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The Winter's Tale:
The Relief of Tragicomedy through Leontes and Autolycus

The Winter's Tale is a tragicomedy about the King of Sicilia, Leontes, who suspects his wife, Hermione, of infidelity with the King of Bohemia, Polixenes. As Leontes believes Hermione to be dead, he sentences their new born child, Perdita, to be cast away to Bohemia, where she grows up in the care of a shepherd, unaware of her previous life. In Bohemia lies a variety of characters including Autolycus, a pick pocket, and Florinzel, Perdita's love interest. Perdita and Hermione, who is actually alive, are ultimately reunited with Leontes in the end.

Shakespeare makes deliberate choices with the plot, setting, and structure that allows the audience to experience theatre differently from other popular seventeenth century plays because he uses the characters of Leontes and Autolycus as a mirror effect. Through the mirroring effect, the audience can experience the feelings of contrition and reconciliation from both characters. It is through Leontes familial troubles that the audience emotionally invests in the plot, and through Leontes subsequent reconciliation with his family that the audience experiences contrition. The audience's experience with Leontes is mirrored by Autolycus, with whom the audience is not emotionally invested and is therefore able to observe and become more aware of his reconciliation between rogue and honest man. Furthermore, the comparison of Autolycus and Leontes serves to develop the tragicomic perspective of Shakespeare's writing by presenting and combining two avenues of emotion for the audience to explore. This comparison highlights how the audience experiences a sense of relief without having to experience the traditional Aristotelian catharsis, in which the main character must die for their actions.

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Shakespeare wrote *The Winter's Tale* after completing *Cymbeline* and before writing *The Tempest* in 1611. He adapted *The Winter's Tale* from Robert Greene's romantic prose *Pandosto: the Triumph of Time*. In *Pandosto*, the main character, Pandosto, dies at the end which, according to J.H.P Pafford, is "to close up the comedy with a tragical stratagem" (Pafford xxxii). Although Leontes experiences tragic events throughout the play, Shakespeare chooses to have Leontes live. Instead of causing the traditional downfall of the 'hero' character, Shakespeare's choice to keep Leontes alive creates a sense of completion for the audience. Shakespeare extends the adaptation further by including the character of Autolycus, adding to the comedic atmosphere to the play. Critics such as Lee Sheridan Cox agree that despite the brevity of his appearance within the play "Autolycus has a role which warrants consideration of his possible significance in relation to the whole drama"(Cox 285.) Autolycus serves as a foil in which the audience can observe on a smaller scale the emotions they experience through engaging with Leontes.

In an attempt to decipher the tragic elements of *The Winter's Tale*, Aristotle's poetics¹ helps to delineate Shakespeare's use of Leontes in the most basic form. Is he a tragic character? Based on Aristotle's definition, it is difficult to assess Leontes' qualifications because the audience is introduced to the character as the results of his jealousy are put into play. The audience is not given a history of the relationship between Leontes and Hermione, and the history between him and Polixenes is factual (not emotional). Therefore, critics have a variety of beliefs that attempt to rationalize or find the origin of Leontes' jealous nature. The critics include J.I.M Stewart's belief that, "Leontes reacts against a taboo love for his friend by displacing it on Hermione and blaming her for what, unconsciously, he both wishes and fears in

¹ Worthen, 2000, pages 125-135

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himself”(Overton 45). While Scott Colley’s suggests that “The king's rage develops from his moral ignorance. His deliverance from the consequence of that rage depends upon Leontes' painful and prolonged education about the nature of time, change, and sexual maturity” (Colley 43.) For the critics to inject rationale into the character’s emotion is to give the characters a path to walk before the characters can crawl.

Shakespeare provides no rationale for Leontes’ jealousy. Leontes’ perception of the conversation between Hermione and Polixenes is blinded by what he chooses to see and not what is actually in front of us. Furthermore, Leontes himself is unsure of what he is seeing. He simply suggests disbelief that Hermione is able to easily persuade Polixenes. In Act 1.2.86-88, he exclaims, “At my request he would not. Hermione, my dearest thou never spokest to better purpose” (Pafford 10). Leontes’ jealousy is self-induced, which in accordance to Aristotle's poetics, is his flaw or *hamartia*, and it is from there that certain aspects of his tragic nature can be assessed. With the *hamartia*, the audience is drawn in, like many of our scholars, to the reasoning behind his jealousy. However, as an audience engaged with the character, they take Leontes’ jealousy as their own and thus explore the irrationality and paranoia that he experiences.

Aristotle discusses that characters need consistency in a tragedy. Shakespeare uses this aspect very well, as from the beginning, the audience knows Leontes to be jealous and irrational. In Act 3.2.140-1, his jealousy and doubt allow him to challenge the gods when they make their final decree by saying, “There is no truth at all i’ th’ Oracle...this is more falsehood” (Pafford 61). In Act One, the audience is given a clue to what Leontes holds most dear to him, his son Mamillius. Leontes’ belief of Hermione’s infidelity only falters when he hears of Mamillius’

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death. Colley examines this dynamic shift in character as almost an act on the part of Leontes, “Thinking that he can simply beg for pardon, and work quickly to set things right...But the confession of his unfounded jealousy and his apparent contrition are not enough to bring him the coherence for which he longs” (Colley 50.) This examination does not take into account the time in which Leontes had the opportunity to bed another wife and move on with his life. This concept is particularly important because the 16 years he is not aware that Hermione is alive. Instead, in Act 3.2.240-2, Leontes vows to live in a contrite manner “so as long as nature will bear up with this exercise” (Pafford 66). His decision suggests both *peripeteia* (reversal of circumstance), in the loss of his son, as well as *anagnoresis* (recognition or critical discovery), through his willingness to acknowledge what he has done. At this point, Shakespeare could have continued with the tragic trajectory and killed Leontes to pay for his crimes, as a true Aristotelian tragic writer would have done. However, there is also a sense of freedom in death that, while an audience in 1611 might not have thought the same way, a modern viewpoint warrants this alternative. The audience is emotionally invested in Leontes and therefore having him live with this heavy guilt is more thought provoking for them than the tragic ending of death. The audience will experience the desire to live in guilt, as much as he does for the 16 years, until ‘nature’ (the gods) see fit.

Autolycus is more than the rogue or thief that he appears to be. He not only provides the elements of pastoral comedy for the second section of the play, through his knavery he allows the audience to observe actions of deception. The audience is first introduced to Autolycus singing, which is what first provides the audience the belief that the atmosphere of the play has changed. Shakespeare allows the audience some background knowledge into Autolycus’

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character, something he did very seldom with the characters in Sicilia. In Act 4.3.24-6,

Autolycus tell us that, “My father named me Autolycus; who being, as I am, littered under Mercury, was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles” (Pafford 82). This introduction makes the audience aware of how Autolycus believes that roguery is his destiny because he was named from the greek mythological character Autolycus². After, the audience watches as Autolycus cleverly steals from the clown with a story of how he was robbed by himself.

In these moments, Shakespeare takes advantage of the audience’s knowledge of Autolycus as the stock character in Shakespearean comedies and uses him as a commentary on the dishonest life he chooses to lead. In Sicilia, the audience experiences the feeling of deception through Leontes; now, in a lighter, more relaxing atmosphere they are able to observe deception through the actions of Autolycus. Pafford acknowledges Autolycus’ role in *The Winter’s Tale* by stating that “he also serves as a faint rhythmic parallel to the evil in Leontes in the first part of the play” (Pafford lxxx). The audience is more aware of Autolycus’ deceptive nature because his actions are not as risky as Leontes’ actions. With the type of antics that Autolycus takes part in, he has nothing to lose. He has no status, no live family to speak of, and the only attachment to other characters was as Prince Florizel’s servant and, from that post, he was fired. In Act 4.3.13-4 Autolycus interrupts his singing to comment, “I have served Prince Florizel...but now I am out of service” (Pafford 81). All of his tomfoolery only benefits himself and is at risk to himself, therein lies the comedy. Larry S. Champion gives a useful definition of the comedy of Autolycus: “comedy is that of manipulation, and the humor is drawn not from character involvement or character incongruity but rather from our observation of puppet-like characters

² Homer’s *Odyssey*, Ovid *Metamorphosis*

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maneuvered into ludicrous situations” (Champion 429). The audience is able to disengage themselves from him as a character and simply observe the actions that take place. Similar to Leontes’ self-induced jealousy, Autolycus maneuvers himself into such ludicrous situations rather than being victim to them.

Leontes’ actions in the first section of the play (Act 1.1.1 to Act 3.3.1, scenes in Sicilia) are the instigating factors of the actions in second section of the play (Act 3.3.1 to Act 5.1.1). Similarly, Autolycus’ actions help to instigate the action of the final section of the play, in response to the truth about Perdita’s upbringing. Autolycus does two main things that propel the story:

Act 4.4.631-38: Camillio - “Why be so still...there’s some boot” (Pafford 125)

Act 4.4.795-801: Autolycus - “Tell me (for you seem to be plain and honest men)
...here is man shall do it” (Pafford 132)

The first quote is of how Autolycus switches clothes with Florinzel in order for Florinzel to sneak onto the ship to Sicilia unnoticed. In the latter quote, Autolycus redirects the shepherd and the clown onto the ship so that they may tell Polixenes Perdita’s true story.

The audience recognizes these actions as contrasting character intentions from the rogue the audience is first introduced to. The actions contrast because they are mostly honest and are beneficial to others. On both occasions, Autolycus comments on how contradictory these actions are to his nature. The audience hears and sees the internal conflict that Autolycus experiences as he debates his knavery with his honest actions. In Act 4.4.596-7, Autolycus first hails his deceptive nature by saying, “Ha, ha! What a fool Honesty is! And Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple gentleman!” (Pafford 123) Then, in the same scene lines 830-835, he questions

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himself by asking “If I had mind to be honest, I see fortune would not suffer me: she drops

booties in my mouth.” (Pafford 134) With Leontes, the audience is given similar internal

conflicts, but the audience is emotionally invested with his action in the plot and experiences the

conflicts internally. They are not able to simply observe as they do with Autolycus.

The last act of the play combines the characters of Bohemia and Sicilia, and although Leontes and Autolycus never meet, their actions in this last act have great similarities. Autolycus is told by the Gentleman chorus about Leontes reuniting with Perdita and realizes his hand in making this event occur. In act 5.2.114-6, Autolycus recalls this directly to the audience, “I brought the old man and his son aboard the prince; told him I heard them talk of fardel” (Pafford 131). The sense of self-reflection was uncommon to Autolycus in the previous acts and prepares the audience for the change of character they are about to observe. That is essentially how Shakespeare creates the foil between Leontes and Autolycus. With Leontes, the audience experiences the events as they are happening, but with Autolycus, there is some sense of preparation for the moment. When the moment arrives, Autolycus continues his reflection in line 121 by saying: “But ‘tis all one to me; for had I been the finder out of this secret, it would not have relished among my other discredits” (Pafford 132). Although his actual act of reconciliation happens in lines 149 - 151 (“I humbly beseech you, sir...”), at this point, the audience is observing the change in Autolycus.

Autolycus’ last act of reconciliation between him, the shepherd, and clown intensifies the foil of him and Leontes because it occurs right before Leontes’ reconciliation with Hermione and Perdita. The audience receives a third party observation of Autolycus’ transgressions being forgiven, and then experiences it in the next scene with Leontes. By ending with Leontes’ last

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speech, the audience feels release from the tortured nature they have been experiencing with his character. The final lines of the play are Leontes: “lead us from hence, where we may leisurely each one demand, and answer his part perform’d in this wide gap of time, since first we were dissever’d: hastily away” (Act 5.3.151-155, Pafford 161.) The happy nature of all participants suggests that time has allowed the previous transgressions of each character to be forgotten. This for the audience is sense of completion without any events left unresolved.

The audience experiences Shakespeare’s maturity as a playwright and the new risks Shakespeare takes with plot and narrative in his later works (*Cymbeline*, *Pericles* and *The Tempest* as examples). The criticism on the success of his later plays, including *The Winter’s Tale*, varies greatly. Northrop Frye suggests that “Shakespeare had no opinions, no values, no philosophy, no principles of anything except dramatic structure”(Overton 32). Frye also believes that *The Winter’s Tale* represents “the end of the steady growth of Shakespeare’s technical interest in the structure of drama” (Overton 32). Frye seems to disregard that the purpose of Shakespeare’s works is to be performed. Many of the structural elements used in *The Winter’s Tale* do not follow the standard of dramatic writing that scholars used in Shakespeare’s time. However, these aspects will go unnoticed by a viewing audience who does not have time to ponder over his script. This technique is common with modern playwrights to make the themes of their plays more transcendent. Shakespeare chooses to explore how the audience can experience different places and times with a performance.

Shakespeare uses alternative dramatic devices to perpetuate the plot of the story. This is evident with the inclusion of the allegorically named character ‘Time’. In Act 4.1.7-17, Time says, “since it is in my power to o’erthrow the law...and give my scene such growing as you had

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slept between” (Pafford 76). This suggests that it is not with sloven nature that Shakespeare creates this sense of structure but with great care and intent. Had he not created a large passing of time, the appearance of many characters in Sicilia would have made little sense to the audience. By allowing the scene to move to Bohemia half way through the play, the audience is allowed to dissociate themselves from the characters and explore the action of the plot on an alternative level.

This disassociation is seen through the introduction of Autolycus, who is the first new character to whom the audience is introduced. In what Jerry Bryant refers to as the “pastoral section” (Bryant 396) the play, the audience is given a different atmosphere from the sections set in Sicilia. Pafford acknowledges the varying atmosphere commenting that, “by the contrast of its...happiness, country life, and venial roguery, it intensifies the dramatic effect of the...murderous crime at court in the first part and the sober serenity of the last” (Pafford lv). Of course, the most important service the tragicomic genre lends to the plot is the fact that there is some sense of completion. Pafford also writes, “there is almost general agreement (among critics) that at this time he (Shakespeare) was particularly interested in the theme of reconciliation” (Pafford xl). This is obvious as Hermione is not dead, Perdita, Hermione and Leontes are reunited, and Paulina is married; these plot lines are tied together in a happy ending. The audience is given the opportunity to become emotionally invested with the story in the first part in Sicilia. In the second section, they step back and observe the action through comedic antics. Finally, in the third, the audience is allowed to integrate both aspects with the completion of the journey. The integration is most aptly demonstrated through the roles of Leontes and Autolycus.

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At the time, these plays were not intended to be read; they were the most popular form of commercial entertainment. By 1611 Shakespeare had already had major success. The choices made with dramatic structure and plot that create this tragicomedy are to create a sense of rejuvenation and surprise in his story for the audience. The characters of Leontes and Autolycus are both recognizable 'types' within Shakespeares plays, but for the audience of *The Winter's Tale*, there is an element of surprise. The rogue becomes an honest man, and the evil king realizes his transgression and is given forgiveness; all can be well. The audience is able to reach that ending through observing the petty antics of Autolycus and through feeling the risk in Leontes every jealous action. Because of that, in the end there is a definite feeling of reconciliation and completion with both characters, which is more satisfying than standard Shakespearean tragedy or comedy.

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