

The Winter's Tale

We wonder that Mr. Pope should have entertained doubts of the genuineness of this play. He was, we suppose, shocked (as a certain critic suggests) at the Chorus, Time, leaping over sixteen years with his crutch between the third and fourth act, and at Antigonus's landing with the infant Perdita on the seacoast of Bohemia. These slips or blemishes, however, do not prove it not to be Shakespeare's; for he was as likely to fall into them as anybody; but we do not know anybody but himself who could produce the beauties. The *stuff* of which the tragic passion is composed, the romantic sweetness, the comic humour, are evidently his. Even the crabbed and tortuous style of the speeches of Leontes, reasoning on his own jealousy, beset with doubts and fears, and entangled more and more in the thorny labyrinth, bears every mark of Shakespeare's peculiar manner of conveying the painful struggle of different thoughts and feelings, labouring for utterance, and almost strangled in its birth. For instance:

Ha' not you seen, Camillo?
(But that's past doubt; you have, or your eye-glass
Is thicker than a cuckold's horn) or heard,
(For to a vision so apparent, rumour
Cannot be mute) or thought (for cogitation
Resides not within man that does not think)
My wife is slippery? If thou wilt, confess,
Or else be impudently negative,
To have nor eyes, nor ears, nor thought.—

Here Leontes is confounded with his passion, and does not know which way to turn himself, to give words to the anguish, rage, and apprehension which tug at his breast. It is only as he is worked up into a clearer conviction of his wrongs by insisting on the grounds of his unjust suspicions to Camillo, who irritates him by his opposition, that he bursts out into the following vehement strain of bitter indignation: yet even here his passion staggers, and is as it were oppressed with its own intensity.

Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? stopping the career
Of laughter with a sigh? (a note infallible
Of breaking honesty!) horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? wishing clocks more swift?
Hours, minutes? the noon, midnight? and all eyes
Blind with the pin and web, but theirs; theirs only,
That would, unseen, be wicked? is this nothing?
Why then the world, and all that's in't, is nothing,
The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia's nothing,
My wife is nothing!

The character of Hermione is as much distinguished by its saint-like resignation and patient forbearance, as that of Paulina is by her zealous and spirited remonstrances against the injustice done to the queen, and by her devoted attachment to her misfortunes. Hermione's restoration to her husband and her child, after her long separation from them, is as affecting in itself as it is striking in the representation. Camillo, and the old shepherd and his son, are subordinate but not uninteresting instruments in the development of the plot, and though last, not least, comes Autolycus, a very pleasant, thriving rogue; and (what is the best feather in the cap of all knavery) he escapes with impunity in the end.

The Winter's Tale is one of the best-acting of our author's plays. We remember seeing it with great pleasure many years ago. It was on the night that King took leave of the stage, when he and Mrs. Jordan played together in the after-piece of *The Wedding-day*. Nothing could go off with more eclat, with more spirit, and grandeur of effect. Mrs. Siddons played Hermione, and in the last scene acted the painted statue to the life—with true monumental dignity and noble passion; Mr. Kemble, in Leontes, worked himself up into a very fine classical frenzy; and Bannister, as Autolycus, roared as loud for pity as a sturdy beggar could do who felt none of the pain he counterfeited, and was sound of wind and limb. We shall never see these parts so acted again; or if we did, it would be in vain. Actors grow old, or no longer surprise us by their novelty. But true poetry, like nature, is always young; and we still read the courtship of Florizel and Perdita, as we welcome the return of spring, with the same feelings as ever.

Florizel. Thou dearest Perdita,
With these forc'd thoughts, I prithee, darken not
The mirth o' the 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,
Tho' destiny say. No. Be merry, gentle;
Strangle such thoughts as these, with anything
That you behold the while. Your guests are coming:
Lift up your countenance; as it were the day
Of celebration of that nuptial which
We two have sworn shall come.

Perdita. O lady Fortune, Stand you auspicious!

Enter Shepherd, Clown, Mopsa, Dobcas, Servants;
with Polixenes, and Camillo, disguised.

Florizel. See, your guests approach.
Address yourself to entertain them sprightly,
And let's be red with mirth.

Shepherd. Fie, daughter! when my old wife liv'd, upon
This day, she was both pantler, butler, cook;

Both dame and servant: welcom'd all, serv'd all:
Would sing her song, and dance her turn: now here
At upper end o' the table, now i' the middle:
On his shoulder, and his: her face o' fire
With labour; and the thing she took to quench it
She would to each one sip. You are retir'd,
As if you were a feasted one, and not
The hostess of the meeting. Pray you, bid
These unknown friends to us welcome; for it is
A way to make us better friends, more known.
Come, quench your blushes; and present yourself
That which you are, mistress o' the feast. Come on,
And bid us welcome to your sheep-shearing,
As your good flock shall prosper.

Perdita. Sir, welcome! [To Polixenes and Camillo.]
It is my father's will I should take on me
The hostess-ship o' the day: you're welcome, sir!
Give me those flowers there, Dorcas.—Reverend sirs,
For you there's rosemary and rue; these keep
Seeming, and savour, all the winter long:
Grace and remembrance be unto you both
And welcome to our shearing!

Polixenes. Shepherdess,
(A fair one are you) well you fit our ages
With flowers of winter.

Perdita. Sir, the year growing ancient,
Not yet on summer's death, nor on the birth
Of trembling winter, the fairest flowers o' the season
Are our carnations, and streak'd gilly-flowers,
Which some call nature's bastards: of that kind
Our rustic garden's barren; and I care not
To get slips of them.

Polixenes. Wherefore, gentle maiden,
Do you neglect them?

Perdita. For I have heard it said
There is an art which in their piedness shares
With great creating nature.

Polixenes. Say, there be: Yet nature is made better by no mean,
But nature makes that mean: so, o'er that art
Which, you say, adds to nature, is an art

That nature makes. You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock;
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race. This is an art
Which does mend nature, change it rather: but
The art itself is nature.

Perdita. So it is.¹

Polixenes. Then make your garden rich in gilly-flowers,
And do not call them bastards.

Perdita. I'll not put
The dibble in earth, to set one slip of them;²

No more than, were I painted, I would wish
This youth should say, 'twere well; and only therefore
Desire to breed by me.—Here's flowers for you;
Hot lavender, mints, savory, marjoram;
The marigold, that goes to bed with the sun,
And with him rises, weeping: these are flowers
Of middle summer, and, I think, they are given
To men of middle age. You are very welcome.

Camillo. I should leave grazing, were I of your flock,
And only live by gazing.

Perdita. Out, alas!
You'd be so lean, that blasts of January
Would blow you through and through. Now my fairest friends.
I would I had some flowers o' the spring that might
Become your time of day; and yours, and yours,
That wear upon your virgin branches yet
Your maidenheads growing: O Proserpina!
For the flowers now that frighted thou let'st fall
From Dis's waggon! daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares and take
The winds of March with beauty: violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
Or Cytherea's breath; pale primroses,
That die unmarried, ere they can behold
Bright Phoebus in his strength (a malady
Most incident to maids); bold oxlips, and
The crown-imperial; lilies of all kinds,
The fleur-de-lis being one! O, these I lack
To make you garlands of; and my sweet friend

To strow him o'er and o'er.

Florizel. What, like a corse?

Perdita. No, like a bank, for love to lie and play on;
Not like a corse; or if—not to be buried,
But quick, and in mine arms. Come, take your flowers;
Methinks, I play as I have seen them do
In Whitsun pastorals: sure this robe of mine
Does change my disposition.

Florizel. What you do,
Still betters what is done. When you speak, sweet,
I'd have you do it ever: when you sing,
I'd have you buy and sell so; so give alms;
Pray so; and for the ordering your affairs,
To sing them too. When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o' the sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that; move still, still so,
And own no other function. Each your doing,
So singular in each particular,
Crowns what you're doing in the present deeds,
That all your acts are queens.

Perdita. O Doricles,
Your praises are too large; but that your youth
And the true blood, which peeps forth fairly through it,
Do plainly give you out an unstained shepherd;
With wisdom I might fear, my Doricles,
You woo'd me the false way.

Florizel. I think you have
As little skill to fear, as I have purpose
To put you to't. But come, our dance, I pray.
Your hand, my Perdita: so turtles pair,
That never mean to part.

Perdita. I'll swear for 'em.

Polixenes. This is the prettiest low-bom lass that ever
Ran on the green-sward; nothing she does, or seems,
But smacks of something greater than herself,
Too noble for this place.

Camillo. He tells her something
That makes her blood look out: good sooth she is

The queen of curds and cream.

This delicious scene is interrupted by the father of the prince discovering himself to Florizel, and haughtily breaking off the intended match between his son and Perdita. When Polixenes goes out, Perdita says,

Even here undone!
I was not much afraid; 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't alike. Wilt please you, sir, be gone?
[To Florizel.]
I told you what would come of this. Beseech you,
Of your own state take care; this dream of mine,
Being now awake, I'll queen it no inch further,
But milk my ewes and weep.

As Perdita, the supposed shepherdess, turns out to be the daughter of Hermione, and a princess in disguise, both feelings of the pride of birth and the claims of nature are satisfied by the fortunate event of the story, and the fine romance of poetry is reconciled to the strictest court-etiquette.

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1. The lady, we here see, gives up the argument, but keeps her mind.
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