauses is consistent with the increase in feminine endings and with an evident fondness for trochees (points to be taken up later), and it permits immense rhythmic variation; Shakespeare exploits such possibilities, especially at the beginning of The Winter’s Tale, to suggest agitation and tension.

The pursuit of violent and unexpected effects extends beyond individual sounds to the placement of words and phrases within sentences. Jonathan Smith has identified two distinct languages in the king’s early speeches: first, a courtly dialect based in Latinate polysyllables, and second, the language of blood, a simpler style consisting mainly of Anglo-Saxon monosyllables. Smith dem-

10 This passage is printed in the Folio thus:

Ynch-thick, knee-deepe; ore head and eares a fork’d one.
Goe play (Boy) play: thy Mother playes, and I
Play too; but so disgrac’d a part, whose issue
Will hisse me to my Graue: Contempt and Clamor
Will be my Knell. Goe play (Boy) play, . . .

Although the stops and starts are indicated by different (and less explicit) means than in modern texts, the jerkiness and vocal complexity of the lines are still apparent.

11 George T. Wright’s discussion of the dynamics of the late verse is pertinent here: “The line is more and more cast into structural doubt, first by late-line pauses and free enjambment, . . . by sentences that flow freely over the margins, and by rashes of short-line exchanges that hover between verse and prose; later by a rhetoric that virtually abandons the flowing sentence for brief and abrupt bursts of staccato phrases that seem almost, at times, in their jagged discourse, to mock both line and phrase.” (“The Play of Phrase and Line in Shakespeare’s Iambic Pentameter,” p. 155).

onstrates that the fierce diction of the second type quickly overpowers the more formal style, and we may extend his analysis to show that the basic language of blood is spiked with unusual and arresting nouns and verbs. Many of Leontes' celebrated passages consist almost exclusively of flat, workaday words that serve as foils to set off a shocking verb or a memorable image:

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. . . .

(I.ii.190–96)

Everybody remembers this speech, thanks mainly to the uncommon images—"sluic'd," "fish'd," and the smarmy Sir Smile—words that stand out in relief against a background of homogeneous monosyllables. Those words that bear the pressure of the prosody also bear the pressure of meaning. For five lines the actor finds very little to emphasize except "cuckolds," and thus Shakespeare encourages him to pounce upon the nasty-sounding "sluic'd."

Even more striking than particular sounds or words is the architecture of the king's sentences, which manifest these same principles of harshness and variety. Leontes' syntax is, for the most part, choppy and complex. Clauses pile upon clauses, sentences run to uncommonly great length, verbs may lag behind their subjects by several lines, and often long sentences refuse to yield up their meanings until the last possible moment. A glance at the text reveals, in addition to the commas and verbal arresters already mentioned, an abundance of dashes, parentheses, and other such grammatical interrupters. The passage just quoted illustrates this feature, but there are still more impressive instances:

Ha' not you seen, Camillo?
(But that's past doubt: you have, or your eye-glass
Is thicker than a cuckold's horn) or heard?
(For to a vision so apparent rumour
Cannot be mute) or thought? (for cogitation
Resides not in that man that does not think)
My wife is slippery?

(I.ii.267–73)\(^\text{13}\)

We might backtrack briefly to observe that "slippery" functions as does "sluic'd," as the odd word in the critical spot. But the important point now is that Shakespeare has controlled the grammar of the sentence to augment the effect of the final clause. Without it the sentence is meaningless, and yet getting to it is no easy matter. Leontes begins by posing a question for Camillo, but before disclosing its substance he leads the auditor through a maze of parenthetical elements and qualifying material: a series of three verbs, "seen," "heard," and "thought," alternates with a corresponding series of lengthy phrases asserting that Camillo must have seen, heard, and thought. The effect is that of a grammatical labyrinth in which we make our way through a series of baffles, then

\(^{13}\) Frank Kermode, in his edition of *The Winter's Tale* (New York: Signet, 1963), prints this speech with dashes instead of parentheses, thus making the disjunctive quality all the more evident.
turn a corner, and find ourselves faced with the beast—"My wife is slippery."

Another way of putting it is to say that we are suspended in air, left dangling through six circumlocutory lines, until we land with a jolt on the final clause; and this tactic of suspension may be the most revealing stylistic trait of The Winter's Tale. The very first sentence of the play is just such a conditional—"If you shall chance, Camillo, to visit Bohemia"—and Shakespeare repeats the construction again and again. According to the familiar form of such suspensions, the ear requires that the conditional beginning be resolved, but Shakespeare often elaborates and protracts the first term to such a degree that we may lose our way before receiving syntactical satisfaction. In addition to the strict "if-then" constructions, of which there are many, Shakespeare also includes a host of sentences that in one way or another delay their completions until the very end:

This entertainment
May a free face put on, derive a liberty
From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom,
And well become the agent: 't may, I grant:
But to be paddling palms, and pinching fingers,
As now they are, and making practis'd smiles
As in a looking-glass; and then to sigh, as 'twere
The mort o'th' deer—O, that is entertainment
My bosom likes not, nor my brows. . . .

(I.ii.111–19)

Such a construction, although a strict Latinist might object to the designation, is periodic, if not in fact certainly in effect, and its operation is representative of Shakespeare's syntactic choices throughout the play. As Carol Thomas Neely points out, "The referents of the speech are not clear until its end, and even then [Leontes] refers to his guest and his wife only by the pronoun, 'they.'"¹⁴ Leontes begins with a possibility (that such behavior might be innocent), enumerates in a string of verbal and prepositional phrases the ways in which it might be construed as proper, summarizes this interpretation in a conditional clause calculated to prepare for its rejection, then demolishes the case for purity in the massive infinitive phrase beginning with "But," and finally recapitulates his conclusion in the appended clause altering the sense of "entertainment." Technically speaking, the sentence owes its effect to the rhetorical device known as anacoluthon, a statement that begins in one direction, shifts in the center, and concludes in the opposite direction. Here the conjunction "But" signifies the reversal.

My use of the term "periodic" demands some explanation, especially since it is here applied to poetry, and not only to sentences but also to whole speeches. The poetic sentences I consider here lack the tight grammatical organization normally characteristic of periodic sentences in prose. In fact, the syntactical arrangement of most sentences in Shakespeare's late verse is discursive; they are made up of loosely connected phrases and clauses which are often interrupted by parentheses, dashes, and changes of direction.¹⁵ The practical effect

¹⁵ James Sutherland, who notices the abundance of parentheses and syntactical obstacles in the verse of the late plays, disputes the common notion that these are calculated to suggest spontaneity and naturalism in the characters' speech; instead, he attributes these stops and starts to Shake-
of this complication is to postpone the full disclosure of meaning until the end of the sentence. For example:

Dost think I am so muddy, so unsettled,
To appoint myself in this vexation; sully
The purity and whiteness of my sheets,
(Which to preserve is sleep, which being spotted
Is goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps)
Give scandal to the blood o’th’ prince, my son,
(Who I do think is mine and love as mine)
Without ripe moving to’t? Would I do this?
(I.ii.325-32)

This passage captures the mutual effect of digressive and periodic strategies found throughout the first three acts. An instructive variation occurring more than once is the sentence which is finished, and completely revised, by another character. When Leontes summons the lords to follow him with the words “We are to speak in public; for this business / Will raise us all,” Antigonus adds privately, “To laughter, as I take it, / If the good truth were known” (II.ii.198-99). Antigonus not only reverses the meaning of Leontes’ words but also radically alters the tone at the end of the scene. Numerous passages take this general form, in which the speaker changes direction or moves back and forth through a series of qualifying phrases; and often the meaning of the passage depends entirely upon the shape of the very last phrase.

Leontes is not the only speaker who employs such loose periods. One of the most stunning suspensions comes from Paulina, in one of the most crucial scenes of the play, after the trial when she announces the death of the queen:

What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
In leads or oils? What old or newer torture
Must I receive, whose every word deserves
To taste of thy most worst? Thy tyranny,
Together working with thy jealousies
(Fancies too weak for boys, too green and idle
For girls of nine), O think what they have done,
And then run mad indeed: stark mad! for all
Thy by-gone fooleries were but spices of it.
That thou betray’dst Polixenes, ’twas nothing;
That did but show thee, of a fool, inconstant
And damnable ingrateful: nor was’t much,
Thou would’st have poison’d good Camillo’s honour,
To have him kill a king; poor trespasses,
More monstrous standing by: whereof I reckon
The casting forth to crows thy baby daughter,
To be or none or little; though a devil
Would have shed water out of fire, ere done ’t:
Nor is’t directly laid to thee the death
Of the young prince, whose honourable thoughts

speare’s haste and willingness to content himself with a vague “impressionism” (“The Language of the Last Plays,” pp. 146-47). It strikes me that neither explanation is adequate. Hesitation, revision, and reversal manifest themselves not only in Shakespeare’s creation of language but also in his characterization and arrangement of action.
Paulina’s obloquy is a masterpiece of calculation, for the speech throws all its force upon the fact of death. The beginning is, to say the least, indirect: Paulina utters a string of questions about how Leontes plans to torture her. Although this gambit is initially confusing, it coheres logically with the remainder of the passage it introduces, for torturing the faithful Paulina would be yet another of the errors and harsms that the king’s “Fancies” have visited upon those who love and serve him. Moreover, the extreme images with which she begins indicate the damage that Leontes has already inflicted. As the tirade unfolds, we perceive that Paulina’s joint purposes are intertwined: she will simultaneously condemn Leontes and reveal his most appalling crime. The first objective waits upon the second, which remains unknown until the conclusion. Every line looks forward explicitly or implicitly to the climax, for every folly and act of cruelty must be compared with Leontes’ last incomparable outrage. Thus not only is the tirade constructed periodically, but it also declares its periodic form early, just after the initial questions. Paulina insists, as she ticks off the specific harms done so far, that each must pale in light of what she will announce. It might be said also that the shape of her revelation is fundamentally theatrical. The plaint is obviously arranged to create a powerful effect upon the main member of her audience, Leontes, and is tailored for and addressed directly to him. But it works similarly upon the stage spectators, acknowledged in “O lords,” and upon the theatre audience. The auditor is made to wait, to lean forward in anticipation of horror. This affective aim is consistent with Paulina’s theatrical manner elsewhere. Pafford speaks of “the calculated tactlessness which is her favourite weapon,” and her directorial style in the final scene is an expansion of her strategy in this crisis.

The emotion and energy of her condemnation make themselves felt in the violent music Shakespeare has composed. The syncopated effect of one rhythm superimposed upon another is especially noticeable here. The lines teem with spondees: “what wheels,” “most worst,” “stark mad,” “‘cry woe!’” Another kind of syncopation is discerned by F. E. Halliday, who asserts that “Shakespeare, particularly in his later plays, imposes a secondary rhythm on the primary iambics” by integrating “natural trochees” into the basic iambic pattern. Halliday illustrates the method with a well-known line of Alonso’s in The Tempest: “I’ll seek him deeper than e’re plummet sounded.” This same practice accounts for the richly polyphonic texture of Paulina’s oration. A third of the lines contain at least two such falling disyllables, and many of these are connected, as Halliday shows they are in the passage from The Tempest, by alliteration and assonance: “newer torture,” “monstrous standing,” “little . . . devil,” “Blemish’d . . . gracious.” In each case the rhetorical movement of

16 Introduction, pp. lxxiv--v.
the sentence strains against the fundamental beat of the verse, and the tension creates a rich kind of music.17

Pace is important also, for it accelerates markedly. After the broken rhythms of the opening interrogatives, the passage gathers speed through the recitation of the king's crimes and moves purposefully toward its horrifying end. This swift pace is not easily or immediately achieved: for example, the general attack on Leontes' "tyranny" and "Fancies" (II. 179–84), with its halts and jerks, its repetitions and appositives and interjections, necessarily retards the speaker. But the specific catalogue of crimes that follows unfolds in a sentence that extends over seventeen lines. Of course the quickening pace is impeded by brief stops and a set of obstacles just prior to the conclusion: "but the last—O lords, / When I have said, cry 'woe!'—the queen. . . ." Paradoxically, however, the collision of such intrusive clauses with the established momentum of the sentence propels the listener even more rapidly toward the revelatory end. Paulina delays slightly with the repetition of "the queen," and the sibilants and elisions of the penultimate line thrust us toward the ugly monosyllable, "dead." But what about the remainder, that anti-climactic final clause? It records a fitting conclusion that has not occurred, and so the words "drop down" with a monosyllabic flatness, alliteration and assonance echoing the hollowness denoted. It is significant that the queen's death is neither the end of the sentence nor the end of the play.

Paulina bewails disorder in poetry that threatens to burst out of its formal limits. By a variety of means Shakespeare sees to it that the speech is crowded with words. Syntactical complexity tends to elongate the lines, as in the repeated questions needing a pause after each: "What wheels? racks? fires? what flaying? boiling?" Extra syllables abound: ten of the twenty-seven lines end with a soft syllable. One line, "Thy by-gone fooleries were but spices of it," contains twelve syllables, and even though fooleries is compressed into two, the end of the line is loaded with an additional beat, in spices of, thus throwing the emphasis on the still-nebulous it. Elision is frequently demanded: "That thou betray'dst Polixenes, 'twas nothing"; "The sweet'st, dear'st creature's dead." Order in the lines is barely maintained.18 Generally speaking, the crowded lines and weak endings dominate the beginning of the passage. As Paulina moves more swiftly toward her end, the line endings become more regular and the iambic beat more audibly insistent. "More regular" is a relative term, to be sure: there are plenty of interruptions and metrical kinks. But it is fair to say that Paulina's creation of an ordered whole from a mysterious and chaotic beginning is mirrored in the increasing regularity of the verse.

17 The Poetry of Shakespeare's Plays, pp. 31–32: "This combination of rhythm and assonance, each emphasizing the other, adds another quality to the later poetry, in which whole speeches are integrated and harmonized by the complex contrapuntal interweaving of a double rhythm with a melodic theme." The general survey of Shakespearean verse that constitutes Halliday's introductory chapter is extremely suggestive. When he turns to each stage of Shakespeare's career in successive chapters, however, his application of his general observations does not fulfill the promise of the introduction. Still, Halliday's book is one of the few critical attempts to study particular characteristics of Shakespeare's dramatic poetry in different periods of its development.

18 Dorothy L. Sipe, Shakespeare's Metrics, Yale Studies in English 166 (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1968), objects to the critical emphasis on irregularity in Shakespeare's verse, particularly to the study of contrapuntal rhythm suggested by Halliday and others. Her unshakable purpose is to establish "that Shakespeare was in fact greatly concerned about preserving the regularity of his verse" (p. 6). This aim deafens her to the subtlety of Shakespeare's rhythmic experiments.
Shakespeare embellishes this poetic structure with musical devices that reinforce the hearer's sense of its complexity. The introductory lines create a mood of incantation, particularly with the repetition of / sounds in lines 177 and 178. Indeed, the entire passage seems unusually alliterative: "What wheels?"; "To taste of thy most worst"; "green and idle / For girls of nine"; "kill a king"; "More monstrous standing by"; "casting forth to crows"; "thee the death"; "could conceive a gross and foolish sire / Blemish'd his gracious dam"; "sweet'st dear'st creature's dead." Similarly, internal rhymes create color: "newer torture"; "every word deserves . . . worst"; "Together working"; "damnable ingrateful." Sometimes these tactics are combined to create extraordinary aural effects: "O, think what they have done / And then run mad indeed. . . ." I may appear to have wandered far from the main issue, the periodic structure of Paulina's announcement, but all these poetic tricks contribute to the power of the verbal construction, adding a weight and difficulty that makes the resolution all the more impressive.

The supreme example of syntactic and prosodic complexity is also one of the most memorable speeches in the play:

Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? stopping the career
Of laughter with a sigh (a note infallible
Of breaking honesty)? horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? wishing clocks more swift?
Hours, minutes? noon, midnight? and all eyes
Blind with the pin and web, but theirs; theirs only,
That would unseen be wicked? is this nothing?
Why then the world, and all that's in it, is nothing,
The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,
My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,
If this be nothing.

(I.ii.284–96)

This astonishing passage is a compendium of all the stylistic traits I have mentioned. Its dissonant music is made of assonance ("Is whispering," "leaning cheek . . . cheek . . . meeting," "wishing . . . swift," "If this"), alliteration ("skulking . . . corners . . . clocks," "then the . . . that's . . . nothing"), and the incantatory repetition of "nothing." Trochaic and iambic rhythms compete so violently that some lines seem to create their own unique rhythm. A majority of the lines end weakly, and caesurae are numerous and random. Ellipsis contributes to the artfully manipulated pace, particularly the dropped gerund ("wishing") in line 291. Although the first two-thirds of the speech consists of a series of rhetorical questions, the effect is of one amplified suspension in which the actor's voice must rise repeatedly to indicate the question and the listener expects some kind of descent, some turn that will clarify the purpose of the endless interrogatives. When the rejoinder does finally come, it is strong enough to balance the beginning—if this is unreal, then reality does not exist—and the strength of the answering term is fortified by the repetition of "nothing." Worth noting here, as in Paulina's great suspension, is the contribution of the additional clause tacked onto the end of the sentence so that the periodic effect is qualified: in this case the redundant but forceful "if this be nothing" returns us to the list of conditions, insisting ironically that this is something indeed.
Most important, of course, is the double irony: we understand what Leontes will not or cannot, that this is nothing. As a number of critics have pointed out, Anne Barton most clearly, Shakespeare throughout the last plays affords the audience a superior understanding of the speaker's words, asks the audience to look beyond the specific speech and situation to the larger meaning. For all the difficulty of the style, we penetrate to the essential truth of the words.

Such complicated periodicity seems to me prominent and frequent enough to be considered a major stylistic feature of *The Winter's Tale*. The reader who is hospitable to the argument thus far will find plenty of additional proof, but a couple of further examples are worth citing. Polixenes threatens Perdita in this style:

> And you, enchantment,—  
> Worthy enough a herdsman; yea, him too,  
> That makes himself, but for our honour therein,  
> Unworthy thee. If ever henceforth thou  
> These rural latches to his entrance open,  
> Or hoop his body more with thy embraces,  
> I will devise a death as cruel for thee  
> As thou art tender to 't.

(IV.iv.435-42)

The obstructions and convolutions leading to the final main clause—and even the conclusion is internally periodic—echo the language of Leontes, whose tyrannical place Polixenes has taken in the fourth act. At one time or another, virtually all the characters look to the future in language that propels us forward—Florizel, Camillo, even Hermione, whose innocence is usually expressed in uncommonly plain language. When Antigonus, recounting his dream, quotes the ghost's instructions to him, "Hermione's" style becomes complex and periodic:

> "Good Antigonus,  
> Since fate, against thy better disposition,  
> Hath made thy person for the thrower-out  
> Of my poor babe, according to thine oath,  
> Places remote enough are in Bohemia,  
> There weep, and leave it crying: and, for the babe  
> Is counted lost for ever, Perdita,  
> I prithee, call't. . . ."

(III.iii.27-34)

Although there are exceptions, periodic verbal structures appear most obviously in the first half of the play, when the conflict is most intense. But this distribution may itself be significant. As it is in particular sentences, so it is in the play as a whole: complexity yields to simplicity and clarity.

II

These distinctive periodic forms are intimately related to the dramatic structure in which they appear: the shape of language and action proceeds from...
Shakespeare's tragicomic understanding of human experience. In other words, the playwright has devised a distinctive language for the distinctive form of his last works. Such a correspondence of style and structure has been discerned in other areas of Shakespearean drama: "the argumentative character of the prose, its tendency to stick close to its syllogistic basis and to acknowledge this openly through the abundance of logical links—these one might relate to the network of causality that composes the intrigue plot." So it is with the poetry of *The Winter's Tale* and of the tragicomedies in general. The organization of the verse recapitulates the arrangement of event, and both kinds of structure correspond to Shakespeare's conception of the course of human life.

Putting the matter as simply as possible, we may say that the shape of the verse reflects the shape of the plot. In general terms, this is self-evident. The constricted poetry of the first three acts yields to the lyricism and simplicity of the last two, just as the setting takes us from the confined madness of Sicilia to the pastoral liberty of Bohemia. But it is possible to be still more specific, to identify a formal parallel between important speeches, even individual sentences, and the tragicomic movement of the action as a whole. The shocking and mystifying revelation of Leontes' suspicions is set forth in harsh and confusing poetry. The arresting, ugly nouns and verbs standing in relief against a neutral background—"and little think she has been sluic'd in's absence"—are represented on the stage by the solitary figure of Leontes set apart from and disrupting the concord of the great second scene. The king's words are at first opaque and disorienting because the universe into which Shakespeare thrusts us is initially puzzling. The difficulty of the verse attests to the complexity of the action it is used to portray, and this is not to say only that the disorder of Leontes' language signifies the chaos of his mind, but that the initial, apparent confusion of the verse represents the apparent disorder of mortal affairs in general.

For the listener, to come to terms with the language spoken is to apprehend the world depicted, and in neither case is this an easy undertaking. Modern interest in structural linguistics has focused attention on the temporal and linear primary meaning of their own words—as in the reiterated description of the lowly Perdita as a 'queen' (p. 147).


21 The sort of stylistic and narrative correspondence I am suggesting here has been discerned in a number of authors by a number of critics. Apart from Todorov, some of the most lucid such analysis has been performed by Eric S. Rabkin. Quoting a long sentence from *Absalom, Absalom!* he shows how the syntax reflects narrative structure: "This interlocking, overlapping principle in fact is reflected in the method of multiple, overlaid narrative that Faulkner employs in *Absalom, Absalom!* and the constant effort to get to the heart of the thought behind the sentence is much like the constant effort of the narrators to get to heart of their tale, the central, untold story of Thomas Sutpen. The structural similarities between the manner of multiple narration and the style may be called, in opposition to image-structure, syntax-structure. Both image-structure and syntax-structure cooperate to foist the fictional reality subliminally on the reader" (*Narrative Suspense*, p. 56). Rabkin also illustrates a different brand of syntax-structure at work in *Tristram Shandy*. Virtually all such analyses of which I am aware are confined to prose fiction. It seems reasonable and fruitful to attempt such a study of dramatic poetry, as long as we are aware of its conventions and special requirements. The particular problems associated with iambic pentameter created for oral delivery are addressed by O. B. Hardison, Jr., "Blank Verse before Milton," *Studies in Philology,* 81 (1984), 253–74.
quality of all speech. As Robert Scholes puts it in discussing the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, "not only is each sign linear, each utterance is even more obviously so. Unlike the picture, which can display various significant elements simultaneously, the elements of a verbal narrative must be delivered in an order which is itself significant. The sign, then, as well as the sentence and all larger units of discourse, is primarily narrative. . . ."22 The linearity of speech causes understanding to occur gradually, as the syntagmatic structure establishes itself: units of language modify one another, meaning is altered, until completion is finally achieved. Just as the massive periods of The Winter’s Tale are founded upon devices of delay and surprise, so Shakespeare extends the narrative potentialities of sentences; and he does so in a manner approximating his protraction of the entire narrative. The auditor is drawn into complex verbal structures without being able to predict their destination, propelled in one direction and then another by unexpected, contradictory clauses, and finally delivered to clarity by a conclusion that makes sense of all that has gone before. And much the same is true of the plot of The Winter’s Tale. The great syntactical suspensions approximate the suspensions in the action, the withholding of information that would complete and explicate an imperfect pattern. As listeners and spectators, we are forced to wait, left suspended, denied immediate understanding of a jarring phrase or a surprising event until the end of the sentence or the end of the play.

Other properties of Shakespeare’s late style may be regarded as parallel to the larger elements of structure. The binary form of numerous sentences, such as the “if-then” construction, is equivalent to the tragicomic structure of the entire work. The second half modifies and illuminates the opening, which would be incomprehensible without the final segment. Dramatically and grammatically, the conflicts of the first unit are not canceled by the resolution of the second; rather, each term qualifies the other, and the meaning of the conclusion is enriched by the difficulties preceding it. Moreover, the choppy and hypotactic properties of the syntax are consistent with the shape of the action. The plot begins in one direction, with Leontes’ jealousy; becomes more complex with the flight of Camillo and Polixenes, the illness of Mamillius, and the banishment of Perdita; reverses itself with Hermione’s divine vindication and Leontes’ epiphany; is intruded upon unexpectedly by the entrance of Time; begins afresh with the pastoral romance of Florizel and Perdita; changes course when Polixenes interferes (in a conversation with a surprise ending, [Discovering himself]); and is finally given coherence by the return of the young lovers to Sicilia, the reunion of the kings, and the restoration of the queen. Even more specifically, just as prosodic devices such as alliteration and internal rhyme give music to the language, so elements of action and character create emotional discord and harmony in the progress of the story. Ellipsis in the style corresponds to omissions in the plot: the gap of sixteen years, the reported deaths, the described reunion. The plot itself might be considered an enormous dramatic anacoluthon: its initial movement is negative, Time is the dash signifying a shift in direction, and the final movement is favorable.

The auditor’s mixed response to the style—puzzlement and ironic confidence—is related to the spectator’s response to the telling of the tale. Suspense and irony can often be mutually exclusive, as Wayne Booth has demonstrated in his study of narrative technique: the author who wishes to create suspense

22 Structuralism in Literature, p. 17.
must suppress information, and this tactic is incompatible with irony, which gives the reader superior insight. But Shakespeare has contrived to partake of the advantages of both. We are aware, as Leontes is not, that Perdita is alive and will serve as the means of his regeneration. And yet the play also surprises us, denying us knowledge of Hermione’s survival until the very end of the work, challenging our confidence in our superior understanding and thus transforming our comprehension of the world we thought we knew.

Shakespeare has arranged the verse so that it illuminates and comments on two central themes of The Winter’s Tale, the complexities of perception and the importance of time in the process of perception. Todorov, in commenting on James’s supernatural stories, argues that “the fantastic text is not characterized by the simple presence of supernatural phenomena or beings, but by the hesitation which is established in the reader’s perception of the events represented. Throughout the tale, the reader wonders (in the same way that a character often does, within the work) if the facts reported are to be explained by a natural or a supernatural cause, if they are illusions or realities.” The subtleties of the Jamesian style, then, contribute to the reader’s bewilderment, and it strikes me that something similar occurs to those who witness—or, in seventeenth-century parlance, “hear”—a performance of The Winter’s Tale. There is a sense in which perception is the central problem of the play. The agon arises from Leontes’ “Fancies,” and in the statue scene Paulina plays with the problem of illusion in her warning to Leontes: “No longer shall you gaze on’t, lest your fancy / May think anon it moves” (V.iii.60–61). When “Hermione comes down,” we “perceive she stirs” (V.iii.103), but we are uncertain what to make of this perception. It is appropriate, therefore, that for much of the play Shakespeare devised a poetic style that engages us directly in the activity of perception and makes us aware of the difficulty. The combination of hypotaxis and parataxis, the violent rhythms, the false endings, and the withholding of syntactical and referential satisfaction allow us to participate at all times in the problems of comprehension.

Shakespeare’s manipulation of the diachronic potentialities of the poetic sentence or speech contributes to his revelation of the importance of time in human affairs. As Time, the Chorus, puts it, “I that please some, try all”; he goes on to claim that he “makes and unfolds error” (IV.i.1–2). Leontes’ self-inflicted miseries, which seem inexplicable and intolerable at the end of the third act, are assuaged and almost mended by the revelations and satisfactions of the ending. The words of Paulina’s namesake are pertinent in this context: “we see through a glass, darkly.” And the implied principles of patience and faith apply to the style as well. Clauses and sentences can be trying, even incomprehensible, while one is lost in their midst; but they finally cohere into a pleasing and meaningful pattern.

This correspondence of language, form, and dramatic universe suggests an identification among speaker, dramatist, and Providence that clarifies the meaning not only of the play in question but of the tragicomic universe as well. If Leontes’ verse does not immediately make itself clear, neither does Shakespeare’s construction of events, nor does the divine architect’s disposition of man’s experience. An event the characters regard as a disaster may in fact be

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25 Wright makes some brief but fascinating suggestions about this sort of correspondence: see “The Play of Phrase and Line,” pp. 157–58.
the prelude to unexpected joy. The grammatical delays and obstacles that temporarily obscure meaning in the middle of a protracted sentence are parts of a larger whole that is eventually elucidated. Something similar may be said of particular happenings in the action of The Winter's Tale. And Shakespeare implies that our world, of which the play is the mimetic instrument, should be interpreted likewise. For the mariners in The Tempest, the storm that interferes with their journey is catastrophic; for Alonso it is a dead end from which there is no escape. But as soon as the second scene opens, the spectator understands the storm, in the grammatical terms I have been using, as nothing more than an introductory element, a subordinate clause leading to heightened understanding and fulfillment.

The method set forth here might be extended to other sections of The Winter's Tale and to other plays. The great penultimate scene, in which three unfamiliar gentlemen announce and annotate the numerous happy reunions, is fertile territory for such work. The prose they speak contains delays and indirections similar to those that mark Leontes' poetry, and again we are suspended, made to wait for and to wonder about the final phase of the action. Indeed, the entire scene is a grand hesitation. A figure who shares Leontes' verbal style is Posthumus in Cymbeline, notably in his mad aria concluding the second act. Attention to Prospero's narrative in the second scene of The Tempest reveals the same stylistic traits: although the rhythm is less wild and the diction less violent, the verse displays a host of intrusive clauses, suspensions, broken phrases, and periodic conclusions. And I am persuaded that these same correspondences of style and structure appear in most of Pericles, in Cymbeline, and in The Tempest.

One of the leading ideas in the last plays is that an understanding of the world requires patience, flexibility, and perspective. An understanding of the style demands these same qualities. In the last act of Cymbeline, when Jupiter descends to explain to the Leonati his apparent mistreatment of their son, the god reveals that misfortune is part of a larger scheme: "Whom best I love, I cross; to make my gift, / The more delayed, delighted." It is a principle that applies as well to style as to action.