This Wide Gap of Time: The Winter's Tale
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THE old debate, the only one, about The Winter's Tale continues.\(^1\) Broken-backed and perfunctory, cavalier in its inconsistencies, a virtuoso piece with many wrong notes, the whole redeemed by the high theatricality of certain scenes and redeemed from the same theatricality by a religiousness, or religiosity, that places it with the other late plays on the heights—if such a judgment of the play is now a minority opinion, the minority is probably still a large one. The sudden jealousy of Leontes, "Exit, pursued by a bear," the statue scene, remain, to say the least, hard to explain; the conversation of Perdita and Polixenes remains a pleasure—to explain. Admirers of the play have always assumed and tried to show that its details of poetry and drama serve its theme and that the theme, so momentous as to seem platitudinous if at all slackly stated, informs the structure. I count myself in the latter group and propose to give an account of the play based on the assumption of its coherence and almost unclouded success.

This account will attempt to make some contribution to an interpretation of The Winter's Tale as it unfolds to a fully alert, sensitive, and well-informed (though possible) audience: in other words, it will be concerned in some degree with dramatic irony.\(^2\) Space does not permit a scene-by-scene commentary; but I shall try, even when plunging into the midst of


things, to remain aware of the direction of the current. Here it is that I differ in method from the critic whose influence will nevertheless be seen as pervasive—from G. Wilson Knight in *The Shakespearian Tempest* and *The Crown of Life.* Knight’s treatment of the whole Shakespearean canon in terms of chaos and cosmos, of tempest and music, is surely one of the great critical achievements of the century; and it would not have been possible without a “spatial” analysis of images, giving only minimal attention to their temporal succession in specific plays. For me the integrity of each play is a primary datum, and its shape as it comes to be apprehended by an audience is the meaning of the play. While this involves as much scholarship as can be mustered, we are not committed to an archaeological reconstruction of the original audience (or the original theater): fresh as that audience was, its understanding did not come out of nowhere but was led at all points, as ours is, by the playwright and the actors, who were already familiar not only with the lines but with the shape of the play. The text is thus prior to the performance, but the text itself is a sequence of events, a temporal shape.

I

*The Winter’s Tale* is almost unique in the canon for its bilateral symmetry. It is, as Thomas R. Price wrote in 1890, “Shakespeare’s experiment in constructing a diptych,” an experiment so bold that it may well be “the final stretching forth of that genius to accomplish a design never before essayed.” And yet he holds two reservations to the diptych method of composition: to work two plots, a tragic and a comic, successively into the usual five acts “compels an almost painful rapidity of movement” and of characterization, and “in moving from part to part, the mind loses grasp of the artistic unity, and becomes perplexed by the introduction of new characters and the inception of a new plot.”

This conclusion will need to be tested as we proceed, but the earlier assertion—about the uniqueness of the design—must be challenged at once. Even more radically than *The Winter’s Tale,* *Timon of Athens* is a play divided at the middle—into affluence and destitution, sentimental benevolence and cynical malevolence. Timon underscores the abrupt re-


versal when he disrupts his own formal dinner party by splashing water in the faces of his guests: "For these my present friends, as they are to me nothing, so in nothing bless them, and to nothing are they welcome" (m.vi.81–84). This uncreating malediction reduces all to watery chaos, without form and void. Later, Apemantus comments on hero and play when he says, "The middle of humanity thou never knewest, but the extremity of both ends" (iv.iii.300–02). If Antony and Cleopatra is pleated with a bewildering number of reversals, Timon of Athens is a folio sheet, like The Winter's Tale, with "nothing" in the middle.5

The symmetry of The Winter's Tale about its "motive center," the oracle, is well described by another of the older critics, R. G. Moulton:

The play divides at its centre: the work of wrong is balanced by the working out of restoration.6

To speak further of the larger symmetries between the tragic and the comic halves, the dark and the light: in the first half Leontes offends and Polixenes is in a state of innocence, in the second Polixenes takes offense and Leontes is in a state of penitence; in the first, Camillo flees. Perdita is rejected, Paulina protests, and Hermione lies hidden as if in death; in the second, Camillo returns, Perdita is received, Paulina restores, and Hermione stands risen as if from death. Carefree Autolycus steps in to replace careworn Antigonus, and the young hopeful Florizel replaces the old-fashioned child Mamillius.7

5. Muriel St. Clare Byrne speaks of Timon as "a play with a hole in its middle, where the nub that is theme-plus-plot ought to be" in "The Shakespeare Season at the Old Vic, 1956–57," SQ, v:vi (1957), 468.
7. Everyone has forgotten Mamillius at the end—or have they, or we? See Clifford Leech, "The Structure of the Last Plays," ShS, xi (1958), 19–30: "The peace at the end of The Win-
Such symmetrical patterning does much to overcome any sense of crowding or haste attendant upon the presence in one play of a tragic and a comic action. While we do not have time in the theater for critical analysis, the perception of symmetries of various kinds is almost instantaneous and gives a kind of stasis to what otherwise would be the runaway speed of The Winter’s Tale. Consider some of these kinds. The simplest may be termed “side-by-side” symmetry, as when the relaxed prose of courtly conversation is used for the opening scene and again to describe Perdita’s recognition, or when the pastoral idyl of Polixenes’ reminiscence of boyhood is lived in the sheep-shearing scene until it is shattered, ironically by Polixenes. Again, we may see the same man in the same role in the two parts, as when Florizel addresses the old counsellor as “Camillo, / Preserver of my father, now of me” (iv.iv.586-87). Even here, however, there is an element of the somewhat more complex “mirror-image” symmetry, since Camillo’s flight is outward bound in the first part, homeward bound in the second. Mirroring symmetry at its most characteristic, in its dexter-sinister exchange, may be seen in the roles of the two kings, most pointedly when Leontes says “Give me the boy,” and Polixenes says “Mark your divorce” (iv.iv.418). Related to this is a pervasive symmetry like the positive and negative of a photograph: in a wide sense the two parts of the play, based on “nothing” and on “nature,” are such a negative and positive. To take a pair of smaller contrasts, for the possessed Leontes Paulina is a “mankind witch” (iii.iii.67); to the penitent king she exclaims, “My spell is lawful” (v.iii.105). Near the end of the first half, the Clown sees the bear worrying the shoulder bone of Antigonus; near the beginning of the second, Autolycus complains that his shoulder blade has been put out by thieves. Many more examples could be adduced of these various symmetries of stasis, but it is time now to locate the pivot of the symmetries, the hinge of the diptych.8

The disclosure of the oracle has been called the “motive center” of the play, and so it is; but I would argue that it is otherwise not the true center but part of the symmetry: the description of the oracle where all is “ceremonious, solemn and unearthly” (iii.i.7) balances the solemn moments of The Winter’s Tale is sad as well as solemn, and the more definitive for that. . . If the statue-scene were missing, we should indeed still have a sense of finality in Leontes’ loss, but the stress would be on the younger generation and its unfinished story” (p. 25).

before the disclosure of Hermione’s statue, and the theophany balances the revivification. The true center, the dead center, is in the bear’s mouth, the eye of the storm, and the audience’s empty laughter at the description of the death of Antigonus and the mariners. “Thou met’st with things dying”—the pivot is crossed in mid-line—“I with things new-born” (iii.iii.112–13).9

“The finding of the child vies with the Cleomenes and Dion scene for the honor of centrality; the introduction of the oracle brings the first assurance of divine overruling, but the finding of Perdita is the assurance of spiritual rebirth. Time the Chorus is not central at all but a necessary mechanism of the plot.” So argues S. L. Bethell.10 While I agree that the turning point has been reached and passed, I also believe that Time is far more than a mere “necessary mechanism.” Time brings with him an hourglass, which he turns. “By his gesture of turning the hour-glass,” Ernest Schanzer writes, in a modest statement of an important critical insight, “Time marks the great break between the two halves of the play, but also creates in us a feeling of repetition. Both parts of the hour-glass look alike, and it may not be too fanciful to think that this fact enhances our sense of the similarity of the shape and structure of the two halves of The Winter’s Tale.”11 This image, of tremendous visual importance in a production of the play, suggests a further variety of symmetry, dynamic where the others were static, that of the movement of elements from the emptying lobe of the hourglass into the filling lobe: call it enantiodromia or interpenetration of opposites, it includes a suggestion of yin and yang and of Yeats’s gyres. The playwright prepares our minds for dynamic symmetry of this kind very early in the play when Camillo speaks thus of the separation and conjunction of the two kings: “Since their more mature dignities and royal necessities made separation of their society, their encounters, though not personal, have been royally attorneyed with interchange of gifts, letters, loving embassies, that they have seemed to be together, though absent; shook hands, as over a vast; and embraced, as it were, from the ends of opposed winds” (i.i.24–31). We must now look more closely into this “vast.”

"The 23rd of June [1609], the King, Queen, and Prince, the Lady Elizabeth, and the Duke of Yorke, with divers great Lords, and manie others, came to the Tower to see a triall of the Lyon's single valour against a great fierce Beare, which had kild a child that was negligently left in the beare-house." This lion and others failed to offer fight, and so on the fifth of July by the King's commandment "this Beare was bayted to death upon a stage." Shakespeare's king, his bear, and his child play very different roles, but it seems quite possible that this striking and recent incident may have suddenly stirred his imagination and suggested a new combination of its elements on a more exalted stage.

Throughout his life as a writer, the influence of Ovid on Shakespeare was pervasive. The fifteenth book of the Metamorphoses is dominated by a speech of over four hundred lines, addressed by a sage to a good king. It begins and ends with an impassioned attack on the eating of flesh as contrary to the harmony of nature: "Those whose nature is savage and untamed, Armenian tigers, raging lions, bears and wolves, all these delight in bloody food" (xv.75–478, esp. 85–87). The visionary sage rises to heights of eloquence: "Now, since a god inspires my lips, I will dutifully follow the inspiring god: I'll open Delphi and the heavens themselves and unlock the oracles of the sublime mind" (xv.143–45). The most reverberative words inspired by Apollo are dark and dismaying: "O Time, thou great devourer, and thou, envious Age, together you destroy all things; and, slowly gnawing with your teeth, you finally consume all things in lingering death" (xv.234–36). Balancing this outcry against tempus edax is an address to "Nature, the great renewer" (xv.252–53). The general congruency of this passage with The Winter's Tale should be apparent.

The images of storm and wild beast scattered throughout Shakespeare's works achieve their highest concentration in the scene of actual shipwreck and actual tearing to pieces by a bear, with its juxtaposition of "loud

weather” and “creatures of prey.” Both of these are self-interpreting symbols, and there is no need to show that a storm is an image of chaos and a beast of unreasoning cruelty and thus to connect both with the inner turmoil and ferocious outbursts of Leontes. But both serve also to point beyond themselves, and in the same direction, the direction of “ill time.” Tempestas means both tempest and time\(^\text{15}\) and can therefore direct the imagination to conceive of a worldstorm of history; likewise, tempus edax, since Ovid, has been apprehended as an engulfing mouth gaping for its prey. As the Clown describes it, the storm reduces shipshape to shipwreck, order to chaos; and the hungry bear usurps the role of hunter and dines on the gentleman. In both cases, as in the heart of the tyrant Leontes, there is “nothing in the middle.”

At a distance, the shipwrecked mariners disappear as if into the dark throat of a swirling hourglass; so, in confused close-up, does Antigonus, the victim not so much of the worldstorm in general as of its particular manifestation in a raging tyrant. “The fear of a king is like to the roaring of a lion,” says the proverb; and the prophet Amos makes the comparison exactly appropriate to Antigonus—“as if a man did flee from a lion, and : bear met him.”\(^\text{16}\)

Yet in keeping with the dynamic symmetry of the play and with the tone of feeling to which all its artifices are finally directed, the bear and the storm are not loosed suddenly at the center simply to reduce all to terror and dismay. The curious mixture of human sympathy, naïve innocence, and glee in the Clown’s narration has often been remarked on;\(^\text{17}\) and it should be observed that the two bear-images, one in the first part of the

\(^{15}\) George Gordon, Medium Aevum and the Middle Ages, Society for Pure English, Tract No. xx (Oxford, 1925); Nathan Edelman, “The Early Uses of Medium Aevum, Moyen Age, Middle Ages,” RR, xxix (1938), 3–25, for media tempestas. The OED traces tempest from tempus (a time, a season) through tempestas (season, weather, storm). In “The Triumph of Time in The Winter’s Tale,” REL, v (April, 1964), 83–100, Inga-Stina Ewbank points out that “The Time which triumphs on the title page of Greene’s Pandosto is not the dreaded tempus edax but the beneficent Revealer” and goes on to show how richly Shakespeare imagined the “manifold meanings of time” (p. 84).

\(^{16}\) Prov. xx.2; Amos v.19. The lion is present, of course, in Leontes’ name and royal office. Biggins (p. 13) speaks of his bearish disposition and draws attention to “the vicious pun he spits out at Paulina (ii.2.90–92): ‘A Callat / Of boundless tongue, who late hath beat her Husband, / And now bayts me.’ ”

\(^{17}\) A. D. Nuttall, William Shakespeare: The Winter’s Tale (London, 1966): “It is likely that emergence of the bear is to be seen as part of the violent unleashing of the irrational forces of nature simultaneously at work in the Heavens. Yet I suspect that our impulse to laugh is foreseen and authorized by Shakespeare. The episode is frightening and funny at the same time; it is eldritch. Nature is terrible now, but in a way she is jovial” (p. 36).
play and one in the second, are both images of mitigation of ferocity:

“Wolves and bears, they say, / Casting their savageness aside, have done / Like offices of pity” (ii.iii.186–88)—so says the doomed Antigonus to the infant Perdita, whom a Providence is to protect. In a balancing passage, though comic in tone, Autolycus has been frightening the shepherds with horrible stories of tortures to come upon them because of the anger of Polixenes—unless someone (like himself) should intercede for them; the Clown says, “He seems to be of great authority: close with him, give him gold; and though authority be a stubborn bear, yet he is oft led by the nose with gold” (iv.iv.802–04). So too are winter and the elements mitigated: when Mamillius begins his winter’s tale so softly “Yond crickets shall not hear it” (i.i.31), the scene is evocative of quiet domesticities, until his father storms in; and when Florizel and Perdita profess themselves to be “the slaves of chance, and flies / Of every wind that blows” (iv.iv.541–42), the wise Camillo counsels “A course more promising / Than a wild dedication of yourselves / To unpath’d waters, undream’d shores” (iv.iv.566–68), and the voyage that might have been desperate is prosperous.

To consider too long the hungry chaos at the center of The Winter’s Tale would be to induce dizziness and dismay. That is why the playwright presents his storm and bear suddenly, with strong, confused, even exhilarating effect, and removes them as suddenly, so that the audience may not linger over them. Otherwise we might mistake the center of the play for the center of the world and run into Leontes’ error:

No: if I mistake
In those foundations which I build upon,
The centre is not big enough to bear
A school-boy’s top. (ii.i.100–03)

The proper action of the audience is rather one of looking before and after. Devouring time and tempestas dominate the first part of the play, redeeming time and temperantia the second; but each is present in the other lobe of the play’s hourglass. The audience is pleased in a myriad of ways; it also profits by pondering the mysteries of sin and grace (neither of which can be conceived of without the other)—sin dominant and grace recessive in the former division, sin recessive and grace abounding in the latter.

Consider the two kings. The jealous frenzy of Leontes has all the force of full maturity: the strength of the lion becomes the cruelty of the tyrant. The outburst of Polixenes in contrast arises out of the resentment of advancing years and has more infirmity than malice in it. He finds himself trapped in the role of heavy father and behaves clumsily, like a lugged bear.
Jealous frenzy, I say, and check myself. As anyone who has tried to consider Leontes and Othello together has found, the sudden inrush of destructive passion in Leontes has in it something inexplicable, comparable not to the jealousy so laboriously wrought in Othello but to the “motiveless malignity” of Iago. Suddenly the bottomless pit opens; a gracious king becomes ungracious, unnatural, “a jealous tyrant” (iii.ii.133): the king is a thing—of nothing. The mysterium iniquitatis must threaten to engulf everything in its dark vortex: the glimmerings of credibility of motive—Hermione’s advanced pregnancy and Polixenes’ nine-month stay, his elegant prating about childish innocence and her arch banter about marriage as a fall from grace, the outward fatigue of a long state visit combined with the inner strain attending the reunion of childhood friends and the polite necessity of pressing for further prolongation—these are but candles by which to see the darkness of Leontes’ heart.

So in the second part, the ungracious is more than balanced by the gracious and graceful, the unnatural by the vision of “great creating Nature” (iv.iv.88), and the “nothing” by which Leontes is obsessed and into whose emptiness he pours wife, son, daughter, friend, and counsellor, is answered by a plenitude so full as to restore the lost and the dead. Even the storm and the bear can be seen in retrospect as creatures of nature’s plenitude.

Near the heart of the play is the image of the heart and heart’s blood. An excursus on this subject is in order for many reasons: because emptiness and fullness are regularly connected in our thinking with the heart, because of the association of the heartbeat with the measurement and quality of time, and of blood with breeding and family continuity.

The play is hardly under way when Camillo says of young Mamillius that he “makes old hearts fresh” (i.i.39)—tragic irony in the sense that a snipping wind will end the child’s winter’s tale, yet also forecasting the comic outcome of the action. In the second scene, hardly has Polixenes spoken of the weak spirits of himself and Leontes in boyhood as having
been “higher rear’d / With stronger blood” (i.ii.72–73) than Leontes begins to undergo his attack of “tremor cordis” (i.ii.110)—that obscure “Affection” whose “intention stabs the centre” (i.ii.138).20

If the mere communication of Leontes’ thoughts can visibly change the “complexions” (i.ii.381) of Camillo, move Paulina to “red-look’d anger” (ii.ii.34), and Antigonus to say, “I’ll pawn the little blood which I have left / To save the innocent” (ii.iii.165–66), how much more violent is the turmoil wrought within Leontes by “Thoughts that would thick my blood” (i.ii.171). While yet dissembling his suspicions, Leontes refers to his friend as, after his wife and son, “Apparent to my heart” (i.ii.177); and in disclosing them to the old counsellor he says:

I have trusted thee, Camillo,
With all the nearest things to my heart, as well
My chamber-counsels, wherein, priest-like, thou
Hast cleans’d my bosom (i.ii.235–38);

but Camillo rejects the slander of the queen with an angry “’shrew my heart” (i.ii.281) and rough second-person discourse, cor ad cor loquitur. The pulse and tempo of the opening half of the play are irregular. Leontes’ actions (and, answering his, all other actions except those of Hermione and the messengers of the oracle) are sudden, unnatural, uncreating. Polixenes, shocked to hear what he is charged with, exclaims in the voice and idiom of Leontes, “O then, my best blood turn / To an infected jelly, and my name / Be yok’d with his that did betray the Best” (i.ii.417–19). Leontes finds “the blood o’ th’ prince” (i.ii.330) slandered (not realizing by whom) and says that Hermione has “too much blood in him” (i.ii.58). The throb of his intent shakes him more and more: “While she lives / My heart will be a burden to me” (ii.iii.204–05); and, “This sessions (to our great grief we pronounce) / Even pushes ’gainst our heart” (iii.ii.1–2). How heart-rending the reversal so soon to come, when it is said with apparently vain hope of Hermione, “Her heart is but o’ercharg’d; she will recover” (m.iii.150), and of the king, “He is touch’d / To th’ noble heart” (m.iii.221–22); to which, as the last heart-reference before the middle of the play, must be added the words from Antigonus’ last speech, “Weep I cannot, / But my heart bleeds” (m.iii.51–52).

Balancing these words of Antigonus is the description of Perdita’s hearing of her mother’s death, which combines the heart image with one, so

soon to be made actual, of marble melting to flesh: “till, from one sign of
dolour to another, she did, with an ‘Alas,’ I would fain say, bleed tears, for
I am sure my heart wept blood. Who was most marble, there changed
colour” (v.ii.86–89). But the second part of the play, in respect to this
image, has been largely concerned with the quiet resumption of normal
pulse. The celebrants at the sheep-shearing become “red with mirth” (iv.
iv.54), and blushing Perdita’s “true blood” (iv.iv.148; cf. 67, 160, 575)
peeps out. “O my heart!” (iv.iv.425) exclaims the old shepherd in comic
parody of Leontes’ tremor cordis, and goes on with ironic iteration to
disclaim Perdita as his “flesh and blood” (iv.iv.689). At the end, Paulina
makes the penitent king almost believe of the statue “that those veins /Did
verily bear blood” (v.iii.64–65) and he replies by echoing a word from
across the vast. The poisoning of his friend would once have been for him
heart medicine, a “cordial” (i.ii.318) but now he finds that “this affliction
has a taste as sweet / As any cordial comfort” (v.iii.76–77). The pulse has
reasserted its beat in the second part; its brief interruption (“Mark your
divorce” [iv.iv.418]) comes as only a momentary cardiac arrest. The heart
has been restored as the seat of nature and of grace, as naturally “full”: the
red blood reigns in the winter’s pale. In the period of Leontes’ long pen-
ance and Hermione’s long sleep, the growing time of Perdita and Florizel,
not to mention Autolycus (“For the life to come, I sleep out the thought of
it” [iv.iii.30]), the sands of time flow gradually, almost imperceptibly, like
blood through the heart.21

“Now bless thyself: thou met’st with things dying,” says the old man to
the young, “I with things new born.” This is, as already remarked, the ex-
act turning point of the play: it is signed with the sign of the cross.22 It is
chuckleheaded youth that says farewell to the storm’s tyrannous rage and
devouring time: it is cantankerous age that welcomes the child on a lucky
day, one to do good deeds on. The “world destroyed” disappears into the
mouth of sea and bear, the “world ransomed” revolves about a full cradle.

The names in the play are Greek; and it is Apollo’s oracle that delivers
judgment. To play for a moment on the distinction between the Dionysian
and the Apollinian, one may observe in the first half the intoxication
of noise, confusion, and pain, culminating in a sparagmos or dismember-
ment, and in the second the harmony of quiet, composure, and healing,
with, of course, the usual interpenetration of the two parts, the quietest

21. For the treatment of time, see Ewbank, passim; F. David Hoeniger, “The Meaning of
The Winter’s Tale,” UTQ, xx (1950), 11–26; and Pafford, pp. lxviii–ix.
22. Bethell, p. 66.
moment of the whole play perhaps being Mamillius’ story in the second act, while the rowdy dance of satyrs in the fourth is one of the noisiest. A production might stress in the first part Leontes in profile, his looks askance, his movements agitated; in the second part Perdita and the statue in full-face, their gaze direct, their movements graceful.²³

And yet, *The Winter’s Tale* does not readily allow itself to be seen as anything but a Christian play. It is the quintessential tragicomedy, and tragicomedy is the characteristically Christian genre: for many reasons, the chief of which is that the Christian mind cannot rest in a belief in a tragic action that lasts three hours and then simply ends.

III

The audience experiences the highest and most distinctive pleasure of the theater, dramatic irony, as it perceives the second part of *The Winter’s Tale* unfolding in symmetry with the first, a perception shared by none of the persons on the stage yet concerning them nearly. So strongly confirmed becomes this intuition of grace overcoming sin that the great disclosure itself, the elaborately maintained surprise of Hermione’s continued life, maintained at the cost of a deception one would think ruinous to dramatic irony or even to the primary illusion of drama—the disclosure itself is accepted as what should have been (and therefore, in retrospect, what was) expected. Our judgment in the theater is not “I don’t believe it,” but “I should have known it.”²⁴

A skillful playwright must keep in mind the normal capacities of the normal spectator and not require of him prodigies of retention and anticipation as a precondition of his understanding the progression of the dramatic fable; nevertheless, provided that the shape and progress of the play are accessible to all, he may reward the performance of such prodigious response in the wiser sort, who enter into an ironic overview similar to the playwright’s own, with an awareness of the reverberation of its themes within a whole world of imagination and a sense of its place in the canon. This is particularly the case with a late play like *The Winter’s Tale*.

I have argued that the devouring beast and the devouring storm at the empty center of *The Winter’s Tale* are a consolidated symbol of a time of tyranny and the tyranny of time. That such a symbol is a continuing and

²³. Pyle, p. 72, n. 1, associates the suddenness of Leontes’ jealousy with the sudden gap of time in the play. For profile and full-face, see Hermann Weyl, *Symmetry* (Princeton, 1952), p. 16.

cumulative one in Shakespeare can be demonstrated. A sampling of the
evidence should be sufficient here if arranged to converge on this play.
These wild and whirling words at best may resemble the experience of
rapid recall of Shakespeare’s plays (as likely to occur in the theater as in the
study); at worst they may induce an exhilarating confusion—like the
Clown’s narrative.

First, the mouth of the beast and its association with emptiness, chaos,
the grave, and hell. Our Clown takes comfort from the fact that bears “are
never curst but when they are hungry” (III.iii.128–29) but wild beasts
when empty are hellish angry. The king of beasts shares this quality with
his subjects: “And like a hungry lion, did commence / Rough deeds of
rage and stern impatience” (1 H 6 iv.vii.7–8); or “Better ’twere / I met the
ravin lion when he roar’d / With sharp constraint of hunger” (A WW III.
ii.115–17); but more often the beast is one hostile to mankind and civility.
“Foolish curs,” says Orleans in Henry V, “that run winking into the mouth
of a Russian bear” (III.vii.140–41). Or recall this execration upon Shy-
lock:

Thy currish spirit
Govern’d a wolf who, hang’d for human slaughter,
Even from the gallows did his fell soul fleet,
And, whilst thou layest in thy unhallowed dam,
Infus’d itself in thee; for thy desires
Are wolvish, bloody, starv’d, and ravenous. (MV iv.i.133–38)

The implications of this image are drawn out in Ulysses’ speech on degree
where the beast’s mouth is the symbol of uncreating chaos:

And appetite, an universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce an universal prey,
And last eat up himself. Great Agamemnon,
This chaos, when degree is suffocate,
Follows the choking. (Tro. 1.iii.121–26)

In The Winter’s Tale the beast and the storm play their parallel roles con-
currently, and as early as 3 Henry VI the images are paired: “And all my
followers to the eager foe / Turn back and fly, like ships before the wind, /
Or lambs pursu’d by hunger-starved wolves” (i.iv.3–5), but Shakespeare
is often to fuse them in the single image of the beast from the sea. The
whale, on both his appearances in Pericles, is a mouth:

I can compare our rich misers to nothing so fitly as to a whale; a’ plays and tumbles, driv-
ing the poor fry before him, and at last devours them all at a mouthful. Such whales have
I heard on a’ th’ land, who never leave gaping till they’ve swallow’d the whole parish, church, steeple, bells, and all. (n.i.29–34)

Again, “the belching whale / And humming water must o’erwhelm thy corpse” (m.i.62–63). The whale mouth may be further extended to become the image of a devouring passion: Parolles slanders Bertram as “a dangerous and lascivious boy, who is a whale to virginity, and devours up all the fry it finds” (AWW iv.iii.203–05). Whatever remains of the sportive in the whale image is absent from the purely monstrous “maw and gulf / Of the ravin’d salt-sea shark” in Macbeth (iv.i.23–24) and in Albany’s cry: “Humanity must perforce prey on itself, / Like monsters of the deep” (Lr. iv.ii.49–50). In a speech of great passion Romeo had yoked together hunger and savagery, the beast and the sea:

   By heaven, I will tear thee joint by joint,  
   And strew this hungry churchyard with thy limbs.  
   The time and my intents are savage-wild,  
   More fierce and more inexorable far  
   Than empty tigers or the roaring sea. (Rom. v.iii.35–39)

And at the end of Othello the adversary is addressed as “O Spartan dog, / More fell than anguish, hunger, or the sea!” (v.ii.364–65).

“How it chafes, how it rages,” cries the Clown (WT m.iii.88), not of the bear but of the sea; by similar transference he exclaims at “how the poor souls roared” (m.iii.98–99). Roaring is regularly ascribed by Shakespeare to sea and beast alike, as are fury and foaming, hunger and an engulfing mouth. The visage of a beast shows its fangs behind the description of the “enchafèd flood” in Othello (n.i.17); what is metaphor there is simile, twice, in Titus:

   For now I stand as one upon a rock,  
   Environ’d with a wilderness of sea,  
   Who marks the waxing tide grow wave by wave,  
   Expecting ever when some envious surge  
   Will in his brinish bowels swallow him. (m.i.93–97)

   If you brave the Moor,  
   The chafed boar, the mountain lioness,  
   The ocean swells not so as Aaron storms. (iv.ii.137–39)

And in Shrew:

   Have I not in my time heard lions roar?  
   Have I not heard the sea, puff’d up with winds,  
   Rage like an angry boar chafed with sweat? (i.ii.197–99)
"The rude sea's enrag'd and foamy mouth" (TN v.i.72) is regularly called a gulf, with its suggestion both of a maw and of whirling disappearance into nothingness. Nature (in a sinister aspect) and the sea (in a benign) are both hungry, the first in Timon: "That nature, being sick of man's unkindness, / Should yet be hungry!" (iv.iii.175–76), the second in Twelfth Night: "But mine [love] is all as hungry as the sea, / And can digest as much" (ii.iv.99–100).

I have largely refrained from citing the passages from King Lear that must spring to mind in this connection, in order to show how pervasive the association is in Shakespeare's works as a whole and in order to direct special emphasis on that "symmetry of interpénétration" we have been observing in the contrary parts of The Winter's Tale, for the same is significantly present in Lear where the quality in the wild beast that is vulnerable and creaturely is separated from the storm and from the monstrous daughters:

This night, wherein the cub-drawn bear would couch,
The lion and the belly-pinched wolf
Keep their fur dry, unbonneted he runs,
And bids what will take all. (iii.i.12–15)

Tigers, not daughters, what have you perform'd?
A father, and a gracious aged man,
Whose reverence even the head-lugg'd bear would lick,
Most barbarous, most degenerate, have you maddened. (iv.ii.40–43)

The change of Leontes and—to a lesser degree—of Polixenes seem like a sudden snapping wind, the chill of mortality. The tyrant King John adumbrates the image, applying it simply to his own oncoming death: "Poison'd—ill fare! Dead, forsook, cast off: / And none of you will bid the winter come /To thrust his icy fingers in my maw" (v.vii.35–37). Gower in Pericles, describing a "fell storm," says "the grizzled north / Dis-gorges such a tempest forth" (iii.Gower.47–48), and Cymbeline sings the passing of "furious winter's rages" (iv.ii.260), thereby recalling Imogen's earlier image: "Comes in my father, / And like the tyrannous breathing of the north / Shakes all our buds from growing" (i.iv.35–37).

But before we turn to the storming tyrant, we should recall another mouth, silent but as inexorable as raging beast or roaring storm—the grave, the mouth of death. "Chain me with roaring bears," cries Juliet "Or hide me nightly in a charnel house" (Rom. iv.i.80–81). Defiance returns as fear when the image recurs to her: "Shall I not then be stifled in the vault, /To whose foul mouth no healthsome air breathes in?" (iv.iii.33–34). Romeo takes it up, in a passage already cited and here: "Thou de-
testable maw, thou womb of death, / Gorg’d with the dearest morsel of
the earth, / Thus I enforce thy rotten jaws to open” (v.iii.45-47). The
lovers move in imagination from encountering the enemy of their love as
“The unreasonable fury of a beast” (m.iii.111) to confronting it as “the
lean abhorred monster” (v.iii.104).

Repeatedly in Shakespeare the grave is said to “yawn” or “gape.” The
metaphor can be combined with the topos of universal destruction, that
“sickens” of a surfeit in Macbeth (iv.i.58-60) or eats the world and itself in
Troilus (i.iii.123-24). Twice in Richard III the grave is associated with hell-
mouth:

Or, earth, gape open wide and eat him quick,
As thou dost swallow up this good king’s blood,
Which his hell-govern’ d arm hath butchered. (i.ii.65-67)

Earth gapes, hell burns, fiends roar, saints pray,
To have him suddenly convey’d from hence. (iv.iv.75-76)

Hamlet exclaims, “I’ll speak to it, though hell itself should gape!” (t.ii.
244). When Othello in similar passion cries out, “Wash me in steep-down
gulfs of liquid fire!” (v.ii.283), we should recall that “gulf” regularly has
the sense of “gullet” as well as “whirlpool”—as in the “swallowing gulf”
whereby Buckingham reminds us of Clarence’s dream (R3 iii.vii.128) and
in Menenius’ parable of the belly and the members (Cor. i.i.94ff.). And
Antony, before he “rage[s]” like Hercules (iv.xii.44) or “roars” like “the
horned herd” (m.xiii.128), sure sign that “he’s hunted / Even to falling”
(iv.i.7-8), sees his stars shoot their fires into the “abysm of hell” (m.xiii.
147).

Destructive time assumes the attributes of the grave—the grave of the
past in “the dark backward and abysm of time” in The Tempest (i.ii.50),
the state of ennui or of emptiness in Antony:

That I might sleep out this great gap of time
My Antony is away. (i.v.5-6)

Whistling to th’ air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature. (ii.ii.220-22)

In Cymbeline, the two are obscurely combined: “and for the gap / That
we shall make in time from our hence-going / And our return, to excuse”

25. See also R3 iv.iv.1-2, where Margaret speaks of “the rotten mouth of death.”
The final words of The Winter's Tale, spoken by Leontes, echo the words of Time concerning the “wide gap” of sixteen years, but speak further of reunion and rescue in the very mouth of destruction:

Good Paulina,
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely
Each one demand, and answer to his part
Perform’d in this wide gap of time, since first
We were dissever’d: hastily lead away. (v.iii.151-55)

Why Leontes should find himself both at leisure and in haste at the end of the action I cannot surmise, unless perhaps because the play all along has been marked by the same curious mixture (see iv.i.7-9).

One further element must be fitted into this complex. When degree is lost,

when the planets
In evil mixture to disorder wander,
What plagues and what portents, what mutiny,
What raging of the sea. (Tro. i.iii.94-97)

“I have seen / Th’ ambitious ocean swell, and rage, and foam” (JC i.iii.6-7). Tyranny itself is a storm and a storm is a tyranny. The dirge in Cymbeline looks back on “furious winter’s rages” (iv.ii.260), which echoes “churlish winter’s tyranny” of 2 Henry IV (i.iii.62). Tyranny is identified with intemperance in Macbeth (iv.iii.66-67), with rage in The Merchant of Venice (iv.i.13), with an inward hell in King John (v.vii.46). In a complex metaphor, a victim of love (Olivia) sees herself as a bear tyrannously baited: “Have you not set mine honour at the stake, / And baited it with all th’ unmuzzled thoughts / That tyrannous heart can think?” (TN iii.i.115-17). Before he knows himself to be a tyrant, Macbeth imagines an enemy approaching “like the rugged Russian bear” (iii.iv.100); it is the measure of the self-knowledge of the “tyrant bloody-sceptered” that he says at the end: “They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly, / But bear-like I must fight the course” (v.vii.1-2). Like many of the other symbols under consideration, this is to be found in most concentrated expression in the late plays, most especially in The Winter's Tale. “O thou tyrant!” cries Paulina, “still winter / In storm perpetual, could not move the gods / To look that way thou wert” (iii.ii.207; 212-14), though in justice to Leontes and in keeping with the tragicomic mode, it should be stated that the king is a blind, even in a sense a reluctant, tyrant, never hardened and only for a moment defiant.
To end this section quietly, consider this collocation of three passages, one tragic, one tragicomic, one comic. Camillo impresses on Polixenes his danger as “one condemned by the king’s own mouth” (i.ii.445)—in this context a destructive breath empty of truth but inexorable as the grave. Compare Hermione’s words on the infant Perdita at the time of greatest peril for both: “The innocent milk in it most innocent mouth” (iii.ii.100); and, this second answering image, of providence and unearned grace, when Autolycus observes: “If I had a mind to be honest, I see Fortune would not suffer me: she drops booties in my mouth” (iv.iv.832–33).

IV

The tenor of the preceding discussion has been to emphasize the “lateness” of The Winter’s Tale, the reliance of its imagery upon, or at least the congruence of its imagery with, that of the whole corpus of Shakespeare’s work. The tragicomic mode, with its compositeness of form and feeling and the sophistication and rapidity of response it demands of the audience, lends itself to a sense of lateness, as does the artful-artless combination of the courtly and the pastoral. Consider, in passing, the sophistication of Shakespeare’s treatment of Pandosto: the whole thing has been inverted and multiplied—all the names changed, the two countries transposed as if in order to give Bohemia a seacoast, the Emperor of Russia given a different son-in-law, the triumph of time given a new dimension of depth and height, the erring king snatched from the jaws of hell, and the injured queen restored from the tomb.26

It is worth noting that the last book of The Faerie Queene27 as we have it, a poem characterized by the same sort of “lateness” as we have been remarking in the play, includes a long and beautiful pastoral digression discussing courtesy and the contented life in princes’ courts and shepherds’ cottes, and that in one of its episodes a lost child is rescued from a bear and in fulfillment of a prophecy becomes the heir of a childless couple.

26. Pandosto is reprinted in Pafford’s edition, pp. 182–225. In the context of our discussion it should be noted that Greene asserts that jealousy only is not to be relieved “by tract of time” (p. 184). Shakespeare may have read this as a challenge. On pp. 216–17, the key images of the play (though at a later point in the action) are present in juxtaposition: “Two or three daies being passed, and no newes heard of Dorastus, Egestus began to fear that he was devoured with some wild beasts” and “there arose such a fearful tempest, as the ship was in danger to be swallowed up with every sea . . . .”

27. Frye, Fables, speaks of the play’s “secular analogy of Christian grace which is identical with nature—the grace that Spenser celebrates in the sixth book of The Faerie Queene” (p. 111); Pyle compares Perdita with Spenser’s Pastorella as well as Greene’s Fawnia (p. 4, n. 1).
But, like Spenser's Legend of Courtesy, The Winter's Tale is also "early" in its gravitation toward sweetness and simplicity, its unashamed use of the childlike and artless and enthralling: it is itself a "lawful spell." Its title makes smiling allusion to Peele's Old Wives Tale, and the play moves easily among figures and themes from early drama. The geographical impertinence; the sixteen-year liberty taken with the unity of time; the use, in Time, of allegorical characterization at its most creaky and fusty, to be enjoyed as such; the reappearance of, shall we say, Ambidexter as Autolycus: all are unmistakably atavistic. Even more emphatic, however, is the regression of a friendly and courteous Jacobean monarch to an obdurate and blaspheming tyrant, pulling down his kingdom and himself into destruction. Leontes kills the "boy eternal" in himself and so Mamillius must die—that is one way of stating the matter; the other is that his own son perishes in a massacre of the innocents, as Herod's did in the old play, but the child who is the bearer of grace escapes the storming tyrant and the beast-mouth of hell.

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28. Cf. Salingar, who connects the play with the medieval Griselda story (p. 12).
29. It is perhaps not too fanciful to recall that King James, whose reign was marked on the whole by clemency and peace, at the beginning had sent a pickpocket to summary execution without due process of law. This exercise of the royal prerogative had shocked many of his subjects as tyrannical. The king in The Winter's Tale becomes a tyrant in the first half; in the second, a pickpocket goes scot-free.