CHAPTER EIGHT

THE LAST PLAYS
Death brings heartbreak in Tragedies but in the last plays, death leads to grief and tears which purify. Death here comes as resurrection. In Tragedies, the lovers are reunited on the other side of life; in the last plays, their union is here and now. But here, as in Tragedies, the Power that gives and takes away is mystery and not a Christian doctrine.

Time has a holiday rhythm in these plays. The last plays express the triumph of life. In these plays, the poet adopts a mode of articulation of life-in-death. Here death does not destroy and life sustains its rhythm in the midst of death. Pseudo death or recovery of those given up as dead shows life and death as merely two sides of the same coin, co-existing with each other.

'Cymbeline' makes mock of death and its sorrow in the mock burial of Imogen.

In 'The Winter's Tale' youth is conceived as power and antagonist to death; and Time works miracles.

In 'The Tempest' life is presented as a dream. Death has no threat in a fulfilled life. Prospero awaits his death with calm of mind.
Chapter - 8
LAST PLAYS

The themes in the Last Plays are restoration, reconciliation, moral resurrection and regeneration. The resurrection and reunion plots dramatize a victory over death. G. Wilson Knight has interpreted the Last Plays as "myths of immortality."¹

"The final period marks not so much a changed approach to human existence as a new totality of comprehension within which death is itself annulled."²

The stories of the Romances are the stories of tragedies, but here they cover not only inferno and purgatory but also paradise. While Lear and Cordelia find each other on the other bank of the River Time, in the Romances, we find permanent reunion on this side of death. They indicate a review of life and death on earth with a tranquil mind. Death has lost its sting now. As Prospero says:

"Every third thought shall be my grave" The Tempest (V, i, 311). Macabre death is transformed into tuneful loveliness in the Last Plays as reflected in the song:

"Full Fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change  
Into something rich and strange.  
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:

_The Tempest_ (I, ii, 394-400)

In the Last Plays, accidents turn out to be fortunate where

"ancient wrongs are righted and the old make way for newness of life in the young, where fulfilment is achieved in this world and not in a region beyond the stars; even death itself being cancelled and the exile returned to his native land; where all is subject to Time which is not envious or calumniating, but joining with mortal designs."

The Last Plays reflect Shakespeare's intuition of conquest over apparent death. Shakespeare was so long concerned with problems of life and death, that now he is more concerned with the mystery of birth "birth amid the chaotic seas of time, beneath the black thunder of mortality."

The Last Plays deal with the universal mystery of this life, which is but a sleep. They have the awareness that life is but "Such stuff as dreams are made on" _The Tempest_ (IV, i, 157) — birth, life and awakening.
"At this last vision we face the systole and the diastole of universal things whereby the tempests of time are dissolved in the orchestration of eternity; and the music of the spheres breaks out across the tranquil seas."

The spirit of the Romances is distinguished by a high moral tone. They tell of repentance and reconciliation, of pardon, love and peace. There is a return to nature, to the Arcadia of Bohemia, the Milford Heaven of Cymbeline and the Enchanted Isle of The Tempest. The Last Plays end on a note of serenity and tranquillity. They offer the vision of the mellowed Shakespeare, expressing the sweetness of forgiveness and reconciliation. In The Last Plays, the dark supernaturalism of the tragedies is replaced by a happier mysticism. Shakespeare's Tragedies are his 'Paradise Lost'; his Last Plays are his 'Paradise Regained'. Not only death, but even Time reveals a benign countenance, as in the shape of the chorus in 'The Winter's Tale'. If the ways of the gods were put to question in the Tragedies, they are ethically probed and justified in the Last Plays in which the cacophony of tempests ceases to symbolize chaos and becomes a harbinger of a Brave New World.

As Shakespeare grew old and wearied of the tumult
of pleasure and pain, the natural piety gains strength, as is seen in the serenity of the Last Plays. Though his plays do not explicitly preach Christian ideas, the Last Plays breathe the Christian spirit of charity, benevolence and forgiveness.

In Tragedies, death brings pain and grief which bring heartbreak whereas in the Last Plays death brings grief which purifies love. So here death becomes a purifier. The Last Plays give the sinners time to repent, not to cut them off in their sins. The Last Plays end with victory of love, the broken bonds between heart and heart are mended. They amend their follies and are forgiven. They are reunited. As we turn from tragedies to Romances, we turn from the thoughts of revenge to those of forgiveness. The Last Plays are centred upon the highest ideal of humanism - Pardon for all. The Tragedies deal with the themes of Wrong and Retribution, the Last Plays deal with the themes of Wrong and Restoration. Here we have a resurrection, a return from death. The life that was broken up, is made to move on, renewed, healthy, fecund. The rhythm of life goes on in all its abundance. The Last Plays end on a note of forgiveness.
"The cruel wrongs are melted away in forgiveness. This forgiveness isn’t just a forgetting of injuries, but a diffusion of Christian charity, an all-understanding Love."  

The Last Plays follow the Christian movement from death to regeneration. They symbolize the processes of rebirth and regeneration.

"As St. Paul realized, the heart of Christianity is the Resurrection; for if Christ is not risen, faith is a foolish hope and death is not succeeded by life. The Christian pattern moves from weakness to strength, from death to life, from sin to bliss."  

In these plays, happiness follows close upon disaster, death follows life. Here Shakespeare views death like a mystic. Death is indeed dead in these plays.

Here the birth theme is recurrent and is meaningful: Marina, Perdita, Posthumous — all are thrown helpless at birth on the stormy waves of life, but are guarded and restored by Divine Providence. The fury of storm subsides and the sea gives back its victims.

The Last Plays are not directly concerned with the survival of death in time; on the contrary, they dramatize
death as a delusion. The apparently dead are found to be alive. Perdita was given up as drowned in the stormy sea of Bohemia, but returns sixteen years later to a family reunion. Hermione is reported dead and comes back alive to a repentant Leontes. A reported death absolves the jealous Leontes. Repentance is his Katharsis.

The theme of illusion of death is recurrent in the Last Plays. The Last Plays attune the mind to the rhythm of the miraculous. In *Pericles*, Marina was reported as dead but was sold to a prostitute; but ultimately was rescued and reunited with her father and mother. In *Cymbeline*, Imogen was given up as dead, so were her brothers too, but they also returned to the court to make old Cymbeline grateful to God.

Death awakes in music to life and love, as in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. Hermione is restored to Leontes in a chapel to the sound of music. Music accompanies resurrection. Music is a symbol of pure delight of reunion. It is the prelude to the working of a miracle. The dead rise with the note of music "For music raises the consciousness until it is in tune with a reality beyond the reach of wisdom."
'The Tempest' dramatizes the final harmony attained by Shakespeare. The tempest is now a symbol not of destruction, but of preservation. The enemies of Prospero consider each other to have died but at the end they reunite to present a brave new world, in which death loses its sting.

The Dirge in 'Cymbeline' itself hymns death as the release from all mortal fears — harsh nature, tyranny and slander.

"Fear no more the heat o' the sun,
Nor the furious winter's rages;
Thou thy worldly task hast done,
Home art gone and ta'en thy wages;
Golden lads and girls all must,
As chimney-sweepers come to dust.

Fear no more the frown o' the great,
Thou art past the tyrant's stroke;
Care no more to feed and eat,
To thee the reed is as the oak;
The sceptre, learning, physic, must
All follow this, and come to dust.

Fear no more the lightning flash,
Nor the all-dreaded thunder-stone;
Fear not slander, censure rash;
Thou hast finish'd joy and mean;
All lovers young, all lovers must
Consign to thee, and come to dust."
No exerciser harm thee!
Nor no witchcraft charm thee!
Ghost unlaid forbear thee!
Nothing ill come near thee!
Quiet consummation have;
And renowned be thy grave!"

_Cymbeline_ (IV, ii, 253-281)

In the Last Plays, particularly in _The Tempest_ life is shown as an illusion, which will disappear into thin air.

"Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

_The Tempest_ (IV, i, 143-159)

The tempests in the Last Plays are closely intertwined with the plots and yield symbolic meaning. Here symbolism is the plot itself. In these plays, love, marriage, birth — all are here opposed by tempests "a whirl of sweet
things rocked, lost, yet saved amid tempestuous adventure" — yet tempests in the Last Plays, unlike tempests in the Tragedies, are kind and restore their spoil. In 'Pericles' and 'The Winter's Tale', the protagonist is separated from his wife and loses his daughter, both are given up as dead; the loss is associated with tempest, the restoration with music. These Last Plays are transcendent visions. These plays deal with the plot of loss and reunion and their powerful child and nature symbolism makes them immortality visions.

The Last Plays express the triumph of life over death. Here Shakespeare adopts a mode of articulation of life in death. Here death does not destroy and life sustains its rhythm in the midst of death. Those who are given up as dead, are restored to life. The spiritual achievement of the Final Plays is in its salvation through recognition and acceptance.

The pseudo-death in an earlier play like 'Romeo and Juliet' leads to a fatal disaster, but not so here. The crisis is happily resolved, and faith is restored. Life and faith render death an integral part of reality.

The tragic pattern across the planes of reality
robs death of all its cruelty and brutality and elevates it to an aesthetic and metaphysical level. Unlike in tragedies, there is no confrontation with death nor its neglect as in Comedies, nor its decay as in the Problem Plays or its mechanizations and rawness as in the Histories. Here is an integral vision, showing acceptance of death—death as a sleep girdling the dream of life, death as an inevitable sequel to life, a way out unto the vast unknown.

Shakespeare's Last Plays close "the metaphysic of the tragedies and the ethic of the comedies in an increasing integration of eternity and time." 10

In "Pericles", Shakespeare worked on an old legend embodying a mystic realization of the conquest of death by life. The play throws a beam of light into the darkness of death. The end of a life and the loss of faith in love are equally grievous to the human heart. Death leads to metaphysical pain as loss of faith is a shock both moral as well as metaphysical. Pericles welcomes the new-born babe "this fresh new sea-farey" (III, i, 41) on the waters of human life. In Pericles' the tempests have the widest significance. Thaisa is supposed dead. She is thrown into the tempestuous sea. Her body is cast ashore by the tempest
in a coffin. She is coffined with jewels. There has never been such a tempest. The earth quakes. Cerimon by his magic and with the aid of music revives her. Pericles thinks his wife dead. It is also reported that his daughter Marina is dead too. For Pericles, life is a voyage of grief. But at the feast of Neptune, the tempest is finally stilled. Pericles and Marina meet at sea which is now peaceful. Marina, the song-maiden restores him, as Cordelia and music restored the "untuned" senses of Lear. This reunion scene is reminiscent of the Lear - Cordelia reunion. The reviving of Thaisa is one of the pinnacles of Shakespeare's art. She is restored to Pericles in the Temple of Diana. They open Thaisa's coffin and the saintly Cerimon restores her to life with music:

"This queen will live; nature awakes, a warmth Breathes out of her; she hath not been entranc'd Above five hours. See! how she 'gins to blow Into life's flower again."

Pericles (III, ii, 92-95)

Life is a 'flower', music revives the tempest-lose life. Death is a trance only.

In the Last Plays, death and sea are associated. An interesting example of this death-sea association is found
in 'Cymbeline' where Guiderius kills Cloten and says he will give his head to the sea. In 'Cymbeline', we have mock-death and therefore mock-burial of Imogen. Like Imogen, her pseudo-death too is equally beautiful. In the burial scene the imagery from the natural world suggests the sorrow of death as also its peace. Having killed what he loved, Posthumous seeks death in vain on the battlefield and in prison. Posthumous' dialogue with the gaoler offers humorous glimpses on death as the solver of all debts, as the solver of all justice and injustice alike. Death is less a punishment and more a liberation for Posthumous. Hearing from Pisanio that Posthumous has ordered her death, Imogen pleads with him to obey her lord's wish as her self-sought death would be sinful. Thus she desired death, which will be a kindly release for her.

In 'The Winter's Tale', husband and wife are cruelly separated, their infant daughter is supposed to have perished, their sweet son withers away. After suffering years of penitence for his sin, Leontes finds that his long-lost wife Hermiinne is really alive. They are reunited and they get back their child, whose loss was lamented. With the death of his son Mamillius begins Leontes' return to
reality. His death is the starting point of Leontes' realization and provides one of the factors for his repentance. Leontes, in the end is a figure of accomplished repentance, and his son's death has been its cause. Here "youth is conceived as a power, as a renewer of life and antagonist to death." There is tempest at the heart of the play. The resurrection is performed when Leontes' repentance is complete. The miracle of a dead queen coming to life is preluded by Paulina: "Music, awake her: strike!" The Winters' Tale (V, iii, 93).

"Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him
Dear life redeems you."

(V, iii, 102-103)

Hermione comes to life; "death awakes in music to life and love." 

'The Tempest' sums up the Shakespearean universe. It is based on the philosophical and poetic concept of 'life as a dream'. It is a mystic parable telling of sea-loss and resurrection. Prospero does not take the course of revenge but takes the path of forgiveness. He wins back the love of
the evil-doers by his forgiveness. His message is:

"... the rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance."

The Tempest (V, i, 27-23)

"the progress from spiritual pain and
despairing thought through stoic acceptance
to a serene and mystic joy is a universal
rhythm of the spirit of man." 13

Prospero in his early appearance expresses his
faith in Providence and in his last appearance he vows that:
"Every third thought shall be my grave." The Tempest
(V, i, 311). Here the thought of elucidid death revives
the wonder and beauty of life.

" 'The Tempest' is a symbolical representation
of a world in which God or Providence exer-
cises direct rule by constant intervention
in the person of Prospero." 14

Here Prospero reminds us of Lear, a happier Lear; though
he is a wronged old man like Lear, he has his Cordelia to
share his banishment. The philosophic peace and forgiveness
of the suffering old man blends with the wedded bliss of
young Ferdinand and Miranda.
As Hamlet through Horatio, Shakespeare through Prospero delivers the poetical testament to the Future Ages. Prospero's view of death has a profound spiritual meaning. Shakespeare who saw the world as a stage, also saw the rising and falling curtains between the acts all leading to the end. When he sees that "these actors have melted into air, into thin air," he seems to be using the metaphor to show the dichotomy between the man and the actor, the actual and the illusion. It is the actor who melts away when one dies; may be the essential self with the stuff as dreams are made on endures margin; along with the 'little life' into the encircling sleep, the sleep of death! Death has lost its terror, its violence. It means here a release, lapsing into sleep from the dream of life.
Chapter - 8

The Last Plays

1. G. Wilson Knight
   The Crown of Life as a frame of Shakespeare’s Final Plays (Methuen and Co. Ltd. London, 1958) P.30

2. G. Wilson Knight

3. John Lowlor

4. G. Wilson Knight
   The Shakespearean Tempest (Columbia University Press New York) P.268

5. Ibid
   P 268 - 269

6. Horace Dobree
   The Last Plays in The Living Shakespeare ed. Robert Gittings (Heinemann London 1960 P.141

7. Sylvan Barnett

8. G. Wilson Knight

9. G. Wilson Knight
   The Shakespearean Tempest Op.Cit. P.222


