

THE WINTER'S TALE : A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The paper, in its New Historicist approach, explores the multi-dimensional "historicity" of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. The historicity of the play springs from the dramatist's "relation" with "power" in society, which is evident in the choice of the theme, the deviations from its original source and the conformity with the contemporary notions of race and royalty. This paper also views the "historicity" as an artistic device through which Shakespeare facilitates the processes of "naturalization" and "appropriation" in the contemporary spectators.

My study of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* runs counter to the New Critics' assumption of art as an autonomous aesthetic object, "a closed context"(Murray Krieger quoted by Abrams,182), which does not allow us to look to the world of reference and action beyond. My assumption is in line with that of the New Historicism which employs a different methodology that shows a convergence of literature and history and, also an interaction that interanimates each other. It is this interaction and interanimation that Montrose means when he speaks of the "historicity of texts" and the "textuality of history"(305).The New Historicism maintains that history is not an objective narrative of past events but a record of the historian's perceptions. A historian projects onto the past his own historical situation and personal preferences. As such, there cannot be just one version of history: there are histories coloured by the persons who recount them. The past is not something frozen in a distance but is rather fluid, moving ,dynamic constantly interacting not only with the contemporary texts but also with the critics and the texts of modern times. Literature too, though authored by a particular individual, is, in fact, shaped by more than one mind, more than one consciousness because the individual, i.e. the writer himself is a social construct, the "sloppy composition of social and political forces"(D G Myers). Hence, the proper way to understand the literary text is through culture and society that produce it. Literary texts, according to the New Historicism, are not "ethereal entities"(Jean E Howard) born of the Lawrential "wind" or inspiration. They originate from what Greenblatt calls a process of negotiations with the social and ideological powers. These powers not only engender them, they also shape and constrain them. The focus of my inquiry in the present paper is this "historicity" of *The Winter's Tale* that emanates from the dramatist's "negotiations" or "relations" with power (Greenblatt 256) in society. "Power", to the New

Historicists, is an inclusive phrase which subsumes not only "the noblest periods, the highest forms... the purest individualities", the kings and the court but also the socially marginalized-all that Foucault's effective historian" with a downward look is interested in (156).

The Winter's Tale shows the operation of power relation at different levels of artistic organization. Even the choice of the theme seems to be regulated by the immediate historical factors. It was intended to be a part of celebrations on the wedding of King James I's daughter princess Elizabeth and Frederick, who in 1619 ascended the throne of Bohemia, a country ruled by Polixenes in *The Winter's Tale*. Though the period of Shakespeare's creative phase to which *The Winter's Tale* belongs, has several comedies called romances such as *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*, they for obvious reasons, could not have been considered appropriate for the auspicious occasion of the royal wedding. *Pericles*, for instance, with all those brothel scenes (Act IV, Scenes II, V and VI) would have been revolting to the moral sense of the royalty; *Cymbeline's* theme of reunion of King's daughter and the low-born Posthumous would have been unacceptable to the class conscious royal family; and, *The Tempest's* exploration of the theme of reconciliation in the fraternal context with the wedding of Miranda and Ferdinand pushed into the background would have been out of place and irrelevant. Hence, it seems plausible to infer that Shakespeare wrote *The Winter's Tale* keeping in mind the royal wedding with the conscious aim to cater to the taste of the royal family. The play's relevance to the occasion lies not only in its choice of the theme of marital bliss and harmony but also in its conformity with the contemporary idea of racial superiority and royalty.

The same extra-literary pressure explains the dramatist's deviations from the original source, i.e., Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, which presents the king of Bohemia as the jealous husband, who abandons his daughter. A shepherd picks up the baby from the forest and raises her as his own daughter. The son of the Sicilian king falls in love with her. Shakespeare's transposition of Sicily in place of Bohemia is an act of diplomatic discretion as the strict conformity with the source would have been offensive to King James I, his daughter and his son-in-law Frederick, who later is crowned king of Bohemia.

This transposition, Desai rightly observes, is in consonance with the Eurocentric notions of ethnicity and racial differences present in the Elizabethan England(320). *The Winter's Tale's* multicultural world of ethnic diversity is composed of three cultures, namely, Sicilian, Bohemian and Russian, represented by Leontes, Polixenes and Hermione respectively. Leontes, the king of Sicily, belongs to the Mediterranean culture in the southern Europe whereas Polixenes, the king of Bohemia is north European, belonging to Slavic race with Hermione, the daughter of the Russian king. Huxley and Haddon describe the physical features of the people belonging to the southern Europe as having "wavy or curly black hair, an average stature of about 5 feet 3 inches, slender build, long head and narrow oval face, straight nose rather inclining to be broad, the eyes are very dark(140). On the contrary, the Russians are described as having "a squarish face and heavy features, reddish-blond hair and orange-brown eyes"(170). These descriptions manifest the physical differences between Leontes and Hermione and the affinities between

Hermione and Polixenes. The sexual jealousy of Leontes springs from his sense of insecurity caused by his physical inferiority to Polixenes and Hermione's affinity with the king of Bohemia. There is, however, another dimension to this affinity, i.e., cultural. Hermione's easy familiarity with Polixenes springs not from a perverse adulterous relationship but from the fact that they belong to the same race and culture. Leontes compares Hermione's restrained response to his wooings with her warm friendliness with Polixenes, and his consumed by jealousy: "Is whispering nothing?/Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?/Kissing with inside lip"(I,ii,285-87)? This jealousy betrays Leontes' misunderstanding of the social mores of northern Europe. The women of the northern Europe enjoyed much greater freedom than those of the south. The southern women were comparatively restrained and inhibited in their behaviour. Robert Burton, a sixteenth century historian, in his book *Anatomy of Melancholy* (pub. in 1621) writes about the cultural practices of the northerners:

... men and women of all sort go commonly into the baths together, without all suspicion; the name of jealousy... is not so much as once heard of among them... the women kiss him they drink to and are kissed again of those they pledge. The virgins in Holland go hand in hand with young men from home, glide on ice (265).

The freedom that the northern women enjoyed was easily misconstrued as licentiousness by the southerners. Burton, on the authority of Jean Bodin, one of the most popular geographers of the sixteenth century, further writes: "southern men are more hot, lascivious and jealous than such as live in the north;... Germany hath no so many drunkards, England tobacconists, France dancers, Holland mariners as Italy alone hath jealous husbands"(264). This was the commonly held belief in the sixteenth century England and the north Europe, a belief that is embedded in *The Winter's Tale* as well as the other plays of Shakespeare. To the best my knowledge, the characters of Shakespeare's plays, who are consumed by sexual jealousy, are almost invariably those belonging to the southern Europe or Africa with the exception of Posthumous in *Cymbeline*. This is true not only of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale* but also of Othello, the moor, and Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra*. One can see, for instance, Antony, who green with envy, speaks to Cleopatra angrily:

Vanish or I shall give thee thy deserving,
 And blemish Caesar's triumph. Let him take
 Thee
 And hoist thee up to the shouting plebians:
 Follow his chariot, like the greatest spot
 Of all thy sex; most monster-like,...
 The witch shall die:
 To the young Roman boy she hath sold me,
 And I fall
 Under this plot.(IV.xii.32-49)

The contemporary notions of race and ethnicity seem to be inherent in Shakespeare. Leontes, Othello and Antony smouldering with jealousy were very convincing to the Elizabethans as they corroborated their deep-rooted notions. Allied to these notions was the concept of genetic fusion or cross-breeding with which Elizabethans were familiar. Bodin refers to it: "The fusion of peoples changes the customs and the nature of men not a little"(Bodin quoted by Hodgen,282). The character of Perdita illustrates this fusion. If we go by the anthropological features mentioned earlier, she should combine the features of her Sicilian father and Russian mother—reddish-blond blended with darker shades. Florizel's reply to Leontes' query as to her nationality that "she came from Libya", though a lie intended to hide her putative parentage, highlights the Mediterranean touch to her Slovak features. In behaviour also, she is not as free, friendly and uninhibited at the sheep shearing festival as was her mother to Polixenes. The shepherd irritably calls her behaviour "retired", by which he means "restrained". Hence, Perdita is an enriched and improved version of her father and her mother. Polixenes echoes Bodin's idea of enrichment through genetic fusion in the following:

We marry
 A gentle scion to the wildest stock,
 And make conceive a bark of base kind
 By bud of nobler race. This is an art
 Which does mend nature—change it
 rather...(IV.iv.92-97)

But, ironically enough, he contradicts himself later by denouncing Perdita's union with Florizel as it would contaminate the royal blood. Only when he discovers her royal birth, he blesses them with unspeakable joy and happiness.

It is obvious that the pressure operating on Shakespeare make him toe the line of the contemporary belief. He withdraws from an aggressive and categorical assertion of the union between what Polixenes calls a "bark of baser kind" and a bud of nobler race". Such a union would have been unacceptable to James I. who was, more than any other English monarch, strongly conscious of his superior royal blood and the divine rights of kings. Roy Strong writes:

...by the close of the century the Tudors
 Were accorded virtually semi-divine status,
 They never claimed it. James I, in sharp
 contrast, stated both in his writings and
 public speeches that kings were God's
 lieutenants on earth, a belief enshrined in
 what was referred to as the divine Right of
 Kings(223-24).

"The human subject", says Greenblatt, "seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relation of power in a particular society"(256). Shakespeare was no exception to it.

The Winter's Tale also shows conformity with the contemporary political situation of Europe, even though the Oracle of Delphi distances the play in terms of time to the pre-Christian era. There are three clues that locate the events of the play in the

sixteenth century: first, the reference to Julio Romano, the Italian painter and sculptor, who makes the statue of Hermione, second, the prosperity of Sicily and the impoverished economic condition of Bohemia, and the third, the military superiority of Russia. While reconstructing the history in *The Winter's Tale* Desai writes:

Julio Romano died in 1546. Assuming that Paulina intended her audience to believe that the "statue" was created during the last years of his life, then Hermione, now in her mid-forties, would have been in her late twenties at the time of her banishment, and this would place her date of birth at around the early 1500's so that her father, the Emperor of Russia... would have been Ivan III, known as Ivan the Great (1462-1505) (315).

Referring to her father Hermione says:

The Emperor of Russia was my father:
O that he were alive, and here beholding
His daughter's trial! That he did but see
The flatness of my misery, yet with eyes
Of pity, not revenge! (III.ii.118-122)

While expressing her misery and sorrow she is visualizing how her father would have reacted to her suffering. Her reference to "revenge" implies the military strength that Russia possessed at that time. Her father would have used this strength to vindicate his daughter's innocence. It must be noted that Russia had close trade and cultural links with Elizabethan England and its military strength was a fact well-known to the people of the period. So far as Sicily is concerned, it was a land of economic prosperity and political stability. Famous as the granary of Europe it exported grain to the northern Europe. The affluence of Sicily is suggested in the opening scene of the play in which Archidamus, a Bohemian lord, gratefully refers to Sicily's lavish style of hospitality. He says that Bohemia which is in a state of economic crisis cannot afford to extend the same magnificent hospitality to Leontes, the king of Sicilia when he visits Bohemia in the coming summer season:

...we cannot with such magnificence—in so rare—I know not what to say.—We will give you sleepy drinks, that your senses, unintelligent of our insufficiency, may, though they cannot praise us, as little accuse us.(I.i.12-16)

Besides these three kingdoms, the English audience also saw into the play the joys and worries of their own country dramatized. As Mamillius' death raises Leontes' worries about the problem of succession to Sicily's throne, Elizabeth I's death aroused the same worries, which came to an end when Queen Elizabeth's nephew James VI, the son of Mary Queen of Scot, ascended the English throne as King James I. As the marriage of Florizel and Perdita unites the two kingdoms, King James I united England and Scotland.

It is in this way that *The Winter's Tale* collapses the distinctions between history and drama. History and drama coalesce into each other. It is a coalescence that lends authenticity to art and human touch to a history made alive through the process of enactment. Desai in his article referred to above, does reconstruct the history of the sixteenth century Europe but fails to perceive the artistic purpose that the multifaceted historicity discussed earlier serves in *The Winter's Tale*. The "historicity" is an artistic device through which Shakespeare facilitates processes of "naturalization" and "appropriation". These processes enable the readers or the audience not only to interpret for themselves what M.H. Abrams calls "its culture-specific and time-bound representations" but also to "make it conform to their own cultural prepossessions"(186).

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