THE WINTER'S TALE

"Though Antony and Cleopatra - with Coriolanus - is the last of Shakespeare's great tragedies, it does not represent the last stage in the artist's development. It was followed by a series of plays, written apparently between 1608 and 1612 (Pericles, Cymbeline, The Winter's Tale and The Tempest), which represent an effort to give artistic form to a new symbolic conception. At the heart of each of these plays lies an organic relationship between breakdown and reconstruction, the division created in the most intimate human bonds (and more especially in the unity of the family) by the action of time and passion and the final healing of these divisions. Near the opening of each play - even in Cymbeline, where the treatment of these central themes is partially obscured - a father loses his offspring through the excess of his own passion-driven folly or through his involvement in a corrupt world. The main action is devoted to the suffering and remorse which follow from this estrangement, and at the end of the play the lost child (......), is restored to her father's blessing and becomes an instrument of reconciliation."

What we have quoted above points to the heart of The Winter's Tale which is about the breakdown of the house of Leontes and the final healing of this breakdown. At any rate, this constitutes one among the many dramatic themes of the play. Shakespearean plays, we must note here, rest not upon one theme but they represent a cohesive or integrated structuring of diversified themes and this is so because Shakespeare holds a mirror to life and life is so diversified. The situation in The Winter's Tale differs from what we came across in the two plays we have studied hitherto. In each of those plays the action revolved round men and women with no off-springs and not holding the key-position in the dominion in which they live, or, to

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put it in a different way, kings and queens. In this play the action emanates from the king in relation to his queen and the structure of the drama has been built upon the theme of their separation and final reconciliation.

How the disintegration in the house of Leontes sets in is of vital importance to our study. We do not have an Iago or Iachimo in this play who are evil incarnate and whose only task is to see others dismantled. Evil has been presented in the person of Leontes. He is the personification (in the first half of the play) of the passion of jealousy. Leontes' jealous disposition brings in another important theme, the theme of supposed unchastity, which is the focus of our study.

Act I Scene II gives us an account of how Leontes and Polixenes were like brothers in their childhood and youth. Comparison has been made to the lambs, and we can take this to be deliberate. Lambs or sheep are known for their closeness.

"We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' th' sun
And bleat the one at th' other; What we chang'd
Was innocence for innocence; ..."

(I.ii.)
This very closeness, we can take for granted, is the reason why Leontes’ jealousy comes to the forefront and takes hold of him. He has already tried to persuade Polixenes to stay but, as we can see, his persuasions have failed. On the other hand, at the request of Hermione (Leontes has given her leave: "Tongue-tied, our queen? speak you") Polixenes changes his mind and decides to stay longer. Herein lies the starting point of the action in the play. Two things can be seen to emanate from the action of Polixenes. The first is that he is "soft" where the feminine sex is concerned and the second, it fans the flame of jealousy already burning within Leontes (he having failed, his wife has succeeded and he and Polixenes being what they were in the past). From this time onwards every little gesture of Polixenes and Hermione serves to confirm what has already been suspected or imagined to be true by Leontes.

"...(Aside) I am angling now, Though you perceive me not how I give line. Go to, go to! How she holds up the neb, the bill to him! And arms her with the boldness of a wife To her allowing husband!

(I.ii.)

The final confirmation comes when news of Polixenes and Camillo’s flight is conveyed to Leontes.
"How blest am I
In my just censure, in my true opinion!
Alack, for lesser knowledge! How accr's'd
In being so blest! . . .

(II.i.)

The ensuing reaction to this is the imprisonment of Hermione. Her fate is sealed and she has thereby become an unchaste woman (as far as Leontes is concerned) and even the child she bears is taken to be a bastard.

The Winter's Tale, is among other things, a psychological study of the problem of evil innate in man. This particular problem has been directed towards Leontes who is a victim of the passion of jealousy, which in itself is evil. Evil is necessarily there in the human situation, it is present in everybody and everyone is capable of doing evil. In Leontes' case the most probable cause of his jealousy is the remembrance of the childhood tie between himself and Polixenes. The exchange of "innocence for innocence" which is only possible where there is no sexual awareness is still prominent in Leontes. With the awakening of sexual awareness and the opening up of the mind to the vast complexities of human existence the exchange of "innocence for innocence" is no longer possible. Leontes is blind to this fact and thereby his mind is turned the other way
when Hermione succeeds in making Polixenes change his mind. He is jealous of his friend, because where he has failed as his friend, his wife succeeds.

It has been said man is a social animal and he needs to love and be loved. The need for love is realised through companionship and union with woman, and the outcome thereof. We see in the Book of Genesis how God wants the man he has created to have company and how he creates the woman for his company. We also see how the woman becomes the temptress and leads to his fall. So we see even in religious accounts of the creation of man, the role woman plays in man's life. As a matter of fact, even the most robust and energetic of men needs the company of women. Moreover, the matrimonial tie binds the relationship between a man and a woman more closely and the object of love is also the object of hatred. This is so because of the fear which is a dominant characteristic of human beings. The fear in the case of Leontes pertains to his wife, Hermione, giving out her love to Polixenes. This fear turns into jealousy the moment Polixenes accepts the invitation of Hermione. Moreover the fleeing of Polixenes and Camillo (who is ordered to poison Polixenes) serves to strengthen what has already been accepted to be true by Leontes.
Man has likeness to God. He is capable of doing good. This capability of doing good is however simultaneously counteracted by the desire or the power to do ill. Thus we see how man is a created contradiction in himself. The power of the mind of man is infinite and thereby he is capable of infinite good or ill. In the case of Leontes, since he lets jealousy overrule his good sense the outcome is devastating. Hermione is ordered to be imprisoned, and her issue, the king's own daughter, is abandoned to die in the desert of Bohemia. The outcome of his jealous disposition is felt by all his household and by his subjects. We have seen how Camillo is obliged to flee. This is not all — Antigonus who has taken charge to consign the child "to some remote and desert place," too suffers death.

The sending for the oracle of Apollo is also of significance from the point of view of the monstrosity of heights Leontes' jealousy has risen to. In the court of justice we see Hermione tried. The contents of the oracle are also unfolded here;

'Hermione is chaste; Polixenes blameless; Camillo a true subject; Leontes a jealous tyrant; his innocent babe truly begotten; and the King shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found.' — but the reaction of Leontes is contrary to the general belief.
There is no truth at all i' th' oracle. The sessions shall proceed. This is mere falsehood.

(III.ii.)

Here we witness how man tends to stay firm in his own belief even when the truth is let known to him. In fact it exemplifies the pitiable insecurity of man's knowledge, and the stubborn clinging to it. One would not be wrong to suggest that Leontes sends for the oracle to aid him in his conviction. When the oracle turns out to be otherwise, he even goes to the extent of condemning it as mere falsehood.

Evil which is necessarily there in the human situation disrupts the smooth running of normal human life. As it is, human knowledge is very insecure where a fellow human being is concerned. There is no "I know him very well," between any two persons. We have hitherto hinted how infinite the human mind can be but with evil taking possession of it, it becomes very hard indeed for one to know another thoroughly or very well. If the reverse were the case, no drama would have been conceived in terms of such husband-wife relationship as we find in The Winter's Tale. Leontes would have known the truth had his eyes and good sense been not blinded by evil. Between Act I and Act II the
the passage of time is not mentioned. Act I ends with the flight of Polixenes and Camillo. In Act II Scene I we are told of how the pregnancy of Hermione has started showing physically.

She is spread of late
Into a goodly bulk. Good time encounter her!

(II.i.)

We can see how impossible the situation is for the child to be a bastard. Nevertheless, Leontes' conviction is that the child has been born of adultery.

...Take up the bastard;
Take't up, I say; give't to thy crone.

(II.iii.)

Shakespeare has indeed tried to show how man's reasoning and goodsense can be clouded by the operation of evil and how he can be blinded by his false persuasion. On the one hand, he has given enough hints that the child could not have been born of adultery. On the other hand, there is evil operating in Leontes and clouding his reasoning and in his fatal sense of self-sufficiency, he takes to be true what is patently false. The triumphant of evil is devastating. The child is left to die in the desert of Bohemia and in the process Antigonus and all those aboard the ship lose their lives. Mamillius in the
meantime has died of grief. The death of Mamillius is the turning point in the action of the play. Hitherto Leontes only believed himself without paying heed to others. Mamillius' death lifts the cloud surrounding his reasoning and he awakes to the truth of the matter.

Apollo's angry; and the heavens themselves
Do strike at my injustice.

(III.ii.)

Shakespeare has diverged from the earlier comedies in which only the lighter and relatively trivial side of life is portrayed without bringing in the explosive and alarming aspects of it. As it is, life is a compound of both. This divergence is to be seen in The Winter's Tale where evil is allowed to play its part in the household of Leontes. Evil has time and again been dramatised by the greatest of dramatists. Christopher Marlow, the greatest among the forerunners of Shakespeare, has dramatised the force of evil in Dr. Faustus. Evil has been personified in the character of Mephistophilis who ultimately leads Faustus to his own destruction. The primary theme of this play is omnipotence which Faustus seeks to attain through black magic. We see how after he has secured Mephistophilis to aid him, all his endeavours to do good turn the other way. This is because he has sought the powers of evil and not
of good. Echoes of hell resound throughout the play which dramatises the power of evil.

In The Winter's Tale the situation is no doubt different, but still it pertains to the dramatisation of evil. The action in the play emanates from the presence of evil in the human situation. Evil has a hold on Leontes and it has been presented in the form of the passion of jealousy - insane and unaccountable. The Leontes and Hermione story constitutes the main plot. We then have the sub-plot constituted by the Perdita and Florizel story. These two stories have been interwined in such a way as to dramatise life's complexities, to shed light on the tremendous ambiguity of the human situation and to bring about harmony at the end.

Perdita who has been abandoned to die is rescued by a shepherd. She is taken to be the daughter of that shepherd. Shakespeare no doubt has created the situation in such a way that her true identity when revealed will have perceptible physical proof to it. The sub-plot or the Perdita story serves to complicate the main plot. It sustains the main plot and paves the way for the final reconciliation. Before the reconciliation is effected, a string of incidents follow paving the
way for it. These incidents serve to complicate the plot. Moreover, we have seen how Hermione at the suggestion and with the aid of Paulina feigns death. This is also an important device used by Shakespeare to dramatise the motif of seeming and being, of appearance and reality. The audience (because the play is primarily meant for acting) is left wondering how the complications are to be resolved in the final reconciliation.

The Perdita–Florizel relation has been imbalanced in the sense that Perdita, until the final resolution of the crisis, is apparently the daughter of the shepherd. This brings in the complication in the sub-plot. The love between her and Florizel cannot be approved by Polixenes, for it is against the practice prevalent among the royal families. In Perdita traces of her royal birth can be discerned but it lacks the refinement of the civilized cultured bourgeois. The contrast between court sophistication and simple life can be seen very powerfully in pastoral Bohemia. This contrast aids in complicating the sub-plot and also in paving the way for the final reconciliation.

In the sheep-shearing ceremony organized by the supposed father of Perdita there ensues a debate between Polixenes and Perdita on the familiar Renaissance topic on the relationship between nature and nur-
ture, natural simplicity and human civilizing improvement, initial nature and completing grace.

The debate indeed has direct bearing on the evil which comes in Leontes. Shakespeare brings out the fact that evil is necessarily there in the human situation. Leontes is the King of Sicilia and he is supposed to have that "completing" grace but on the contrary we find that he is capable of thinking and doing evil. The same can, in a different way, be applied in the case of Polixenes. He symbolizes civilizing improvement without the grace of nature. He confuses love with the apparent civilizing improvement of Court life. Innocence that is possible only in infancy is confused by both Leontes and Polixenes.

On the other hand, we have the relation between Perdita and Florizel. This relation acts as a counterpoise to the relation between Leontes and Hermione. The presence of Polixenes in the sheep-shearing ceremony brings this out very vividly. He is a representative of the older generation and also of the Court. The relation that he sees between a man and a woman is based upon rank in the social set up. This belief is counteracted or repudiated by the Perdita-Florizel relation, which is based not upon social rank but upon
the understanding of the human heart. Perdita is aware of their differences in the social set up.

...Your high self,
The gracious mark o' th' land, you have obscur'd
With a swain's wearing; and me, poor lowly maid,
Most goddess-like prank'd up. But that our feasts
In every mess have folly, and the feeders Digest it with a custom, I should blush
To see you so attir'd;...

(IV.iv.)

and

Apprehend
Nothing but jollity. The gods themselves,
Humbling their deities to love, have taken
The shapes of beasts upon them: Jupiter
Became a bull and bellow'd; the green Napurne
A ram and bleated; and the fire-rob'd god,
Golden Apollo, a poor humble swain,
As I seem now. Their transformations
were never for a piece of beauty rarer,
Nor in a way so chaste, since my desires
Run not before mine honour, nor my lusts
Burn hotter than my faith.

(Iv.iv.)

Now, Florizel talks of how the Gods humbled themselves to enjoy their lovers who were below their rank. In his case it is not only the desires of the flesh but love or "agape" as the Greeks would put it. In the case of Leontes and Hermione love was there but not to that extent which is to found in the Perdita and Florizel relation. Leontes overrules his wife with his passionately jealous disposition and he is blind to
all other things. Even the verdict of the oracle is put aside because it does not aid in confirming what he has already elevated to the status of certain knowledge.

The Perdita-Florizel relation dramatically suggests what the Leontes-Hermione relationship has lost and what it should have continued to retain. As we have said before, the former is based upon mutual understanding or "agape."

Thou dearest Perdita,
with these forc'd thoughts, I prithee,
darken not
The mirth o' th' feast. Or I'll be thine, my fair, Or not my father's; for I cannot be Mine own, nor anything to any, if I be not thine. To this I am most constant, Though destiny say no.

Lift up your countenance, as it were the day Of celebration of that nuptial which we two have sworn shall come.

(IV.iv.)

The steadfastness of this love is brought to light by the above passage. The concluding three lines are remarkable in the sense that they bring about an atmosphere of positiveness in what ever Florizel has said before. Upon the love of Perdita and Florizel an external force impinges in the person of Polixenes (Florizel's father). The intervention of Polixenes in the affairs of Florizel marks the climax of the
action in the sub-plot. This can be taken to be the key to the final resolution of the crisis. "When Polixenes, with his sneering description of her as 'worthy enough a heardsman,' accuses her of enticing Florizel to debase himself and threatens her with torture, her reply is a frank acceptance of the implied challenge:" 11

...I was not much afeared; for once or twice I was about to speak and tell him plainly The self same sun that shines upon his court Hides not his visage from our cottage, but Looks on alike. ....

Beseech you, Of your own state take care. This dream of mine - Being now awake, I'll queen it no inch farther, But milk my ewes and weep.

(IV.iv.)

Once again we encounter Hermione in the person of Perdita, who calmly accepts her lot. Before Leontes sent Hermione to prison, we have seen how calmly she accepted the sentence.

There's some ill planet reigns. I must be patient till the heavens look With an aspect more favourable.

(II.i.)

On the other hand, we have Florizel who is a sharp contrast to Leontes and Polixenes. They, as we have said, represent the society clustering around the Court with its vain and ceremonious grandeur. Florizel is also a descendant of this society, but he is true to


The Pelican Guide to English Literature.
his feelings.

Cam.: Be advis'd.
Flo.: I am — and by my fancy; if my reason
     will thereto be obedient, I have reason;
     (IV.iv.)

Florizel can be said to represent the product of nature and nurture in the truest sense of the terms. A human being is capable of differentiating between what is bad and what is good, and he also possesses the power of suppressing the evil in him and he who does so is a product of nature and nurture exemplified in Florizel.

...Camillo,
Not for Bohemia, nor the pomp that may
Be theretof glean'd, for all the sun sees
or
The close earth wombs, or the profound seas hides
In unknown fathoms, will I break my oath
To this my fair belov'd.
     (IV.iv.)

To Polixenes the action of Florizel naturally is an act of revolt. On the other hand, it is an act of gentlemanliness which is a product of nurture. He has promised to marry Perdita and cannot break the oath he has made to his beloved. We also see how Florizel has made use of the word "pomp," which signifies 'Wordly vanity.'

The action of Florizel in defying his father
Polixenes is of vital importance in bringing about the final resolution in the drama. This act makes them flee Bohemia and the scene shifts back to Sicilia.

Now, coming back to the Leontes-Hermione story, we have seen how the death of Mamillius brings Leontes back to his senses. But the plot demands that the complications be not resolved then and there, for that which is lost has not been found. Moreover, the feigned death of Hermione serves to complicate the plot all the more. We see how Leontes repents:

Apollo, pardon
My great profaneness 'gainst thine oracle.
I'll reconcile me to Polixenes,
New woo my queen, recall the good Camillo—
whom I proclaim a man of truth, of mercy.

(III.ii.)

But this reconciliation is not to come about until the passage of sixteen years.

Turning back to the Perdita-Florizel story we see how they escape to Sicilia. In this act they are helped by Camillo who in turn helps himself, for he shall "tell the king

Of this escape, and wether they are bound;
wherein my hope is I shall so prevail
To force him after; in whose company
I shall re-view Sicilia, for whose sight
I have a woman's longing.

(IV.iv.)
Camillo's act can be seen as one of enlightened selfishness. He thinks not only of himself and how he can best avail of the circumstance but also of how the troubled and bewildered prince and princess could be restored to their estranged parents in an atmosphere of joy and thanksgiving. The occasion presents him with the rare opportunity of combining his self-interest with the security and well-being of the hapless lovers.

At this point we come to the last movement of the drama. Everything is ready for the final resolution. Perdita and Florizel present themselves before Leontes with their "make-believe" greetings from Polixenes. Here too Shakespeare uses another dramatic technique to heighten the final reconciliation. He introduces Polixenes and Camillo as a dramatic counterpoint to Perdita and Florizel. This in turn helps to clarify the true status of Perdita. "That which is lost" has been found. Hermione who has so long feigned death is restored to Leontes.

Thus we have come a long way from a violent disruption to a blessed union, from folly to knowledge. We have been introduced to and conducted through a saga of human experience spanning the whole gamut of error and blunderings, of self-correction and self-knowledge, of egotism and altruism leading finally up to
a healing of sickness and an open-eyed recognition of
the need for the direction of the heavens to rescue
man from the pit of error into the sunshine of truth
and fulfilment.

This whole idea comes through clearly
in the final speech of Leontes who now functions to his
full potential.

...Let's from this place.
What! look upon my brother. Both your pardons,
That e'er I put between your holy looks
My ill suspicion. This your son-in-law,
And son unto the king, whom heavens directing,
is troth-plight to your daughter. Good Paulina,
Lead us from hence where we may leisurely
Each one demand and answer to his part
Perform'd in this wide gap of time since first
We were dissoever'd. Hastily lead away.

It should be clear, that, the human
drama with its grim tragic potential and actual tragic
happenings (namely, the deaths of Mamillius and Antigo-
nus) issues from the one single act of Leontes' attrib-
ution of unchastity to Hermione, from his insane per-
ception of an evil in her when the evil lay in him, took
possession of him and distorted his vision and action.

Alienated from himself, Leontes does
not recognise his true self. He projects his evil on the
world around him and sees evil where there is none, while
remaining blind to the evil within himself.
Thus, the appearance becomes the reality for him. Reason proves fragile and passion overtakes and supplants it. And this triggers the whole chain of events that the play spans within its ambit.

The Leontes-Hermione story gives rise to the Florizel-Perdita story. One necessitates the other. The supposed unchastity of Hermione leads on to her supposed death, to the actual death of her son, to the flight of Camillo and Polixenes, the supposed identity of Perdita, the death of Antigonus, the commotion in Bohemia, the flight of Florizel and Perdita, as fleeing outlaws, to Sicily and the eventual resolution of errors.

The insolence that makes Leontes mistake seeming for being causes him first to condemn his queen as unchaste, then to take her as dead and finally as a statue. His dangerous solipsism and alienation from knowledge causes waves of uncontrollable upheaval not only in his own kingdom but even in Bohemia. His insecurity of knowledge turns out to be the author not only of his own insecurity of happiness but also of the mounting insecurity of another royal household, in other words, of the rest of the world.

What needs to be equally recognised is that within this framework created by the enormity
of benighted human insolence, Shakespeare dramatises a whole range of human experience bringing into play the forces of good and evil, the workings of motives and intentions, of loyalty, selfishness and deceit, of nature and nurture, of human follies and divine providence. In the event, through a masterly and comprehensive exploitation of the motif of appearance and reality, Shakespeare pulls off a profound illumination of the eternal human situation, complex and many-faceted and ever tragedy-prone because of the potential for error and evil within and outside man.