



## When does the tragi-comic disruption start?: *The winter's tale* and leontes' 'affection'

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WHEN DOES THE TRAGI-COMIC DISRUPTION START?:  
*THE WINTER'S TALE* AND LEONTES' 'AFFECTION'

In most accounts of *The Winter's Tale*, the question of when the tragi-comic disruption starts has generally been taken as synonymous with 'When does Leontes become jealous?'. The assumption may blur an interpretative crux of some importance and one which is actually signalled in the text.

Leontes's jealousy, which initiates *The Winter's Tale's* tragi-comic cycle, has proved a perennial problem for the critics mainly on account of its suddenness. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch reached the notorious conclusion that 'Shakespeare had time, or could have found time, to make Leontes's jealousy far more credible than it is. I maintain that he bungled it'.<sup>1</sup> Dover Wilson was largely instrumental in promulgating the opposite view that Leontes should appear jealous from the outset.<sup>2</sup> That these positions are not in fact irreconcilable has been demonstrated by Roger J. Trienens, arguing that 'suddenness' is thoroughly appropriate to Shakespeare's dramatic purpose, but that vestigial clues are deliberately left to hint at the genesis of the jealousy along the lines recounted in Greene's *Pandosto*.<sup>3</sup> Modern productions tend to favour this composite approach, having Leontes smouldering away from his first entry; a menacing inflection to I.ii.87, 'At my request he would not'; and the raw passion becoming explicit for the audience at I.ii.108 ('Too hot, too hot!').<sup>4</sup>

1 Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, *Shakespeare's Workmanship* (London, 1918), p. 290.

2 New Cambridge Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale* (Cambridge, 1931), n. 9-10, p. 131.

3 Roger J. Trienens, 'The Inception of Leontes' Jealousy in *The Winter's Tale*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 4 (1953), pp. 321-6.

4 J. L. Styan has recently summarised some of the production history and many of the practical problems surrounding Leontes's entry: 'Some moments in Shakespeare we may never fully understand, no matter how many versions of them we see. The shape and form to be taken by Leontes's jealousy at the beginning of *The Winter's Tale* is one of these dramatic enigmas. Presumably not wanting to repeat the long, slow growth of the green-eyed sickness he had demonstrated in *Othello* ten years before, Shakespeare now chose to show jealousy descending on the King of Sicilia like a bolt from hell. The effect is so quick that it is an embarrassment to any actor who must play the part and appear to be the least realistic. Following the suggestion of John Dover Wilson, John Gielgud in 1951 decided to make Leontes jealous from the start, got up a head of steam offstage and stormed on to the astonishment of all. Not having seen the character before, the audience wondered about the cause of his bad temper: had he stubbed his toe as he came in? In 1969, newly inheriting all the apparatus of the Stratford Memorial Theatre, Trevor Nunn decided to play a strobe light on the Leontes of Barrie Ingham perhaps to suggest the telescoping of time; he succeeded only in suggesting that the King was having a fit. In 1981, Ronald Eyre's production for the RSC permitted Patrick Stewart, who had recently been playing a psychiatrist on television, to apply his new learning to Shakespeare and play Leontes as a schizophrenic; he did a brilliant job of making the disjointed lines seem to fit the dual personality. The only trouble was that no one in the audience could feel a jot of sympathy with a madman. Which half of the dual personality do we identify with?' J. L. Styan, 'Understanding Shakespeare in Performance', *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, 1 (1987), 21.

However, this controversy over the inception and genesis of Leontes's jealousy, though intriguing in itself, has tended to obscure Shakespeare's own dramatic emphasis, which is not on how and when the jealousy comes into being but on the moment of its triumph – the moment when Leontes's rational nature collapses. This is the crisis during which the disruptive force is unleashed. There is nothing in *Pandosto* to suggest the dramatic pointing Shakespeare gives to the episode, and to understand it we must look to psychological models which make no appearance in Greene.

The crucial speech is I.ii.137-46, given in F as follows:

Most dear'st, my Collop: Can thy Dam, may't be  
Affection? thy Intention stabs the Center.  
Thou do'st make possible things not so held,  
Communicat'st with Dreames (how can this be?)  
With what's vnreal: thou coactiue art,  
And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent,  
Thou may'st co-ioyne with something, and thou do'st,  
(And that beyond Commission) and I find it,  
(And that to the infection of my Braines,  
And hardning of my Browes.)<sup>5</sup>

This apostrophe to Affection has always been regarded as a difficult speech. A fairly orthodox paraphrase is given by J. H. P. Pafford in his *Arden Appendix* of 1963:

Can your mother (be faithless)? Is it possible? Lustful passions: your intensity penetrates to the very heart and soul of man. You make possible things normally held to be impossible just as dreams do [...]. How can this be? Lust causes one to associate in the mind with persons who are purely imaginary, who do not exist at all, therefore it is very credible that the most unthinkable lustful association can take place between real people: and lust, you have brought it about in this case, going beyond what is lawful – and I am the sufferer to such an extent that I am losing my senses and grow cuckold's horns.<sup>6</sup>

Pafford reads the speech as an impassioned outcry concerning mankind's general susceptibility to 'lustful passions', the ease with which such passions turn sexual phantasy into actual infidelity, and the hurtful certainty that this is what has happened between Hermione and Polixenes. One objection to such an interpretation is that to some extent it denies the context, the presence and dramatic value of the young Mamillius. In line 136, Leontes is trying desperately to discern the innocency of the mother in the welkin eye of the son. The boy's looks are the concrete eugenic evidence of Hermione's past faithfulness, evidence which not even Leontes can gainsay. While it is possible (in the study, if not on stage) that Mamillius simply precipitates Leontes's festering suspicions with regard to the parentage of Hermione's unborn child, it is much more likely that the boy's manifestly innocent presence would substantiate the idea of his

5 Reproduced from Appendix 1 of the *Arden* edition, ed. J. H. P. Pafford (London, 1963), p. 165. Unless otherwise specified, all references are to this edition.

6 *Ibid.*, p. 166.

wife's fidelity and therefore cast doubt on the validity of Leontes's own suspicions. This seems to be the clear dramatic import of the child's presence.

Pafford's reading requires that Leontes abruptly deny the dramatic logic of the boy's presence and launch into a speech which asserts the capacity of 'lustful passions' to overwhelm Hermione's virtuous nature in respect of the second pregnancy. While this seems psychologically feasible, given Leontes's distraught state, it is not dramatically justified by the text. Surely the deft build-up from line 119 ('Mamillius/Art thou my boy?') to Leontes's tender but tortured recognition that the child is incontrovertibly his son cannot be thrown away so lightly? The dramatic logic is far stronger if it be allowed that the physical, visual 'argument' of Mamillius's presence on the stage causes Leontes to doubt, quite radically, the validity of his own underlying suspicions concerning Hermione.

Such a reading becomes possible once 'Affection' is no longer taken to mean simply 'lustful passions'.

Hallet Smith, building on the work of H. C. Goddard<sup>7</sup> and others, greatly clarified the sense of Leontes's speech when he proposed that 'Affection' might be the vernacular equivalent of the Latin *affectio*, as used by Cicero, and defined in Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae et Britannicae* (1582 ed.) as follows:

Affectio, Verbale. Cic. Affection: a disposition or mutation happening to bodie or minde: trouble of minde. Impetus, commotio, affectioque animi. Cic.<sup>8</sup>

Hallet Smith observes:

Munroe and all the other editors think 'Affection' means love or lust, the feeling Hermione has for Polixenes (supposedly). I maintain that 'Affection' here means *Affectio*, that is, a sudden mental seizure, and that the passage describes the feeling of Leontes, his own suspicion or jealousy, and not his wife's supposed feeling at all.<sup>9</sup>

Hallet Smith's view has since been elaborated to the point where John Erskine Hankins, drawing on the vocabulary of Aquinas, Ficino and others, sets the entire speech in the context of specific psychological terminology.<sup>10</sup> Hankins thinks 'Intention' refers to a secondary image formed by the phantasy or imagination on the basis of a primary image supplied to the common sense by the external senses. Emphasising OED 11 rather than OED 8, this modifies, but does not controvert, the more usual reading of 'intensity' or 'intentness'.<sup>11</sup> Similarly 'Communicat'st', another formal psychological term, carries its origi-

7 Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 2 (2 vols.; Chicago, 1951), pp. 264-5.

8 Hallett Smith, 'Leontes' *Affectio*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 14 (1963), pp. 163-6.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 163 (footnote 6). Other noteworthy usages occur in *MV* IV.i.35-62, and *Ant.* I.v.12ff. However, both suggest a wilful indulgence of 'affection', whereas Leontes's predicament lacks entirely this element of deliberate choice.

<sup>10</sup> John Erskine Hankins, *Backgrounds of Shakespeare's Thought* (Hassocks, 1978), pp. 98-101.

<sup>11</sup> See *The Winter's Tale*, A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare, ed. Horace Howard Furness (6th ed.: Philadelphia, 1898), pp. 27-30.

nal meaning of 'impart, share, hold in common' (as in OED 5). Used here, the term would imply that the Affection, working through its Intention, might have the power to delude Leontes in the same fashion that dreams can 'make possible things not so held'. While the plain meaning of the words is not disturbed, Hankins also supplies psychological contexts for (modernising the spelling) 'co-active', 'co-join', and less problematically, 'infection', thereby sharpening our sense of the intellectual and social sophistication of the Sicilian court, and heightening the contest between intellect and passion in Leontes himself. Following Goddard and Hallet Smith, Hankins regards this elaborate vein of overwrought psychological commentary as Leontes's effort at self-diagnosis, the convention of the dramatic soliloquy expressing the struggle of the rational man to examine and comprehend his own state of being.<sup>12</sup>

Such a reading gains support from instances of contemporary psychological discussion where this special sense of 'affection' appears in contexts which help elucidate Leontes's important speech. Timothy Bright's *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1586) gives a trenchant account of such unnatural perturbations. He writes that 'if the brayne be altered, and the obiect not rightly apprehended then is it deliuered otherwise then it standeth in nature, and so the hart moued to a disorderly passion'.<sup>13</sup> In terms of *The Winter's Tale*, the 'obiect not rightly apprehended' would be Hermione's innocent social flirtation with Polixenes. Furthermore, Leontes's interjection at I.ii.108 ('Too hot, Too hot!') becomes decidedly ambiguous. Is the 'heat', which Leontes thinks he detects in his wife's behaviour, really in his own metabolism? Bright details the effects of excessive heat in the human system as follows:

Now particularly the spirite of the humour being subtler, thinner, and hoter than is meete, maketh the apprehension quicker then it should be, and the discretion more hasty, then is meete for the vpright deliury to the hart, what to embrace or to refuse: this causeth pronenes to anger, when we are offended without cause, commonly called teastiness, and fowardnes. If the humour also with this spirite possesse the brayne, then are these passions of longer continuance: humour being of a more sollid nature then the spirite, and so not easily dispersed, which causeth fittes of such passiōs to be of longer continuance: and thus the hart may be abused from the brayne ...<sup>14</sup>

This account certainly seems to underwrite aspects of Leontes's behaviour. Bright stresses that the perturbation affects principally two organs, brain and

<sup>12</sup> Hallett Smith (*op. cit.*, p. 164) draws attention to the comparison with *Mac.* I.iv.137-42:

Present Feares  
Are lesse then horrible Imaginings:  
My Thought, whose Murther yet is but fantasticall,  
Shakes so my single state of Man,  
That Function is smother'd in surmise,  
And nothing is, but what is not.

Smith comments: 'the device of having the tempted man ironically express the way to his own salvation though he does not recognise it or follow it is used in both plays'. A crucial difference is that (as argued below) Leontes' soliloquy actually renders the collapse of the rational faculty, whereas Macbeth, though plagued by "horrible Imaginings", remains coldly rational throughout.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Bright, *A Treatise of Melancholie* (1586), p. 93.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

heart, and that the affection is *communicated* from brain to heart (where the word carries the psychological sense implied in I.ii.140: 'Communicat'st with Dreames ...'):

Of all partes of the body, in ech perturbation, two are cheifly affected: first the brayne, that both apprehendeth the offensive or pleasaunt obiect, & iudgeth of the same in like sort, and communicateth it with the harte, which is the second part affected: these being troubled carie with them all the rest of the partes into a simpathy, they of all the rest being in respecte of affection of most importance.<sup>15</sup>

Robert Burton's version of the phenomenon (based partly on Bright) is rather more sedate, and lays greater emphasis on the power of imagination to exacerbate the mental turmoil. The following passage is particularly interesting because it implies the formation of an exaggerated or misleading secondary image based on a primary image 'residing in the former [foremost] part of the brain', and also includes the notions both of 'intentness' or 'intensity' and of 'communication':

To our imagination commeth by the outward sense or memory, some object to be knowne (residing in the former part of the Braine) which he misconceauing or amplifying, presently communicates to the Heart, the Seat of all affections. ... If the Imagination be very apprehensive, intent, and violent, it sends great store of spirits to or from the Heart, and makes a deeper impression, and greater tumult, ...<sup>16</sup>

Such a conception calls to mind Leontes's cry at I.ii.110:

I have *tremor cordis* on me: my heart dances,  
But not for joy – not joy.

If these examples do accurately suggest an appropriate psychological background for the upheaval dramatised in Leontes's speech, this may have important implications for our sense of the dramatic genre and structure of the play and specifically for the question of when the disruption actually starts. A figure striving (and failing) to maintain faith and integrity while seized by an insidious attack of jealousy is, at least in potential, an inhabitant of a tragic universe such as those of *Othello* and *Macbeth*. However, Leontes is overcome, not by the machinations of an Iago<sup>17</sup> or the supernatural seductions of witchcraft, but by

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (Oxford, 1621), p. 121.

<sup>17</sup> There is an interesting comparison to be made between Leontes's agonised musings at I.ii.115/6 ('But to be paddling palms, and pinching fingers,/As now they are ...') and Iago's tempting of Roderigo at II.i.251-259:

Iago. ... Didst thou not see her paddle with the palm of his hand?

Rod. Yes, but that was but courtesy.

Iago. Lechery, by this hand: an index and prologue to the history of lust and foul thoughts: they met so near with their lips, that their breaths embrac'd together. When these mutualities so marshall the way, hard at hand comes the main exercise, the incorporate conclusion.'

Leontes has no need of an external tempter; the jealous fictions are internalised and proliferat-

a psychological aberration which overwhelms his rationality<sup>18</sup> and has no evident moral significance at all – except, of course, in its consequences. This moral arbitrariness points in two (congruent) directions: towards the self-conscious artifice of the theatrical experience, and towards the larger, more disturbing, notion of life as a tragi-comic artifice presided over by whimsical playwright-gods who orchestrate human affairs for their own delectation, even at the cost of much human pain and confusion. As Barbara Mowat has noted, ‘the undermining of the “tragic world” of Sicilia with comic distortions and exaggerations gives us a world uninformed by tragic universality, one which produces an effect approaching the grotesque ...’.<sup>19</sup> It obviously will not do to read Leontes’s predicament as a tame reworking of Othello’s, especially when the arbitrary violence of the attack on Leontes’ rationality is subtly dramatised in the apostrophe to ‘Affection’. A man struggling rationally with an onslaught of jealousy remains a potentially tragic figure. But once the rational faculty is swamped in *this* way – a moment which is indicated in line 142 – the play moves decisively into the painful, yet tender and illuminating world of tragicomedy.

Until this point (line 42) Leontes has been engaged in a turbulent but admirably rigorous effort of self-analysis. He has before him the hypothesis that his jealousy may be entirely unfounded, the effect of an ‘Affection’. The Affection is brought on by an image (an ‘Intention’ or, later, a ‘Dreame’) which seems to attest unequivocally Hermione’s adultery with Polixenes. This Intention ‘stabs the Center’: it goes to the heart of the frantic doubts and speculations which have been obsessing Leontes.<sup>20</sup> In so doing it necessarily stabs the emotional, passional ‘Center’ for, as Burton has it, the heart is ‘the Seat of all affections’.<sup>21</sup> The violence here is complex. Natural relief at attaining intellectual certainty (comparable to the elation of ‘hitting the white’, ‘the Center’, in archery)<sup>22</sup> is

ing unaided. That the common lexical set should recur from Roderigo’s facile love story rather than Othello’s grand passion perhaps suggests something of Leontes’s lack of true tragic stature.

<sup>18</sup> Reason is conventionally the faculty pitted against affection in unnatural perturbations of the kind attributed to Leontes. For instance, Erasmus recounts the views of Diogenes as follows: ‘... he is reported to have used this saying also, that to matche against fortune, he sette alwayes the confidence or stoutnesse of courage: against the law, he sette nature: against affections, mocioüs, or wilfull pangues of the minde, reason. ... For by these three thynges is purchased and maintained the tranquillitee of menne.’ Erasmus, *Apophthegmes*, trans. Nicolas Udall (1542), 92 verso.

<sup>19</sup> Barbara A. Mowat, *The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare’s Romances* (Athens, 1976), 20.

<sup>20</sup> This ‘Intention’ is not necessarily rooted in the particular flirtation implied at I.ii.108: ‘Too hot, Too hot!’ (though to an audience it may well appear so). I.ii.115-17 and 284-96 suggest that Leontes’s jealousy has undergone at least some period of gestation, as in *Pandosto*. Perhaps the necessary distinction is that between a private gestation and a public manifestation: *The Winter’s Tale* dramatises a sudden, uncontrollable eruption (in public) of a festering private jealousy.

<sup>21</sup> Burton, *op. cit.*

<sup>22</sup> The reference to archery is noted by R. G. White (see *New Variorum*, ed. Furness, p. 28). Many commentators have picked up a correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm in the word ‘Center’. The likelihood is borne out by Leontes’s speech at I.ii.200:

Physic for’t there’s none;

It is a bawdy planet, ...

savagely counterpointed by the emotional agony of supposing Hermione guilty. The violence also suggests the perceptual disfunction which precipitates this kind of perturbation. Not only does the Affection present itself with overwhelming intensity but it gains direct access to Leontes's inner being. In normal circumstances the submissions of the phantasy and the imagination would be modified by the judgement.<sup>23</sup> Here man's rational nature is simply by-passed, so the violent impact of the Intention indirectly conveys the violence done to Leontes' identity as a rational being.

As the conventional comparison with dreams shows, Leontes knows that such an Affection can make things which judgement, memory and experience affirm to be impossible seem possible: 'things' such as the absurd notion that Hermione should be unfaithful, above all with his trusted friend Polixenes. But at the very point where he seems about to diagnose the delusory nature of his jealousy, the Affection overwhelms Leontes's intellect:

With what's vnreal: thou coactiue art,  
And fellow'st nothing. Then 'tis very credent [142]  
Thou may'st co-ioyne with something, and thou do'st,

The caesura in line 142 marks the moment of crisis. 'Then' purports to be a logical connective, but there is no logical passage from the conventional wisdom surrounding the untrustworthiness of the Affection, to the possibility that the Intention may indeed be properly grounded in reality. Before the break Leontes's judgement appears to be winning the struggle: he is acknowledging that his overwrought state may be largely the product of an imagination untempered by reality. Thereafter his rationality is suborned by the psychologically imperative Affection. The very intensity of his passion convinces Leontes of its basis in reality. No longer attempting to weigh the Intention against the testimony of his judgement, Leontes reasons from the premise of the Intention towards his experience of the world with disastrous consequences: if Affections usually co-operate with illusions, they may also, *a fortiori*, co-join with reality. Significantly, his state of mind now becomes public knowledge for the first time. Such is the violence of Leontes's mental turmoil that it can no longer be concealed (I.ii.146-50) and hereafter the Court of Sicilia is subject to the tyranny of unreason. As Hermione later puts it (III.ii.81): 'My life stands in the level of your dreams'.

We have, then, to distinguish between the inception of Leontes's jealousy and the start of the tragi-comic disruption – a distinction which has obvious implications for the shape and pace of the play in performance. Whatever conclusion is reached as to how and when the jealousy initially comes into being, the tragi-comic disruption commences at the moment when Leontes's intellect suc-

<sup>23</sup> 'The understanding ... had to sift the evidence of the senses already organised by the common sense, to summon up the right material from memory, and on its own account to lay up the greatest possible store of knowledge and wisdom. It was for the will to make the just decision on the evidence presented to it by the understanding.' E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*, 1943 (Harmondsworth, 1963), p. 91.

cumbs to a perceptual aberration, a moment which is clearly implied in the text.

The cruel suddenness of this capitulation is in keeping with the extreme self-conscious theatricality of the play as a whole. C. O. Gardner has noted the importance of the word 'strike' in establishing that almost brutal disregard for naturalistic propriety which weighs so heavily in our experience of the play.<sup>24</sup> 'Strike' occurs at each of three crises in the story of Leontes. When jealousy overwhelms him, he says of Hermione's supposed infidelity:

Physic for't there's none;  
It is a bawdy planet, that will strike  
Where 'tis predominant; – (I.ii.200-2)

Then immediately after his son's death he cries out:

Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves  
Do strike at my injustice. (III.ii.146-7)

Finally, at the miraculous moment of Hermione's 'resurrection' we have:

Music, awake her, strike! (V.iii.98)

This is the *coup de théâtre* which is to 'Strike all that look upon with marvel' (V.iii.100). It is therefore appropriate that this theatrical cycle, in which disaster and miracle 'strike' with terrifying precipitateness and splendour, should be inaugurated by Leontes' speech on Affection, dominated as it is by the brutal verb 'stab': 'Affection? thy Intention stabs the Center'. This is the cruel theatrical blow by means of which the playwright-gods of tragi-comedy take hold both of the Sicilian court, and the audience in the theatre.

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<sup>24</sup> C. O. Gardner, 'Three Notes on *The Winter's Tale*', *Theoria*, 54 (May, 1980), pp. 51-66.