

Deception in *The Winter's Tale*

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Deception is the keystone of *The Winter's Tale*.¹ Paulina's sixteen-year torment or testing of the contrite Leontes gives shape and purpose to the play's diffuse and wayward progress. Far from being an afterthought, as many have suspected, Hermione's return in the last scene provides the necessary and inevitable conclusion to the many narrative strands brought together in this improbable tale. No other ending would satisfy, nothing else could achieve the unique effect of *The Winter's Tale*: the play reveals itself to be a unified artistic whole, despite its prolixity, despite the apparent lack of a central narrative thread, despite the patent absurdity of its sensational finale. Hermione's 'resurrection' fulfils more than the promise of the oracle:

Hermione is chaste; Polixenes is 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. (III. ii. 132-6)

It also fulfils the formal, emotional and perhaps even philosophical implications of this complex and disconcerting play.

Admittedly, *Pandosto, or the Triumph of Time* does not end with the restoration of Bellaria, Pandosto's wife; equally, Simon Forman's diary says nothing about the last scene as it appears in the Folio text,² and equally the oracle's reference to 'that which is lost' seems to apply primarily to Perdita. Nevertheless, the rush by earlier critics and scholars to declare that the last scene is an unwarranted and inartistic attempt to please audiences addicted to the type of sensationalism Beaumont and Fletcher were making popular around the time *The Winter's Tale* was first acted, reveals something of the literary and dramatic tastes of an earlier generation rather than being capable of persuading us on historical and scholarly grounds. The last moments of the play have proved (and still do on occasions) an embarrassment — not because of the evident improbability that Paulina should have been able to sustain

- 1 Quotations from *The Winter's Tale* are from J. H. P. Pafford's Arden text (London, 1963). The quotation from *Macbeth* is taken from my Challis edition (Sydney, 1980).
- 2 The Furness variorum of *The Winter's Tale* (Philadelphia, 1898) contains an account of Forman's notebook (pp. 318-9).

her monstrous deception for sixteen years, but because Shakespeare seems to have betrayed the trust of his audience by insisting as firmly as he does that Hermione dies in III. ii. and by taking steps effectively to block any suggestion that the Queen has survived. He has been accused and convicted of false dealing. Even Northrop Frye, who did much to remove the play from conventional ethical and moral priorities, reveals a sense of uneasiness as he attempts to justify Shakespeare's sleight-of-hand by appealing to the power of nature and art:

it turns out that in fact no statue has been made of Hermione, and the entire reference to Romano seems pointless. We do not need this kind of art when we have the real Hermione, and here again, whatever Romano's merits, neither he nor the kind of realism he represents seems to be very central to the play itself. There is little plausibility in *The Winter's Tale*, and a great deal of what is repeatedly called 'wonder' . . .³

Whether Shakespeare should be accused of improper practices relies to a large extent on questions of acting style and theatrical convention of a sort that the recent interest in theatre studies has forced on the attention of the critical and scholarly community. In particular, the three key elements in Shakespeare's grand deception in *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione's swoon in III. ii., Paulina's highly charged announcement of the Queen's death a little later in the scene, and the 'resurrection' in V. iii., need to be examined from the vantage-point of the theatrical practices and expectations of Shakespeare's stage. One must tread carefully here: we know too little of the acting styles employed in Shakespeare's theatre to speak with any confidence about how an audience might have been expected to react to certain important but ultimately misleading elements in a play, especially in a play such as this, which seems to demand a pristine audience — one that, even if familiar with *Pandosto* would have no inkling of how the play is to end. All we may do is appeal to probability and to rely on suggestions to be gleaned from the play and from similar situations in other plays of the period, in an attempt to lift the veil from matters obscured by the passage of time.

On hearing of Mamillius's death, Hermione falls in a swoon. Paulina alerts the court and the audience to what is happening:

This news is mortal to the queen: look down
And see what death is doing.

3 Northrop Frye, 'Recognition in *The Winter's Tale*', in *Fables of Identity* (New York, 1963), p. 113.

Leontes replies:

Take her hence;
Her heart is but o'ercharg'd: she will recover.
(III. ii. 148-50)

Which are we to believe? We who know the play, for whom *The Winter's Tale* is a 'classic', not a fresh theatrical experience, know that Leontes is 'right', for all the wrong reasons — his assertion, while correctly anticipating the play's conclusion, is not the product of some superior diagnostic skill, but the result of the deeply guilty creature's inability to contemplate the consequences of his wrongdoing. For Leontes to admit the monstrosity of his suspicions and actions would surely destroy him. The question is, rather, whether Shakespeare's original audience would have had even the faintest suspicion of what a well-read modern audience knows — that indeed the Queen's heart is but overcharged with sorrow at hearing of her son's death. The usual answer is that that audience would have had no inkling of the true state of affairs, and that even if the suspicion were entertained, Paulina's passionate announcement of her mistress's death a little later (l. 176ff) would effectively dispel any lingering hope that Hermione lives — as it does for Leontes himself.

Yet the matter is neither as simple nor as straightforward as this account would suggest. In the first place, we must recognize that a curious connection was made in Shakespeare's theatre, and that of his contemporaries, between fainting (that is a loss of consciousness, no matter how induced) and deception. The best place to focus a discussion of this is in II. iii. of *Macbeth*. As the horrified Scottish nobles recover from the shock of finding King Duncan murdered in his bedchamber, they begin to question Macbeth about the reasons why he killed the grooms whose duty it was to protect the King. Macbeth 'equivocates'; he invokes his sense of outrage, loyalty and grief as justification, claiming that the frenzy of anguish made him kill those that had obviously slaughtered their master. One has to assume that the thanes are a little suspicious of this, and that they sense something of the 'equivocation' in Macbeth's famous lines

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood,
And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in Nature
For Ruin's wasteful entrance; there the murderers,
Steep'd in the colours of their trade, their daggers

Unmannerly breech'd with gore. Who could refrain,
That had a heart to love, and in that heart
Courage to make's love known?

(II. iii. 120-7)

Immediately after this, Lady Macbeth, who has been a silent witness throughout, falls in a faint: the thanes turn their attention to succouring the distressed lady. Bradley, in a well known note to *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 'Did Lady Macbeth Really Faint?', came to the tentative conclusion that this was a genuine swoon. Referring to her silence throughout the preceding episode, he wrote:

I decidedly believe that she is really meant to faint. She was no Goneril. She knew that she could not kill the King herself; and she never expected to have to carry back the daggers, see the bloody corpse, and smear the faces and the hands of the grooms . . . She had now, further, gone through the ordeal of the discovery. Is it not quite natural that the reaction should come just when Macbeth's description recalls the scene which had cost her the greatest effort? Is it not likely, besides, that the expression on the faces of the lords would force her to realise, what before the murder she had refused to consider, the horror and the suspicion it must excite?⁴

Bradley admitted that he was 'not aware if an actor of the part could show the audience whether it was real or pretended',⁵ yet, as the above passage shows, on psychological and moral grounds he believed Lady Macbeth's faint to be genuine. I believe that he was wrong in this — it is by no means impossible for an actor (at least in the modern theatre, the monumental Shakespearean style of the last century may be a different matter) to indicate that a faint is a ruse or a subterfuge, nor is it incompatible with Lady Macbeth's character for her to size up a situation, to read, indeed, the expression on the faces of the nobles, and execute a brilliant diversionary tactic.

But whether the faint is genuine or not is, in reality, a secondary issue. What is important is the conjunction of fainting and deception evident here. Macbeth attempts to hoodwink the Scottish nobles into believing him innocent of Duncan's murder, and in order to do so he must incriminate the grooms. This deception, despite Lady Macbeth's assertion that it will succeed, threatens to come unstuck; she faints, and the problem is, at least temporarily, shelved. That volition is not necessarily involved in such conjunctions of deception and fainting is illustrated by the climax of *Much Ado About Nothing*. There can be no doubt that Hero faints when Claudio rejects her at the altar and accuses her of unchastity.

4 A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904: London, 1978), p. 418.

5 Bradley, p. 419.

Nevertheless, the Friar immediately seizes on this to launch the elaborate deception of Claudio and of the people of Messina in general. If it is given out, he argues, that Hero has died, her friends will have a greater opportunity to prove her innocence, and thus shame the young count, or, should she be proved guilty, she may all the more easily be conveyed to a receptive nunnery.

The conjunction may be found in other plays. In *Romeo and Juliet* Friar Lawrence induces a swoon, a false death, in his attempt to deceive the Capulets and the Montagues. When Belarius and Arviragus believe Imogen to be dead in IV. ii. of *Cymbeline* (she too swoons when she swallows the drug Pisanio had substituted for the poison he was instructed to administer to her), a whole complex of confusions and deceptions results. The motif may be encountered outside Shakespeare, in Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, for example, and in *Volpone* where fainting is one of Volpone's devices in his attempts to deceive his gullible clients. But in order to understand how this motif is of importance in *The Winter's Tale*, it is necessary to return to Hero's swoon in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In many ways, this play mirrors the devices of the later and more complex work, particularly in Hero's 'resurrection' at the end. As with the return of Hermione, this is presented in terms of powerful suggestions of magic and mystery. The contrite Claudio agrees to make reparation to Hero's family by marrying her 'cousin' even if the girl lacked all traces of beauty. As the bride is unveiled, the astonished count finds that his bride is another Hero, and then that she is the Hero who died. For the audience there is, of course, no mystery; here we have been party to the deception all along. But Claudio's rapt wonder closely resembles that of Leontes as the statue of Hermione begins to move. The difference is that, at least according to conventional wisdom, the audience of *The Winter's Tale* is supposed to be as much in the dark as the tormented King.

Why the audience is supposedly so convinced of Hermione's death depends, of course, on two powerful assertions of her death placed at important points in the play's design. The first is Paulina's impassioned announcement of the Queen's death (III. ii. 176), the second is Antigonus's monologue (III. iii. 15) in which he tells how a vision of Hermione appeared to him in a dream imploring him to be merciful to the child he has to abandon on the hostile Bohemian shore. Well documented evidence⁶ suggests that Shakespeare's age

6 Pafford cites, however, Walton's account of how Donne's wife appeared to her husband in a vision while he was in Paris, but that this did not suggest to Donne

believed that only the dead were capable of appearing in dream visions such as this. This is not, it must be stressed, a matter of Shakespeare's individual convictions, but of the commonly held assumptions of a society which a public dramatist may confidently exploit. Consequently, it seems as though Antigonus's vision is a very strong indication to the audience of Hermione's death — a discouragement of any possibility of her survival being one of the aims or goals of the dramatic action. But this monologue occupies a very particular place within the play's design: it comes close to the turning-point, the stunning *coup-de-théâtre* where the stage is empty but for the insignificant bundle of the abandoned babe, where *The Winter's Tale* begins the second half of its palindrome-like design, winding back to its origins and the 'miracle' of Hermione's return. This is also close to the point where the dark, near-tragic tonalities are converted into the sunny world of comedy, as Antigonus's tormented monologue gives way (via the empty stage) to the Old Shepherd's comic discourse

The storm begins: poor wretch,
 That for thy mother's fault art thus expos'd
 To loss and what may follow! Weep I cannot,
 But my heart bleeds; and most accurs'd am I
 To be by oath enjoin'd to this. Farewell!
 The days frowns more and more: thou'rt like to have
 A lullaby too rough: I never saw
 The heavens so dim by day. A savage clamour!
 Well may I get aboard! This is the chase:
 I am gone for ever! *Exit, pursued by a bear*

Enter Old Shepherd

Shep. I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest: for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting . . .

(III. iii. 49-63)

Antigonus's confirmation of Hermione's death fulfils, I think, a limited and specific purpose. No work of literature, and certainly no play written for the public stage of the seventeenth century, is absolutely consistent in its effects or its structure — consistency of an absolute nature is very much a critical dream or desire. In this instance, the powerful reminder that we should think of the Queen as dead answers the momentary, local needs of the play to stress the

that she had died. (Introduction, p. xxv). Furness quotes one E. H. Ranney writing in *Religio-Philosophical Journal* (Chicago, 30 December 1893) to the effect that such an occurrence is a well known psychic phenomenon called, apparently, 'phantasm of the living' (note to III. iii. 24).

disaster that is about to occur — the extinguishing of all virtue and innocence by the brutal death that awaits the abandoned babe as much as it awaits Antigonus. This is not, admittedly, consistent with the tenor of the rest of the play, but it serves to highlight the implications of doom which are replaced, so disconcertingly, a few moments later by the arrival of the Shepherd's *comic* voice.

Paulina's announcement of the Queen's death provides a more powerful and structurally more significant affirmation — an affirmation the audience could well recall throughout the remainder of the play.

What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
 What wheels? racks? fires? what flaying? boiling?
 In leads or oils? What old or newer torture
 Must I receive, whose every word deserves
 To taste of thy most worst? Thy tyranny
 Together working with thy jealousies
 (Fancies too weak for boys, too green and idle
 For girls of nine), O think what they have done,
 And then run mad indeed: stark mad! for all
 Thy by-gone fooleries were but spice of it.
 That thou betray'dst Polixenes, 'twas nothing;
 That did but show thee, of a fool, inconstant,
 And damnable ingrateful: nor was't much,
 Thou wouldst have poison'd good Camillo's honour,
 To have him kill a king; poor trespasses,
 More monstrous standing by: whereof I reckon
 The casting forth to crows thy baby daughter
 To be or none or little; though a devil
 Would have shed water out of fire, ere done't:
 Nor is't directly laid to thee the death
 Of the young prince, whose honourable thoughts
 (Thoughts high for one so tender) cleft the heart
 That could conceive a gross and foolish sire
 Blemish'd his gracious dam: this is not, no,
 Laid to thy answer: but the last — O lords,
 When I have said cry 'woe!' — the queen, the queen,
 The sweet'st, dear'st creature's dead: and vengeance for't
 Not dropp'd down yet.

(III. ii. 176-202)

This is not the style of *The Winter's Tale*, nor of the last phase of Shakespeare's career in general. The carefully modulated rhetorical tactics, the deliberate building up to the dreadful climax, the use of suspense (in its strict sense, through grammatical suspensions) are all reminiscent of an earlier Shakespeare. This is a set piece, indeed a 'lament' of the sort we encounter frequently enough in the earlier history plays and tragedies — the linguistic and

poetic world of the grieving queens in *Richard III* or of the Capulet's keening in *Romeo and Juliet*. Nor is it consistent with Paulina's personality as it is revealed by the play. Elsewhere she is presented as a plain-speaking realist. In II. ii., the near-farcical scene in which she brings the new-born babe to the irate Leontes, Shakespeare establishes a strong contrast between her uncompromising bluntness and the much more 'courteous' behavior of Antigonus and the other lords. It may not be too fanciful to suggest that her name — not revealed until later in the play — evokes associations with a Pauline spirit of Christian directness.

Yet the announcement of Hermione's death is an impassioned tirade, flamboyant, rhetorically embellished, calculated in its contrivance as it rises to its awful climax:

the queen, the queen
 The sweet'st, dear'st creature's dead: and vengeance for't
 Not dropp'd down yet . . .
 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.

(III. ii. 200-7)

I have suggested elsewhere⁷ that the very flamboyance and contrivance of this virtuoso display in a somewhat antiquated dramatic style may suggest to the audience that Paulina is putting on a 'performance'. The flamboyance gives the game away, as it were. One cannot be dogmatic about this: it would be possible to deliver this speech with exaggerated 'winks and nods' to the audience to indicate quite clearly that this is all deception and trickery, that this is not heartfelt grief but the commencement of what will prove to be a monstrously protracted comic torment and practising. To do so would prove, no doubt, excessive and unacceptable, but equally, given the contrast with the style of the play in general and Paulina's personality in particular, it is very difficult to play the speech 'straight' — as actresses who have attempted to do so have discovered. The sincerity, and therefore the 'truth', of this terrible announcement is rendered somewhat doubtful by the apparent and excessive theatricality of Paulina's delivery. No matter how played, I would suggest that an actress would find it well-nigh impossible not to admit some sense of contrivance in this carefully modulated

7 In *Antic Fables: Patterns of Evasion in Shakespeare's Comedies* (Sydney, 1980), pp. 135-8.

tirade — this is neither spontaneous grief nor anger: it is, to use Paulina's words, a studied torment.

This matter is of more than passing interest. If the audience were to have even an inkling of Paulina's practices here, or if it were, no doubt subconsciously, to make some connection between fainting and deception — as its theatrical experience of other such conjunctions might well prompt it to do — conventional ideas of the 'seriousness' of *The Winter's Tale* would require some re-examination. It is usually acknowledged that formally the play is a comedy — some writers, like Frye, have been at pains to point out that it is a compendium of comic devices and motifs. But the notion that this is one of Shakespeare's 'Romances' lingers. I would not wish to deny the well known fact that this play, as much as its companions, relies on certain narrative elements and techniques which are derived from, or at least reflect, similar devices in what we call romance literature; nor would I deny that these plays plumb more complex, more disturbing and emotionally more ambivalent states and personalities than many — perhaps most — of the earlier comedies. But the notion of its being a 'Romance' confers on it some seriousness of purpose which is, at least tacitly, taken to be at odds with the notion of comic practising and deception. This is not the appropriate occasion on which to examine at length the curious connection literary and cultural studies make between seriousness and what has to be (not at all unfairly, I think) called solemnity. But this much must be stressed: modern studies of the 'Romances' have stressed what I call the 'elevated' concerns of these plays with the often undeclared assumption that the 'comic' elements are included merely to lend weight, to intensify their fundamentally 'serious' concerns — thereby neutralizing, even eliminating the impact of such comic devices.

The Winter's Tale and *The Tempest* are the most frequently and most thoroughly 'allegorized' of Shakespeare's plays. I am not concerned here with the details or relative merits of the several rival interpretations of *The Winter's Tale* that have gained wide currency in the last half century or so. Rather, I would question the basic assumption of all such 'readings', that the play deals with recondite philosophical and even religious questions and propositions in such a way that its dramatic elements are ancillary to its main intellectual concerns, contributing towards the dramatist's purpose which is, in the terms of such readings, non-dramatic and non-theatrical; thus enrolling the late Shakespeare among those who insist that the value of literature and drama is to provide the sugar-coating over

the bitter pill of moral and philosophical instruction. Treating the play as though it were an allegory allows the many absurdities of the plot to be justified and excused. It seems at times as if discussing the play in terms of fable and myth somehow counters the embarrassment of the naive plot which, in Shakespeare's hands, comes to reveal such surprising emotional and intellectual potentialities. Paulina's grand deception, her sixteen years' torment of the hapless Leontes, is neutralized because it is taken as a figure within the pattern of the play's philosophical 'meaning'. Hermione's return comes to be viewed in terms of philosophical even religious preoccupations, thus legitimizing perhaps the most spectacular peripety of Renaissance drama. Even Frye, who generally avoids 'interpreting' literature in the conventional sense, concludes his essay on the play thus:

But in *The Winter's Tale* nature is associated, not with the credible, but with the incredible: nature as an order is subordinated to the nature that yearly confronts us with the impossible miracle of renewed life . . . Much is said about magic in the final scene, but there is no magician, no Prospero, only the sense of participation in the redeeming and reviving power of a nature identified with art, grace and love. Hence the final recognition is appropriately that of a frozen statue turning into a living presence, and the appropriate Chorus is Time, the destructive element which is also the only possible representative of the timeless.⁸

Frye describes what is essentially the paradox of *The Winter's Tale*. We know from the studies of Rosalie Colie⁹ and others that paradoxical propositions played a considerable role in many philosophical systems of the Renaissance. But paradox is also implicit in comic structures that have nothing of the philosophical about them — though they are capable of being 'philosophized'. The paradox in this play, while decked out in the gorgeous colours of philosophical mysteries, has something of the flavour of a 'tall story'. The confounding of nature and art that Frye remarks effectively cancels out everything within the play: there is no statue, the Queen has not died, the power of art is merely the power of nature and so on. I am not denying that at the end the audience experiences a great sense of restoration after the storms and tribulations it has witnessed. Nevertheless is there not the danger that the audience too might feel that it has been cozened and deceived?

8 *Fables of Identity*, p. 118.

9 Rosalie L. Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica* (Princeton, 1965) contains a celebrated discussion of the cult of paradox in the Renaissance.

The deceptions practised by Shakespeare on his audience are intimately connected with the question of whether it might have any suspicion that such practices are in train when 'hard' evidence of Hermione's death is forcefully presented on several occasions throughout the play. These are, moreover, the most sophisticated of the deceptions within the play; they come together precisely where the philosophical attributes of the play are gathered, in the resurrection of Hermione in the last scene. There, if nowhere else, the play should confirm the nature of its concerns, the function of its essentially comic plot which relies so heavily on a variety of deceptions. So far I have been concentrating on the main deception within the play: Paulina's practices whereby, apparently in the few minutes between Hermione's swoon and Paulina's return to the stage in III. ii., the plot to keep the Queen's survival secret until the terms of the oracle should be fulfilled is hatched — if it were legitimate to entertain such considerations in a play like this. But this is merely the major, in many ways of course the central, deception in *The Winter's Tale*. The rest of the play seems at times to concern itself with finding opportunities for the display of a variety of deceptive practices.

What constitutes deception, how many types of activity the term may include, is severely tested by the play's inveterate deceptiveness; to understand its operation we should look at the progression from simple trickery to Shakespeare's aesthetic sleight-of-hand as the complicated structure unfolds. Almost every character indulges in deception at some point or another. Camillo and Polixenes, in the face of the danger posed by Leontes's irrational jealousy in Act I, deceive Sicilia by taking flight; late in the play Camillo once more deceives, this time Florizel and Perdita, whose plan to flee to Sicilia he reveals to Polixenes. The young couple too attempt to deceive Leontes, on their arrival at the Sicilian court, by feigning to have had Polixenes's approval of their marriage. The latter part of the play is dominated by the most blatantly deceiving figure of all, the rogue Autolycus, who introduces himself as a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles, but proves to be more a trickster, the perennial con-man of popular imagination. *The Winter's Tale* is in many ways a fantasia of deception, for its concern with deception extends far beyond elements and devices of the plot: deception, deceptiveness and trickery become aspects of the characters' personalities, of their individuality and of their predicaments. Not only does the play run the gamut of deceptive circumstances, it also concerns itself with

self-deception, the delusions to which Leontes is particularly prone. The many strands come together in the final grand deception, the restoration of Hermione to her contrite husband, accomplished by means of Paulina's insinuations that Julio Romano's supreme masterwork is capable of breathing, moving and speaking. In this much discussed scene the various deceptions and subterfuges are resolved in a theatrically satisfying conclusion, while the implications of the play's concern with deception are revealed.

Whether the audience suspects up to this moment in the play that the Queen has not died becomes a relatively unimportant issue once Paulina unveils the statue. The person on the pedestal, or whatever device was originally used, is clearly the actor who had impersonated Hermione. No playwright, in the seventeenth or the twentieth century, will bring an actor on stage without purpose. Whatever Shakespeare's purpose, it is likely to have been realized by his original audience that it was more than providing an opportunity for the Sicilian court to indulge in art appreciation. As several commentators have remarked, it is practically impossible to make the 'statue' stop breathing during the few minutes between the unveiling and the culmination of Paulina's magic — a similar problem is encountered in many productions of *Don Giovanni* where, as singers and directors have found to their cost, the statue is supposed to be a statue, even though it steps from its pedestal and begins to sing. In performance at least, the mystery and magic of Paulina's practices must inevitably be less impressive than in the study. This may indicate to some the superiority of Shakespearean drama as a literary rather than as a theatrical phenomenon, but since *The Winter's Tale* was conceived as a theatrical piece, it is that aspect we must acknowledge when considering such matters. The essential and inescapable deception of the theatre itself, the audience's constant awareness that it is observing not reality but a simulacrum, always qualifies and conditions episodes like this which deal with the supernatural and the miraculous.

With that sophistication which many have noted in his late plays, Shakespeare exploits with considerable brilliance and flamboyance this declared and acknowledged deceptiveness of the theatre as he comes to the preposterous culmination of his complicated and diffuse tale. The structure of *The Winter's Tale* is in itself an indication of the deceptiveness, which thus becomes an element in the play's artifice. The plot defies almost every rule of dramatic construction, even the very minimal requirements of Shakespeare's theatre. The sixteen-year gap in the action, though artfully glossed

over by Time in his monologue at the beginning of Act IV, threatens to break the play in half, as does the introduction of an almost entirely new set of characters at the beginning of the second part. Shakespeare deceives his audience into believing that the play might be a shapeless, purposeless ramble of the type that Jonson clearly took it to be in his famous gibe in the Induction of *Bartholomew Fair*. But this infringement of even the basic unity observed on the stage during Shakespeare's lifetime, namely that even if the action occupies a considerable span of time it should appear to be continuous (as it does in *Anthony and Cleopatra*), is made acceptable and aesthetically harmonious by the play's symmetrical, palindrome-like design. Again, it is difficult to know whether an audience perceives this as the action unfolds; but I believe that even if it is not consciously recognized or registered, it is felt and experienced, just as a concert audience, even those without formal musical training, will register and be guided by the harmonic progression in a complex piece of music as it makes its way to the 'home' key and the conclusion. Some elements in the palindromic structure of *The Winter's Tale* are readily apparent, others are more difficult to perceive, perhaps more subtly treated. But whether clearly apparent or obscured, this structural device bridges the gap between theatrical artifice and the play's concern with and indulgence in deceptive practices.

Most notable is the similarity between the opening and closing episodes, each comprising two scenes in the Folio's disposition of acts and scenes (which is followed by most modern editors). Both episodes begin with the fantastical, flamboyantly courtly conversation of attendant gentlemen. In the first, Act I scene I, Camillo and Archidamus vie with each other to exchange elaborate compliments about Leontes and Polixenes, their respective royal masters. This episode is filled with ominous ironies — apparent to those who know the play or presumably to those members of the audience who have perfect recall. The words with which Archidamus opens the play suffice as an illustration of this aspect of Shakespeare's theatrical cunning:

If you shall chance, Camillo, to visit Bohemia on the like occasion whereon my services are now on foot, you shall see, as I have said, great difference betwixt our Bohemia and your Sicilia. (I. i. 1-4)

Act V scene II is likewise a gathering of gossiping courtiers; on this occasion the topic of conversation is not the amity of Leontes and Polixenes, about to be shattered as the jealousy of Leontes unfolds,

but the rare wonder of the recovery of Perdita, and Julio Romano's statue of the late Hermione which the royal party is on its way to view. It is here that the much admired and much commented on statement about the power and perfection of Romano's art is heard:

the princess hearing of her mother's statue, which is in the keeping of Paulina, — a piece many years in doing and now newly performed by that rare Italian master, Julio Romano, who, had he eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile Nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape: he so near to Hermione hath done Hermione, that they say one would speak to her and stand in hope of answer. (V. ii. 93-101)

Just as the hopeful words about the perfect accord of the two kings are revealed to be based on false assumption when Leontes's jealousy shatters the courtly grace of Act I scene II, so these words about Julio Romano's great art are shown to be based on no fact or reality as Paulina's deception is disclosed in the final scene (to which this acts as a prologue, just as the opening scene is a prelude to the major preoccupation of the first act). A connection clearly exists between Shakespeare's artful symmetry of construction and the deep misapprehension, indeed the deception and self-deception with which the scenes are concerned.

The symmetrical and palindromic design of the play centres on the moment of silence in III. iii. where, against all theatrical logic and propriety, the stage is quite empty but for the silent bundle of the abandoned babe. The scenes and episodes of the play fan out from this central point by way of contrasts and similarities: Antigonus and the Old Shepherd; later Camillo and Polixenes alone again (IV. ii.) just as they had been at the end of the first act, but here fomenting plots against Florizel and Perdita which are uncomfortably like those of Leontes against Polixenes in the first act. In each case Camillo is placed at the centre of a royal intrigue — the situation is the same, albeit the circumstances and the role of each participant are the opposite or mirror-image of the other. Later, at the end of IV. iv., Camillo once more arranges a flight: earlier — sixteen years earlier in terms of the play's chronology — he had assisted the flight of Polixenes from Sicilia in order to escape Leontes's tyranny. Now he tricks the young lovers into fleeing to Sicilia so that he might arouse Polixenes's tyrannical anger into pursuing them, thus allowing him to revisit his homeland. The physical journeys of the play mirror and echo its structural voyaging. These are but some of the more striking instances of such symmetry in the construction of this play. They are of interest here not in their own right — though they warrant detailed study — but

because of the light they shed on the play's concern with deceit and deception. The connection is provided by the preoccupation with art, artifice and contrivance which is so apparent in the play's design and acts as a 'theme' during its second part.

It is in the course of the great central scene of the second half of *The Winter's Tale*, the festival of IV. iv., that we first hear the great debate between 'art' and 'nature' that is to be a preoccupation during the play's climax and conclusion. In this celebrated and much discussed passage, Polixenes, the disguised king at the pastoral revels, and Perdita, the royal princess whom everyone believes to be shepherd lass, debate the relative merits of natural and cultivated flowers. Perdita declares her unwillingness to grow carnations, 'nature's bastards' (IV. iv. 83)

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

(IV. iv. 85-7)

Polixenes becomes the advocate of hybrid, cultivated flowers:

Say there be;
Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean: so, over 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.

(IV. iv. 88-95)

But his words reveal a sinister intent, for the images employed recommend precisely that which Polixenes has come to the festivities to stop: the marriage of the nobler scion of Florizel to Perdita's baser stock. In a most complex and subtle manner, art (at least in its old sense) gains a champion in one employing the 'arts' of deception. Polixenes, the death's head at the feast, uses the praise of artifice in a treacherous attempt to trick the shepherd lass into condemning herself. It is a critical commonplace to regard the episode (as well as the gentlemen's ecstatic conversation about Julio Romano's great art in V. ii. and Paulina's words in the last scene) as revealing Shakespeare's engagement with the nature and mystery of art. But equally, the conversation seems to foreshadow the much more explicit suggestions in Act V of the capacity of art to deceive.

The gentlemen's conversation about Julio Romano's rare skill is

usually taken as Shakespeare's rapt praise of art, even of his own powers as the master illusionist, nature's perfect ape. Yet the emphasis is on deception and on the ability within the work of art, the magnificent statue, to deceive: they say, reports the third gentleman, that one would speak to the statue and stand in hope of answer. The ability of art to mirror life, the doctrine of verisimilitude, is of great antiquity; the story of the grapes painted by Zeuxis which were so lifelike that birds came to peck at them is the most commonly invoked *topos* in discussions of the capacity of art to imitate nature. When Paulina unveils Hermione's statue, she speaks in similar terms.

As she liv'd peerless,
So her dead likeness, I do well believe,
Excels whatever yet you look'd upon,
Or hand of man hath done; therefore I keep it
Lonely, apart. But here it is: prepare
To see the life as lively mock'd as ever
Still sleep mock'd death.

(V. ii. 14-20)

The others adopt, at first fancifully perhaps, Paulina's implied suggestion that the statue is so lifelike that one is *deceived*, as it were, into imagining that it lived. Leontes is the first, with very good reason, to catch this mood: he calls upon the statue to chide him (l. 24) then to rebuke him 'For being more stone that it' (l. 38). Perdita takes up what are still the clichés of art-appreciation: 'And do not say 'tis superstition, that / I kneel and then implore her blessing' (ll. 43-4). Paulina checks her by reference to the *trompe l'oeil* nature of the sculpture: the paint is not yet dry (l. 48). Leontes imagines that the statue breathes, that there seems to be blood within its veins; Polixenes notices that the very life seems warm upon her lips, and finally Leontes comments 'The fixture of her eye has motion in't / As we are mock'd with art' (ll. 64-8). It is in this context that Paulina begins to insinuate that she is capable of practising magic upon the statue; she offers to afflict Leontes farther, and as he begs her to do so, his plea marks the transition from the fanciful discussion of verisimilitude to the possibility that this 'realism' may be brought into reality:

For this affliction has a taste as sweet
As any cordial comfort. Still methinks
There is an air comes from her. What fine chisel
Could ever yet cut breath?

(V. iii. 76-9)

And thus, with a further injunction against kissing the statue's still wet lips, Paulina begins her 'conjurings'.

The idealistic, 'Neo-Platonic' implications of Paulina's conjurings in this scene have received much critical attention.¹⁰ That there is no magic, that if Julio Romano carried out a commission in the Sicilian court it must have been something other than the statue of the late Queen, is usually explained in terms of Shakespeare's celebration of the magic, or 'art' of nature: that the only miracle is that natural miracle, the only art that natural art which can wind back sixteen years of suffering to the felicity of the final scene, a felicity that mirrors, according to the play's symmetrical construction, the dissension of the first act. Thus Paulina's monstrous deception is justified. Yet what impinges most, I think, is not the rapt wonder, though that is given its proper place, but the extraordinary deception and machination practised here. And the deception is twofold: that which Paulina practises on the hapless Leontes, and that, even more brilliant perhaps, which Shakespeare practises on his audience.

Such is the deceptive artfulness of *The Winter's Tale* that we accept its contrivance without question. At the end of the play we see to all intents and purposes the same Leontes being deceived by Paulina's conjuring that we saw at the beginning being deceived (though in that case without any intent to deceive) by Hermione's courtesy to the royal guest. In each instance Leontes's imagination, his capacity to be governed by illusions, is the matrix on which deception and self-deception grow. That its operation is entirely negative in the first instance and positive in the second, driving the play towards its celebration of felicity, is not the issue; rather the emphasis falls on the complex interaction of deception and artifice which is spelled out in the conceit of Julio Romano's great sculpture. Here, I think, *The Winter's Tale* does approach a moral statement of sorts: it seems to imply that it is precisely those qualities of imagination in Leontes, which drive the first half of the play towards disaster, that ensure the unhopd-for blessing of the end; that in a sense he is responsible for the great good as much as the great evil. But these moral concerns are relatively minor: *The Winter's Tale* is, above all, an artefact, a beautifully fashioned structure which turns on itself at its mid-point to reverse the disasters of the first half. Like the putative masterwork of Julio Romano, which is proved to have had no existence whatever, it

10 Principally by Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (London, 1975), p. 89ff; see also Chapters 4 and 5 of my *Antic Fables*.

beguiles us with an appearance of lifelikeness — the great issues of suffering and evil, of the restorative properties of time and nature, of the deeply hidden springs of human behaviour seem to occupy a most important place in its ambitions. And so they do in a way, but the play is curiously detached from most, perhaps all of these.

As in *The Tempest*, and this may be the chief characteristic of the 'Romances', what seems to have importance, to carry philosophical even perhaps religious weight, turns out equally to be an aspect of the play's uninhibited desire to entertain. What is *The Winter's Tale*, one might ask, a profound meditation, or a most sophisticated example of Fletcherian tragicomedy which beats the master of that form at his own game? It is, of course, both, but in the critical interest that the play has generated in the last hundred years or so the former has diverted attention from the latter — probably because, until relatively recently, it has been considered a purely literary, poetic (rather than theatrical) work. Such an attitude finds it hard to acknowledge the deceptiveness of the play or even its fundamental concern with deception. Yet the play's curious but significant bringing together of deception and artifice is the most reliable guide we have to its dramatic and literary excellence. This is not capable of entirely rational explication, but, as these pages have attempted to demonstrate, the play establishes an essentially playful ambivalence between its two seemingly quite contradictory aspects: a meditation on time, loss and restoration, on the one hand, and on the other a deliberately 'artful' caprice that goes some way at least towards taking the apparently hoodwinked audience into its confidence. The self-sufficient symmetry, working its way back to its inception with significant 'landmarks' of the sort discussed above, combines with its many images of deception, self-deception and delusion to suggest that this is, in essence, an elaborately choreographed pageant. Emotionally and intellectually we are both absorbed by and yet detached from Leontes's passion, Hermione's suffering, or even from the ecstatic love of Perdita and Florizel in Act IV — surely the most beautiful though most stylized of love-scenes in Shakespeare. Deception, as subject-matter and as practised by Shakespeare on his willing audience, permits the extraordinary fascination and beauty of the play to be revealed: it offers much, by way of emotional compulsion and intellectual profundity; but simultaneously, it takes it all away, as it were with a flick of the conjuror's wrist.