

seate that may be', as James protested) the theory of mixed government was to become a deadly weapon in the hands of the opposition.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, Huffman uses all this historical material to introduce a reading of *Coriolanus* as Shakespeare's apology for Jacobean absolutism, even going so far as to suggest that the dramatist believed Rome would have been better off in ashes, with Volumnia, Virgilia and little Martius dead, than left at the mercy of an institution so wicked as the tribunate. As so often, the settled conviction that Shakespeare's view of history was orthodox, conservative, rooted in the political theories expounded in the Homilies, has blinded the critic to what is actually there on the page. But why should we assume that, in the words of a well-known essay on *Coriolanus* and the Midlands insurrection, 'Whether or not Shakespeare had been shocked or alarmed by the 1607 rising is anyone's guess; but it is fairly certain that he must have been hardened and confirmed in what had always been his consistent attitude to the mob'?<sup>21</sup> Assertions like these encouraged Edward Bond to interpret the extremely ambiguous documents relating to the Welcombe enclosures of 1614 entirely to Shakespeare's discredit. One may dislike Bond's *Bingo*, with its portrait of a 'corrupt seer',<sup>22</sup> a brutal and reactionary property-owner victimizing the rural poor, but there is a sense in which it simply spells out and exaggerates the received notion about Shakespeare's political attitudes. There is no reason why such a view should persist. Although he remained as fascinated by history as a process in 1607 as he had been in the early 1590s, when he was writing the *Henry VI* plays, the man who conceived *Coriolanus* gives every indication of being more tolerant of the commons than before. He looked attentively at the young Roman republic delineated by Plutarch and by Livy, and chose to emphasize what was hopeful, communal and progressive in it, when writing his interpretation of the time.

<sup>20</sup> C. C. Huffman, *Coriolanus in Context* (Lewisburg, 1971), *passim* but especially pp. 148, 189.

<sup>21</sup> E. C. Pettet, 'Coriolanus and the Midlands Insurrection of 1607', in *Shakespeare Survey* 3 (Cambridge, 1950), 34-42.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Bond, in his Preface to *Bingo* (1974), p. xiii.

## CHAPTER 8

Leontes and the spider: language and speaker  
in Shakespeare's last plays (1980)

- HERMIONE: Come, sir, now  
I am for you again. Pray you sit by us,  
And tell's a tale.
- MAMILLIUS: Merry, or sad shall't be?
- HERMIONE: As merry as you will.
- MAMILLIUS: A sad tale's best for winter. I have one  
Of sprites and goblins.
- HERMIONE: Let's have that, good sir.  
Come on, sit down, come on, and do your best  
To fright me with your sprites; you're pow'rful at it.
- MAMILLIUS: There was a man -
- HERMIONE: Nay, come sit down; then on.
- MAMILLIUS: Dwelt by a churchyard. I will tell it softly,  
Yond crickets shall not hear it.
- HERMIONE: Come on then,  
And give't me in mine ear.  
[Enter] LEONTES, ANTIGONUS, LORDS [and others].
- LEONTES: Was he met there? his train? Camillo with him?
- I LORD: Behind the tuft of pines I met them; never  
Saw I men scour so on their way. I ey'd them  
Even to their ships.
- LEONTES: How blest am I  
In my just censure! in my true opinion!  
Alack, for lesser knowledge! How accurs'd  
In being so blest! There may be in the cup  
A spider steep'd, and one may drink; depart,  
And yet partake no venom (for his knowledge  
Is not infected), but if one present  
Th'abhor'd ingredient to his eye, make known  
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,  
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider.  
Camillo was his help in this, his pandar.  
There is a plot against my life, my crown;  
All's true that is mistrusted. That false villain

Whom I employ'd was pre-employ'd by him:  
 He has discover'd my design, and I  
 Remain a pinch'd thing; yea, a very trick  
 For them to play at will. (*The Winter's Tale*, II.1.21-52)

*The Winter's Tale* begins where many of Shakespeare's earlier comedies had ended. Friendship, no longer love's rival, has found a spacious if subordinate place for itself within the domain of marriage. Leontes enters the play with his wife Hermione and his friend Polixenes: three people apparently in possession of that harmonious, adult relationship which the youthful protagonists of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing* and *All's Well That Ends Well* had struggled painfully, over five acts, to achieve. Mamillius and Florizel, the children whose birth is predicated at the end of so many Shakespearean comedies, actually exist. The story is, or should be, over. So powerful is this sense of being in a place just beyond the normal terminus of Shakespeare's comedies that, even at the beginning of Act II, when Leontes has perversely begun to un-build his paradise, it is possible to hear the echoes of another and less disturbing winter's tale:

Now it is the time of night  
 That the graves, all gaping wide,  
 Every one lets forth his sprite,  
 In the church-way paths to glide.  
 (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, v.1.3.379-82)

Mamillius' whispered story 'of sprites and goblins' will be as harmless as Puck's fifth-act account of the terrors of the night: a ghost story carefully qualified, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, by the final benediction of the fairies. Safe in her warm, domestic interior, Hermione listens indulgently to a child's tale of grave-yard horrors. Neither of them notices that, as in Peele's *The Old Wives Tale*, someone has appeared on stage to tell Mamillius' tale for him. It is Leontes' story of the night, not Mamillius', that the theatre audience actually hears, and this adult fantasy is neither harmless nor amusing.

Leontes, like Othello before him, asserts passionately that ignorance is bliss:

I had been happy, if the general camp,  
 Pioners and all, had tasted her sweet body,  
 So I had nothing known. (*Othello*, III.3.345-7)

Othello's sophistical insistence that a man is robbed only if he knows he is had concentrated attention upon Othello himself: a man constitutionally incapable of existing – whether for good or ill – except in a state of certainty and total commitment. His false logic, engendered by the psychological pain of the moment, had been an unavailing attempt at self-delusion discredited by the speaker in the very moment of constructing it. Othello, in agony, deliberately plays with the idea of a blessed ignorance from which, through Iago's insinuations, he has effectively been debarred. He invents the gross 'pioners' as a form of self-torture, while trying simultaneously to persuade himself that paradise would not be lost even if he were the only man who still believed in it. But he knows that he cannot any longer believe.

Leontes' speech in *The Winter's Tale*, for all its superficial similarity, is very different from Othello's. The little inset story of the spider is palpably an old wives' tale: a piece of unnatural natural history which Leontes trots out as part of his self-defeating effort to make something out of nothing, to give substance to a bad dream. As such, it functions in ways of which the speaker is himself unaware, tells a truth he consciously rejects. If Leontes sees himself as being in Othello's situation, we do not. Othello, with some excuse, could not distinguish between Desdemona's truth and Iago's cunning falsehood. He was not the only person in the play to make this mistake. Leontes, on the other hand, inhabits a world of clear-cut black and white, one in which there is no Iago, and even the herd of anonymous gentlemen at the court always know that Hermione is innocent. Leontes' mind, as his words involuntarily but quite explicitly inform us, has poisoned itself, breeding madness from an illusory evil, even as the minds of people doomed by voodoo or black magic are supposed to do. Whether visible or not, the spider in the cup is itself innocuous: it is the human imagination that is destructive and deadly. This is the most important thing Leontes has to tell us. It is characteristic, however, of the last plays, that the speaker should be quite unconscious of what, for the theatre audience, is the primary meaning of his own words.

In his earlier plays, Shakespeare had very occasionally anticipated this technique. Usually, he did so for straightforward comic effect – one thinks of the word 'ass' as Dogberry indignantly applies it to himself, or as Bottom uses it, innocently, after his translation. Fools who luxuriate in words without understanding their proper mean-

ings, as Dogberry does throughout *Much Ado About Nothing*, Touchstone's Audrey with the epithet 'foul', or Cleopatra's clown (more profoundly) with the term 'immortal', are given to making sense of a kind they would consciously repudiate. It is part of the character of the Hostess in the *Henry IV* plays that she should remain blithely unaware of the bawdy double entendres which other people detect in her speech, unintentional indecencies which tend to overbear her own meaning. Only in *Troilus and Cressida*, however, did Shakespeare exploit the device in ways that were, fundamentally, not comic. The play is conditioned throughout by the audience's foreknowledge of the fate of Troy, and of the destiny of each individual character. A unique and all-encompassing irony ensures that characters seldom speak out of their own, present moment of fictional time without an audience interpreting their words in the light of the myth as a whole. So, when Helen suggests languidly that 'this love will undo us all' (III.1.110-11), what for her is mere badinage converts instantly into a sinister and alien truth. Pandarus regards it as a jocular impossibility that Cressida should ever be false to Troilus. Should his niece falter, 'let all pitiful goers-between be called to the world's end after my name; call them all Pandars. Let all constant men be Troiluses, all false women Cressids, and all brokers-between Pandars! Say, amen' (III.2.200-4). It is only for the audience, painfully aware that this is precisely the significance which these names now have, that 'amen' sticks in the throat.

*Troilus and Cressida* is a special case. (Indeed, it is interesting that Shakespeare should have wished to stress the ineluctable end of the Troy story in this fashion, as he did not with what might have been regarded as the equally predetermined patterns of English history.) In general, the compulsion to drive a wedge between dramatic speech and the nature and intentions of the speaker becomes important only in his late plays. One must be careful, I think, not to confuse this late stylistic development with ordinary ambiguity – the shadowy penumbra of meanings, not necessarily in the control of the speaker, which may surround a given word. Nor is it the same as that kind of implicit, underlying irony which becomes visible only when a passage is analysed in the study, or remembered from the special vantage point of the fifth act. When Henry V, before Harfleur, exhorts his soldiers to imitate tigers, greyhounds, cannons, or pitiless granite escarpments, his words are a successful incitement to action. Only in the context of the whole play, and *after the dramatic moment is*

*past*, leaving us to confront an immobile Bardolph and Pistol, is it possible to reflect that he is asking men to be both more and considerably less than human. Obviously, Henry himself does not see the terms he employs as equivocal, an impoverishment as well as an epic magnification. The point is that, in the theatre, neither do we. Or, at least, the speech as heard projects this sense in a way that is almost subliminal.

Similarly, when Othello, in Cyprus, exclaims of Desdemona,

Perdition catch my soul  
But I do love thee! and when I love thee not,  
Chaos is come again, (III.3.90-2)

or Macbeth asserts, 'Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had liv'd a blessed time' (II.3.91-2), the literal but at this instant merely potential truth lurking behind the hyperbole is secondary to the meaning of the lines as the speaker intends them, but also as we hear them in the moment of utterance. Othello and Macbeth, like Pandarus and Leontes, speak more truly than they know, but the bitter prophecy inherent in their words – like the unwitting predictions of Buckingham, Lady Anne, or Richard himself ('Myself myself confound') in *Richard III* – will always be submerged in the theatre by other and more immediately arresting considerations. Even if one's mind does flicker forward to 'the tragic loading of this bed', here, in the particular stage-present of Act III, Othello's lines make themselves felt essentially as Othello himself feels them: as a spontaneous declaration of love and faith. Macbeth's cry, while it certainly prefigures his fifth-act recognition of a life fallen irremediably into the 'sear, the yellow leaf', concentrates attention as it is uttered upon the audacity of his dissembled horror. That is the primary register.

This is not, however, the way we react to Leontes' spider, or to his assertion that 'I / Play too, but so disgrac'd a part, whose issue / Will hiss me to my grave' (I.2.187-9). Here, as in his angry words to Hermione,

Your actions are my dreams.  
You had a bastard by Polixenes,  
And I but dream'd it, (III.2.82-4)

it is what we take to be the *primary* meaning of the speech which is concealed from the speaker. In the last example, Leontes' heavy

irony functions, for us, as a simple statement of truth. This is also true of the convoluted reasoning through which he persuaded himself, in Act I, that because 'affection' may communicate with dreams, be coactive with the unreal, and because it 'fellow'st nothing' (1.2.138-46), it may conjoin with 'something' – and has. It is interesting to compare the false logic here with Brutus' soliloquy in the orchard in *Julius Caesar*: 'Then lest he may, prevent' (II.1.28). All of the passages from *The Winter's Tale* are entirely and almost impersonally apt as descriptions of the dramatic situation as we, but not Leontes, apprehend it. Mirrors of action almost more than of character, they do not focus attention upon Leontes' central self in the way that Othello's and Brutus' assertions had illuminated the needs and complexities of their natures.

A number of critics have felt that Shakespeare, in his last plays, destroyed that close relationship between language and dramatic character which had seemed the permanent achievement of his maturity. Charles Olson observed in 1950 that the later Shakespeare 'very much doesn't any longer bother to keep his music and thought inside the skin of the person and situation, able as he had been to make each person of his play make his or her individual self register its experience of reality'.<sup>1</sup> James Sutherland, confronting the opening lines of *Cymbeline*, suspected that 'the person who is thinking rapidly, breaking off, making fresh starts, and so on, is not the character, but Shakespeare himself'.<sup>2</sup> For Sutherland, this dislocation between verse and character reflected a Shakespeare who, if not exactly 'bored' (Strachey's epithet), was at least a little jaded: a man to whom poetry no longer came as naturally as leaves to a tree, who had to force himself now to create at all, and had taken to writing in a strained and entirely cerebral way. S. L. Bethell also claimed that the twisted rhythms and tortured syntax of the last plays represented 'Shakespeare's mind, not the character's; indeed, it draws our attention away from the speaker to what is spoken about'.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Sutherland, Bethell approved of what seemed to him a new technique designed to give prominence to those metaphysical truths which

<sup>1</sup> Charles Olson, 'Quantity in verse, and Shakespeare's late plays', in *Selected Writings of Charles Olson*, ed. R. Creeley (New York, 1966), p. 37.

<sup>2</sup> James Sutherland, 'The language of the last plays', in *More Talking of Shakespeare*, ed. John Garrett (London, 1959), p. 146.

<sup>3</sup> S. L. Bethell, Introduction to *The Winter's Tale*, New Clarendon Shakespeare (Oxford, 1956), pp. 22-3.

alone could justify Shakespeare's use of plot material so naive and silly. More recently, Hallett Smith has shifted the emphasis away from Shakespeare himself to the nature of the stage action. 'It is noteworthy', he says of certain passages in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, 'that the speeches do not so much characterize the speaker as dramatize the occasion'.<sup>4</sup>

Smith appears to me to have come closest to the truth. It is not easy to see why a dramatist who had so triumphantly solved what Daniel Seltzer describes as 'the problem of causing verbal expression to spring naturally from the inner life of the stage personality', who had developed 'a technique uniquely Shakespearean: that of expression, moment by moment, of an inner state and an immediate present time',<sup>5</sup> should suddenly decide to sacrifice the accomplishment. But then it is not easy, either, to understand the logic which impelled Michelangelo to forget everything he had painfully learned about the realistic articulation of the human body and return, in the Rondanini *Pietà*, to the stiff, non-naturalistic forms of Romanesque art. For whatever reason, Shakespeare at the end of his writing life chose to subordinate character to action in ways that seem to give Aristotle's conviction of the necessary primacy of the  $\mu\theta\omicron\varsigma$  a new twist.<sup>6</sup>

Editors of *The Tempest* have often wished to transfer Miranda's verbal assault upon Caliban in Act I ('Abhorred slave, / Which any print of goodness wilt not take') to Prospero. It seems almost inconceivable that her innocence and gentleness should be capable of such rugged and uncompromising vituperation. Examination of the last plays as a group, however, tends to suggest that the Folio is correct. Over and over again, Shakespeare jettisons consistency of characterization because he is more interested in the impersonal quality of a moment of dramatic time. This is what happens near the beginning of Act III of *The Tempest*, when Miranda somewhat

<sup>4</sup> Hallett Smith, *Shakespeare's Romances: A Study of Some Ways of the Imagination* (San Marino, California, 1972), p. 177.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Seltzer, 'Prince Hal and tragic style', in *Shakespeare Survey 30* (Cambridge, 1977), pp. 13, 23.

<sup>6</sup> In *Die dramatische Technik des Sophokles* (Berlin, 1917), T. Wilamowitz argues against the idea of psychologically consistent characterization in Sophocles, and for the centrality of action, in ways that have some bearing on Shakespeare's late style. According to Wilamowitz, Sophocles was always essentially interested in the situation of the moment, and its effect on the theatre audience. This, as opposed to any internal logic, governs the behaviour of his characters and the way we see them. (See the discussion of Wilamowitz's argument by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, 'T. Wilamowitz on the dramatic technique of Sophocles', in *The Classical Quarterly* 22 (n.s.), 1972, 214-28.)

startlingly produces the image of a concealed pregnancy as the means of declaring her love to Ferdinand: 'And all the more it seeks to hide itself, / The bigger bulk it shows' (III.1.80-1). That Ophelia, in her madness, should reveal that she has secretly committed to memory all the verses of a rude song about St Valentine's Day, certainly says something about Ophelia, and about the pathos of her attempts to look in directions sternly prohibited by Polonius and Laertes. It would obviously be inappropriate and futile to apply the same reasoning to Miranda's lines. They are there, not to tell us anything about sexual repression on the island, but because – as the betrothal masque will later make even more plain – Shakespeare is concerned, above all, to delineate this marriage in terms of natural fertility and increase. Even so, Miranda says to Caliban earlier what the situation, as opposed to maidenly decorum and the pliability of her own nature, would seem to demand.

Miranda is not the only heroine to be treated in this fashion in the late plays. As early as *Pericles*, Marina had anticipated Miranda's confrontation with Caliban in the uncharacteristic venom and masculinity of her reproof of Boult:

Thou art the damned door-keeper to every  
Custrel that comes inquiring for his Tib.  
To the choleric fisting of every rogue  
Thy ear is liable; thy food is such  
As hath been belch'd on by infected lungs. (IV.6.165-9)

The lines, however well suited to the Duke in *Measure For Measure*, are not easy for an actress to encompass, considering that she will have spent most of her previous scenes epitomizing a kind of gentle and melancholy lyricism, coupled with an innocence incapable of even understanding the Bawd's professional instructions (IV.2.116-23). One previous abrupt departure from Marina's normal manner, during her account to Leonine of the sea-storm of her birth (IV.1.58-64), has at least warned the performer what to expect. In both passages, Shakespeare appears to be using Marina less as a character than as a kind of medium, through which the voice of the situation can be made to speak.

Further instances of this attitude towards dramatic speech may be found most readily by turning to those passages in the late plays which, for one reason or another, have aroused critical censure or disagreement. Dr Johnson found the third-act soliloquy of Belarius in

*Cymbeline* ('These boys know little they are sons to th'King') positively exasperating in its irrationality and unabashed expository purpose. Belarius is not, elsewhere, so crudely confiding, like a character in an old play. The improbability, however, of the story he has to tell has already been admitted by Shakespeare, indeed brought to our attention, in the opening dialogue between the first and second gentlemen (I.1.57-67). Belarius' speech in Act III reflects, not his own personality or feelings at the moment (elsewhere clearly enough defined), but simply the character of the events he describes: remote, fantastic, and overtly artificial. The same will be true of the highly wrought and convoluted prose in which the courtiers recount the finding of Perdita in *The Winter's Tale*, as it is of Iachimo's insistence, at the end of *Cymbeline*, upon transforming what ought to be an agonized confession of guilt into an intricate and palpable work of fiction. Iachimo's flowery and long-winded account of how Posthumus was led to wager on Imogen's chastity bears little resemblance to the episode we actually saw, back in the fourth scene of Act I. The gentlemen were not, as Iachimo claims they were, sitting at a feast praising their loves of Italy, until their hyperbole stung the melancholy Posthumus into a celebration of his mistress, and then into accepting Iachimo's trial. The reality was different, and more complex than this. Iachimo has tidied it all up, brought it closer – both stylistically and in terms of fact – to a romance world. He does this for reasons which (again) have less to do with his character than with the way *Cymbeline*, in its final scene, deliberately treats its plot material as unreal.

A similar concern to express situation before character allows the wicked Queen in *Cymbeline* to speak of Britain in words that would not misbecome John of Gaunt, when she proudly refuses to pay the Roman tribute. Even Cloten, when he announces that 'Britain's a world / By itself' (III.1.12-13), can expect applause. Arviragus appears to wander off the point in ways of which true grief, even in a verse play, ought to be incapable when he assures the 'dead' Fidele of the kindly attentions of the ruddock's 'charitable bill (O bill, sore shaming / Those rich-left heirs that let their fathers lie / Without a monument!)' (IV.2.225-7). His brother Guiderius reproves him for playing 'in wench-like words with that / Which is so serious'. It is Arviragus, however, who is unconsciously faithful to the quality of the situation: Fidele is not dead, but merely asleep, as the result of the Queen's potion. It is interesting to compare Arviragus' lament here

with the comic frenzy of the Nurse when she discovers Juliet 'dead' on her wedding day. Like Fidele, Juliet is only drugged into a semblance of death and, in this sense, the Nurse's ludicrous attempts at tragic style ('O day, O day, O day, O hateful day!'; iv.5.52) are entirely appropriate to a situation which is not what it seems to be. With the Nurse, however, one is aware first and foremost of how perfectly *in character* her lamentations are. Presumably, she sounded much the same when poor Susan went to God. This is not true of Arviragus' elegy in *Cymbeline*, a speech which, if anything, seems oddly hard to square with what we know about this princely rustic.

At least two notorious problems in the last plays may result from Shakespeare's use of this dramatic technique. It is always hard to know what to make of Lysimachus' asseveration to Marina, at the end of their interview in the brothel, that he came 'with no ill intent, for to me / The very doors and windows savor vilely' (iv.6.109-10). He has certainly created the impression, in the scene as a whole, that he is a man perfectly at home in a house of prostitution, and intimately acquainted with its ways. 'How now? how a dozen of virginities?' As the Bawd remarks, 'Your honor knows what 'tis to say well enough' (iv.6.20, 31). There is not the slightest hint that the Governor of Mytilene may be dissembling. Is his explanation to Marina a desperate attempt to save face before he too, with the other converts, goes off to 'hear the vestals sing'? Or is the answer simply that Shakespeare is not interested in Lysimachus' motivation: during the dialogue with the professionals, and with Marina, he is a young man of rank in search of a sound whore, because that is what the situation demands. Afterwards, he is not – because he is going to marry Marina. Something similar seems to be happening with Paulina's outburst to Leontes after the 'death' of Hermione.

I say she's dead; I'll swear't. If word nor oath  
Prevail not, go and see. If you can bring  
Tincture or lustre in her lip, her eye,  
Heat outwardly or breath within, I'll serve you  
As I would do the gods. But, O thou tyrant!  
Do not repent these things, for they are heavier  
Than all thy woes can stir; therefore betake thee  
To nothing but despair. A thousand knees,  
Ten thousand years together, naked, fasting,  
Upon a barren mountain, and still winter  
In storm perpetual, could not move the gods  
To look that way thou wert. (*The Winter's Tale*, III.2.203-14)

Paulina, of course, is lying – or, at least, she seems to be from the vantage point of the fifth act. In the scene itself, one must assume that she is a woman half crazed with shock and grief, expressing the truth of the situation. For the theatre audience at this point in the play, Hermione, unlike Fidele, is indeed dead. Paulina's voice is faithful to the action. And it is characteristic of the last plays that Shakespeare should not bother, amid the partial revelations of the final scene, to provide any explanation of her previous behaviour.

Never a man who paid much attention to the requirements of neo-classical decorum when constructing character, the Shakespeare of the late plays seems to have abandoned even the basic convention by which, earlier, his servants and lower-class characters generally expressed themselves in homely, colloquial, if vivid, prose. The gardeners of *Richard II*, in their one, brief appearance, had been striking exceptions to this rule: emblematic, verse-speaking custodians of a garden more symbolic than literal and, as such, very different from Launce or Speed, Costard, the citizenry of the Roman plays, Cade's rabble, the Dromios, Grumio, Peter, Pompey, or the carriers at Rochester. Posthumus, on the other hand, is a humble, private gentleman but he has mysteriously acquired, in Pisanio, a servant of quite extraordinary verbal sophistication, who can tell Imogen to

Forget that rarest treasure of your cheek,  
Exposing it (but O, the harder heart!  
Alack, no remedy!) to the greedy touch  
Of common-kissing Titan, and forget  
Your laborsome and dainty trims, wherein  
You made great Juno angry. (III.4.160-5)

Even the gaoler in *Cymbeline*, although he speaks prose, seems (like Perdita herself, though without the justification of her lineage) to smack of something greater than himself, 'too noble for this place'. To place his meditation on death ('O, the charity of a penny cord'; v.4.157-206) beside that of the grave-digger in *Hamlet* is to see how little Shakespeare is concerned, now, with any attempt at social realism. Even the Old Shepherd of *The Winter's Tale*, and the fishermen Patchbreech and Pilch in *Pericles*, seem to dodge in and out of their status-defined, comic roles in ways for which there are no real parallels in earlier plays. Stephano and Trinculo, in *The Tempest*, do not do this: they are consistently (and relatively realistically) conceived throughout. Shakespeare's orthodox handling of them,

however, only serves to throw into relief the inexplicably civilized verse (if not the sentiments) of Caliban.

It is a commonplace of criticism to separate Imogen from the other young heroines of the last plays, to see her as a sister of Rosalind, Viola, Portia, or the Julia of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a character existing somewhat uncomfortably in a romance world not really designed to accommodate her. There is obviously some truth in this judgement, at least when Imogen is measured against Marina, Perdita, and Miranda. She does indeed seem to be more vigorous, complex, and three-dimensional than they, to summon up memories of the earlier heroines. And yet, when Cymbeline, at the very end, recognizes 'the tune of Imogen' (v.5.238), it is not easy to define just what he means. Unlike Rosalind or Viola, Imogen has seemed to manifest herself in several, divergent modes: passionate and chilly, timorous and aggressive, sometimes intensely feminine, sometimes not. This is partly the result of the way she submerges her own personality within that of the fictional Fidele, losing herself in her role, as Rosalind had not when she impersonated Ganymede, or Viola when she acted Cesario. Rosalind's mercurial, feminine self always shines through Ganymede, making Orlando's acceptance of the wooing game credible. Viola constantly reminds us, as she talks to Orsino, Feste, and Olivia, or struggles to overcome her physical cowardice when confronting Aguecheek, of the lonely, isolated girl she really is. The image is curiously double. In the theatre, an audience remains aware that Fidele is really Imogen. Yet her identity is overlaid by another: that of the 'boy' whom Guiderius, Arviragus, Belarius and (later) Lucius see. We share their viewpoint, as we never share Olivia's, Orlando's, or Orsino's. This is not because Imogen is particularly skilled at dissembling – indeed, the bluntness and impatient candour of her behaviour at court during the early scenes suggest precisely the opposite – but because Shakespeare has transformed her so completely, in her dialogue with other characters, into the person she is pretending to be, that we intermittently lose sight of the reality. It is possible that the page Fidele's lament for his dead master,

Alas,  
There is no more such masters. I may wander  
From east to occident, cry out for service,  
Try many, all good; serve truly; never  
Find such another master

(iv.2.370-4)

made an imaginary situation seem so convincing that Shakespeare was impelled to introduce the subsequent aside (lines 377-9) in order to remind us of the truth.

Shakespeare's handling of Imogen's disguise would seem to be a further example of the subordination, in the last plays, of character to the demands of stage action. It is also part of a new, and sometimes perplexing, attitude towards disguise and deceit generally. Pastoral Bohemia is a land in which ballad stories so improbable that they are virtual synonyms for fiction can eagerly be swallowed as true. There, no one sees through the various disguises of Autolycus, Florizel, Polixenes and Camillo. Elsewhere, however, dissembling and deceit tend to be transparent as they were not in earlier plays. 'Here comes the Lord Lysimachus disguis'd', the Bawd remarks calmly in the fourth act of *Pericles* (iv.6.16-17). One almost wonders why he is troubled. When one considers how complex and vital an issue it had been in earlier plays – both the comedies and tragedies – to distinguish truth from falsehood, seeming from reality, how difficult to arrive in particular cases at Hamlet's understanding that 'one may smile, and smile, and be a villain', the sudden diminution or disappearance of this problem from the last plays is startling. It would seem, however, to be to a considerable extent responsible for their special character and flavour.

Where Bassanio had agonized long over the riddle of the caskets at Belmont, Pericles solves Antiochus' conundrum without effort and at once. Later, at Pentapolis, his rusty armour and dejected manner fail to conceal his innate nobility and worth from King Simonides and his daughter. Both are eager, before they know his identity, to press this seemingly unequal marriage. Lysimachus stands more upon his dignity, but even he requires only the assurance of a birth certificate to offer his hand to the girl he met first in the stews. At Cymbeline's court, everyone but the king himself can see clearly that the queen is evil and not to be trusted, and also that Cloten is a boor, and the lowly Posthumus the only man worthy of such a jewel as Imogen. Courts are not usually so perceptive. Cornelius will not give the queen the poisons for which she asks. Pisanio will neither betray Posthumus by entering the service of Cloten, nor believe Posthumus when he brands Imogen as unchaste. Imogen herself sees through Iachimo's slander of Posthumus. Guiderius and Arviragus know, although they cannot explain why, that Fidele is akin to them as Belarius is not.

In *The Winter's Tale*, although Antigonus misinterprets a dream (and pays heavily for it), Leontes is really the only person who believes in Hermione's guilt. Everyone else, including the nameless gentlemen of the court, sees clearly that he is deluded. Camillo tells Leontes to dissemble with Polixenes: 'with a countenance as clear / As friendship wears at feasts, keep with Bohemia' (1.2.343-4), and the king accepts his advice. 'I will seem friendly, as thou hast advis'd me.' Just how successful this attempt is emerges at the end of the act, when Polixenes assures Camillo that 'I do believe thee: / I saw his heart in's face' (1.2.446-7). Duncan had lamented that 'there's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face' (*Macbeth*, 1.4.11-12), but in the last plays it seems to be true more often that no art is required: faces tell all, even when, as in the case of Leontes, their owners are making strenuous attempts at hypocrisy. Prospero, through his magic art, understands the true nature of everyone on the island. The knowledge adds doubtfully to his happiness. It contributes, however, to the general sense in this, as in the other Romances, that the real problem, now, is not one of distinguishing good from evil but of deciding what to do with a knowledge which often seems to be acquired involuntarily rather than through any conscious effort at discrimination.

The involuntary plays a significantly new part in the last plays. Although, in general, good and evil are oddly transparent and recognizable for what they are, a few individual characters are arbitrarily deprived of this knowledge. Sealed off from everyone around them, they inhabit a strange, isolated state of consciousness in which they not only make false judgements, but cannot be reached or reasoned with by anyone else. These extreme states of mind are not arrived at, as it seems, by any logical, or psychologically comprehensible, process: they are simply 'caught', like the 'flu. This happens to Pericles towards the end of the play. He appears in Act v as a living dead man, one who has not spoken to anyone for three months. Only Marina can break through the barrier, and even she comes close to being defeated by the task. In the case of King Cymbeline, his delusion has come upon him before the beginning of the play, an inexplicable blindness which prevents him from seeing what is apparent to everyone else. Only the death of the wicked queen releases him from the spell. *The Tempest* stands slightly apart from the other Romances, in that the trance which enwraps Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian after the enchanted banquet is directly

attributable to Prospero's art. Again, however, it has the effect of creating a distinction between a special, almost somnambulist state and a waking world of preternatural clarity and moral definition. Posthumus, in *Cymbeline*, shuts himself off from the light in Act II. Philario is a minor character, and he has never met Imogen, but even he can see that Iachimo's tale 'is not strong enough to be believ'd / Of one persuaded well of' (II.4.131-2). Posthumus, however, has suddenly entered the troll kingdom of *Peer Gynt*, and no longer sees the world with the eyes of other men.

The madness of Leontes would seem to be generically like that of Pericles, Cymbeline, Posthumus and (with reservations) the three men of sin in *The Tempest*. But Shakespeare allows us to watch its inception and development at much greater length, a privilege which only serves to make the affliction itself more mysterious. Leontes comes to believe that he is the only person in Sicily capable of distinguishing truth from falsehood. In fact, he is the only person who cannot. What he describes, in the speech about the spider and the cup, as 'my true opinion' is a chimera, a self-deception of the grossest kind. And indeed, only a few lines later, he is repeating this talismanic word *true* in a sentence which means one thing to him and, as so often, something quite different to the audience: 'All's true that is mistrusted.' Editors of *The Winter's Tale* tend to feel that the phrase is sufficiently obscure to require a gloss. They explain carefully that Leontes is justifying the truth of his own suspicions about Hermione and Polixenes – and so he is. The word order, on the other hand, is oddly convoluted. (Compare Ford's superficially similar statement in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: 'my intelligence is true, my jealousy is reasonable'; IV.2.148-9). *The Winter's Tale* inversion draws attention to a rival, and even more important, interpretation. What Leontes is telling us, without being aware that he does so, is that everything he thinks false is, in fact, true.

Throughout his writing life, Shakespeare displayed a marked predilection for analysing situations by way of contraries or antitheses. Dualities and polar opposites are a striking feature of his style, superimposed upon the individual verbal habits of particular characters: darkness and light, frost and fire, summer and winter, love and hate. Elizabethans, trained as they were in the discipline of formal rhetoric, often thought in such patterns. With Shakespeare, however, certain words seem to summon up their opposites almost automatically, as the result of an ingrained habit of mind almost



more than from the requirements of a particular situation or rhetorical pattern. This is the case especially with the true-false antithesis, as even a quick glance at the two words in the Shakespeare concordance will reveal. They are surprisingly constant companions. In the last plays, however, something odd seems to happen to antithesis generally, and to the true-false figure in particular.

'Metaphysical' is a term frequently invoked to describe the stylistic peculiarities of the Romances. And indeed, there is much to be said for using it, in Dr Johnson's sense of heterogeneous ideas yoked together by violence, analogies so ingenious it seems a wonder they were ever found at all. Characteristic of all four plays, but of *The Winter's Tale* in particular, is a form of similitude, usually employing the conjunction *as*, in which antithesis is employed to define resemblance in a fashion both unexpected and only superficially logical. When Antonio wants to assure Sebastian that Ferdinand is surely dead, he complicates a fundamentally simple assertion by explaining that 'Tis as impossible that he's undrown'd, / As he that sleeps here swims' (II.1.236-7). Time, in *The Winter's Tale*, warns the theatre audience that he will 'make stale / The glistening of this present, as my tale / Now seems to it' (IV.1.13-15). Hermione is sure that her past life 'hath been as continent, as chaste, as true, / As I am now unhappy' (III.2.34-5), and Paulina informs Leontes that she is 'no less honest / Than you are mad' (II.2.71-2). Iachimo, purloining the sleeping Imogen's bracelet, finds it 'as slippery as the Gordian knot was hard' (II.2.34). There are many other instances. In all of them, a negative and a positive statement are oddly conjoined. Moreover, although the syntax often appears to be setting up a clear-cut polarity (honest-dishonest, chaste-falsely accused), in fact the figure slides off into the oblique. The terms compared are not really antithetical: they are merely *different* in a way that makes one wonder why these particular instances have been made to confront each other at all.

The words *false* and *true* continue, in the last plays, to evoke one another, but Shakespeare tends to treat them, now, in an almost vertiginous way. Earlier true-false antitheses (e.g. 'As false, by heaven, as heaven itself is true'; *Richard II*, IV.1.64) had been clear cut. Although the complications attendant upon broken vows produced, in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *King John*, three isolated examples prophetic of the future,<sup>7</sup> it is only in the Romances that

<sup>7</sup> *Love's Labour's Lost*, v.2.772-4. *King John*, III.1.27-8 and v.4.28-9.

truth and falsehood come to engage habitually in a balancing act in which, at one and the same time, they remain polarities and seem to exchange identities. In the light of similar passages in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, Pericles' meditation on Antiochus at the beginning of the play sounds like an authentic and uncorrupted piece of Shakespearean text:

If it be true that I interpret false,  
Then were it certain you were not so bad  
As with foul incest to abuse your soul. (I.1.124-6)

Even so, Cornelius, when deceiving Cymbeline's queen about the nature of the drug he gives her, describes himself as 'the truer, / So to be false with her' (I.5.43-4). Pisanio performs the same gyration in Act III, when he informs the absent Cloten that 'true to thee / Were to prove false, which I will never be / To him that is most true' (III.5.157-9), and reiterates the paradox in Act IV: 'Wherein I am false, I am honest; not true, to be true' (IV.3.42). Leontes argues that even if women were as false as 'o'er-dy'd blacks', as water, wind or dice, 'yet were it true / To say this boy were like me' (I.2.134-5).

Imogen's anguished investigation of what it means 'to be false' extends the exercise:

True honest men being heard, like false Aeneas,  
Were in his time, thought false; and Sinon's weeping  
Did scandal many a holy tear, took pity  
From most true wretchedness. So thou, Posthumus,  
Wilt lay the leaven on all proper men;  
Goodly and gallant shall be false and perjur'd  
From thy great fail. (III.4.58-64)

Hermione on trial sees the same problem from the opposite side, but she delineates it in similar terms:

Since what I am to say must be but that  
Which contradicts my accusation, and  
The testimony on my part no other  
But what comes from myself, it shall scarce boot me  
To say 'Not guilty'. Mine integrity  
Being counted falsehood, shall (as I express it)  
Be so receiv'd. (III.2.22-8)

The pessimism of both women is unwarranted. Except for characters like Leontes and Posthumus, who have suddenly and arbitrarily gone blind, distinguishing between falsehood and truth as *moral* entities is

no longer difficult. All of these riddling passages remind us of this fact. At the same time, they suggest, in their deliberate confounding of opposites, the presence of another kind of true-false confusion: one which is central to these plays.

On the whole, efforts to distinguish the fictional from the 'real', art from life, tales from truth, come in the Romances to replace the older, moral concern with identifying hypocrisy and deceit. It is not easy for characters to make these distinctions – nor, in some cases, for the theatre audience. *Leontes*, when he applies the story of the spider in the cup, mistakes a fiction of his own devising for fact, with disastrous results. He forces the imaginary to become true, even as Antonio does before *The Tempest* begins, when

having into truth, by telling of it,  
Made such a sinner of his memory  
To credit his own lie – he did believe  
He was indeed the Duke. (1.2.100–3)

Both of these are false and destructive fictions, credited only by their creators. And in both plays they can be countered only by another, and benevolent, kind of illusion: Prospero's restorative art, or the pastoral make-believe of Bohemia.

In Bohemia, almost all the special techniques of the last plays with which this essay has been concerned are on view simultaneously. People are constantly expressing the truth of the situation without grasping what, for us, is the primary meaning of their own words – as in the reiterated description of the lowly Perdita as a 'queen'. It has often been remarked that Polixenes and Perdita, in their debate on Art and Nature, perversely argue against their own position and intentions as they understand them at this point. Polixenes, after all, has come to the sheep-shearing precisely in order to prevent his gentle scion from grafting himself onto wild stock. Perdita, for her part, intends to make just such an 'unnatural' marriage. Their words, inconsistent with the purpose of the two speakers, focus attention not upon them but upon the real nature of the situation.

Perdita dislikes acting as much as she dislikes nature's bastards in her rustic garden. It worries her that her own identity should be submerged so completely in that of the festival queen she plays, that her robes should change her disposition. In fact, she does lose herself in her part, even as Imogen had in that of Fidele, although in this case

the scene in which she distributes the flowers seems to operate as a healing counterbalance to the earlier 'play' in which her father, another unwilling actor, had fancied himself hissed off the stage in the role of cuckold. It is with great reluctance that Perdita agrees to continue in her royal part after Polixenes has revealed himself. Camillo's counsel to her to 'dislike / The truth of your own seeming' (iv.4.652–3) not only brings truth and falsehood into a linguistically dizzying relationship, in the manner characteristic of these plays; it expresses a truth beyond Camillo's ken. Like Imogen, Perdita must consent to 'disguise / That which, t'appear itself, must not yet be / But by self-danger' (*Cymbeline*, III.4.144–6).

Autolycus, a man of various and willing disguises, may seem at first sight to be a hypocrite and dissembler in the manner of earlier plays. His real association, however, is with fictions rather than with genuine evil. Certainly his decision not to take the obviously profitable step of acquainting Polixenes with Florizel's intended flight – because to do so would be an honest action, and Autolycus prefers to remain true to his own falsehood – is scarcely that of a man whose villainy we can take seriously. At the end of the play, the Clown, his chief victim, is cheerfully defending his oath that Autolycus is 'as honest a true fellow as any is in Bohemia' on the grounds that 'if it be ne'er so false, a true gentleman may swear it in the behalf of his friend' (v.2.157, 162–3). Justice Shallow's man Davy, pleading for the notorious Visor because 'the knave is mine honest friend' (2 *Henry IV*, v.1.50), never confounded the moral connotations of 'knave' and 'honest', despite his concern to mitigate the pejorative side. The Clown, on the other hand, calls precisely this polarity into doubt in ways that make it impossible for us to regard Autolycus as anything but what he is: a creator of fictions who, by not betraying Florizel to Polixenes, and by inventing a tale which frightens the Old Shepherd and the Clown into Sicily with the all-important fardel, is in fact the agent of the happy ending.

In Bohemia, people constantly confuse fact with fiction. Mopsa and Dorcas are almost obsessive in their desire to be assured that the pedlar's fantastic ballads are true. Their naiveté is comic and yet, later in the play, we find ourselves humbly sharing their impulse. The second gentleman announces that 'such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour that ballad-makers cannot be able to express it' (v.2.23–5). The preservation of Perdita and her reunion with her father are, as Shakespeare continually reminds us, 'like an old tale',

more improbable even than Autolycus' ballads. It is, however, a story that we too, in reading or watching the play, want to believe. This is even more true with the awakening of Hermione from marble to flesh, a resurrection which is as much a miracle for the theatre audience as for the characters involved. 'It is requir'd', Paulina says, 'you do awake your faith' (v.3.94-5). What kind of faith?

Several kinds of fiction, as it seems, have operated in *The Winter's Tale*. The comedy ending which was the original point of departure dissolved almost at once into a dark tale of sprites and goblins. Then, it metamorphosed into a traditional comedy plot. Florizel and Perdita stand together in the last moments of the play as lovers who have won through, despite parental opposition and mistakes about identity, in the immemorial way of comedy. It is true that there is something they lack. Mamillius ought to be standing beside them: Florizel's friend, as Polixenes was Leontes'. But Mamillius, like Antigonus, is dead. Hermione, too, is wrinkled and older after the passing of sixteen years. Leontes does not get back exactly what he threw away. Still, he gets back far more than men can realistically expect. *The Winter's Tale* admits something that Shakespeare's Elizabethan comedies had tried to deny: happy endings are a fiction. A fiction, but not quite a fairy-tale.

Paulina declares of Hermione in the last scene:

That she is living,  
Were it but told you, should be hooted at  
Like an old tale; but it *appears* she lives.

(v.3.115-17; *my italics*)

The words are true, once again, in a way not comprehended by the speaker. It is, after all, because of the dramatic form in which this implausible fiction has been embodied, because of our complex, theatrical experience of this  $\mu\theta\theta\omicron\varsigma$ , that we can give *The Winter's Tale* a kind of assent we deny to Greene's *Pandosto*. In the world as we know it, the dead do not return. Lost children generally stay lost, and shepherds' daughters do not attract the sons of kings. Ageing widows are not married off quite so neatly as Paulina. Shakespeare not only does not try to conceal, he positively emphasizes 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. And also, to a desperate artistic honesty which could admit, now, to creating fictions, while making us understand why and how much we should like those fictions to be real.