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*Enter TIME*  
*The Winter's Tale, Aristotle and Derrida*

This tragedy of dating has become apparent to me today, too late.

– Jacques Derrida

After some twenty years of meditating on time, time itself at last takes the stage in Shakespeare's work. Time has *arrived*. At the beginning of Act Four of *The Winter's Tale*, time enters and speaks:

*Enter TIME, the Chorus.*

I that please some, try all; both joy and terror  
Of good and bad; that makes and unfolds error  
Now take upon me in the name of Time  
To use my wings. Impute it not a crime  
To me or my swift passage that I slide

O'er sixteen years and leave the growth untried  
 Of that wide gap, since it is in my power  
 To o'erthrow law, and in one self-born hour  
 To plant and 'o'erwhelm custom.

Beyond the familiar appearance of Father Time on the sixteenth and early seventeenth century stage to account for the 'swift passage' of time, it is hard to underestimate how strange this arrival is. Imagine that it was not TIME that entered at the beginning of Act Four of *The Winter's Tale*, but space. *Enter SPACE*. How do we keep watching, how do we keep reading *after* the arrival of TIME? What was happening *before* the arrival of time?

Since at least Aristotle, the arrival of time *itself* has been the philosopher's dream, the disquieting, long hoped for and always dreaded moment of arrival. But can time ever *arrive*? Can time *itself* arrive? We are no longer waiting, look Godot has arrived, he is *here!* *Enter TIME*.

The arrival of TIME in *The Winter's Tale* can be taken as a wonderful conceit, an impossible gathering, an amazing act of theatrical bravado. It is also possible that Shakespeare was sensitive to the entrance of this most difficult, most elusive of characters. As he writes, TIME enters and announces a 'wide gap', a gap that can neither simply be filled, nor entirely closed. *The Winter's Tale* perhaps marks the extraordinary *entrance* of that which *cannot arrive* – as itself.

The reaction against this 'wide gap' was so great in the eighteenth century that when David Garrick and Charles Marsh both adapted and reworked *The Winter's Tale* in 1756, they *closed* the gap and removed TIME from the stage. But there was some criticism of this heavy-handed intervention. In a review of Garrick's work, Theophilus Cibber complained that Shakespeare's play had been 'lop'd, hack'd, and dock'd'. In trying to *close* 'the wide gap' of *The Winter's Tale*, Garrick had only *opened* more gaps.

This anxiety in 1756 about the wide gaps *of* time on the stage may have also been a remote and rippling eddy from the great ‘wide gap’ that had appeared four years earlier in 1752 when Britain and its colonies had finally adopted the Gregorian calendar: ‘that calendar trick where chance will have marked an epoch’. In an attempt to resolve the long-standing problems that had arisen from trying to ensure that Easter would never coincided with Passover, in 1582 a Papal Bull had introduced the Gregorian calendar in Catholic Europe. For the next 170 years every correspondent to and from Britain would have problems with dating, and every traveller to and from Britain would experience an exceptional time lag.

Until 1752, the new year began in Britain not on 1 January but on 25 March: the dating of the previous year and the year to come were always nearly three months out of sequence with much of Europe. On 24 March 1751 in Paris it was still 1750 in London. There was also a discrepancy of eleven days between the Julian and Gregorian Calendars, and for 170 years if you sailed from France to England you could *arrive* ten days *before* you had left. This remarkable ‘wide gap’ of time – that led to the traveller arriving *before* departing, and suggested that the *entrance* of time could disorder the accustomed sequence of ‘before’ and ‘after’ and ‘behind’ and ‘in front’ – began in 1582 when William Shakespeare was eighteen years old.

Though it has recently been argued that there were probably no riots (as has often been thought) when the eleven days were removed and the calendar jumped from Wednesday 2 September to Thursday 14 September 1752, as with Garrick and Marsh’s adaptations of *The Winter’s Tale* four years later, it was apparent that one could only *close* a gap of time by *opening* another ‘wide gap’. One can only wonder what happened to those in Britain and its colonies who had a birthday or an anniversary of some kind between 3 September and 13 September 1752.

In fact, this extraordinary ‘wide gap’ in September 1752 is remarkably elusive. The Earl of Chesterfield, who first proposed changing the calendar in 1751, is rather coy in his letters to his son leaving a gap in the correspondence from 21 July 1752 to 15 September 1752, the second day of the new calendar. Samuel Johnson dates a letter to Charlotte Lennox from February of that year as 1751/2, hinting at the confusion of dating the New Year from 1 January. It is only to be regretted that the antiquarian Joseph Ames, who noted with such care that on ‘Friday evening 21<sup>st</sup> day August 1752 at Eleven a Clock’ he was ‘accompanied by Mr. John Rook to the Angell Inn [at] the back of St. Clemons church in the Strand’, leaves a gap in his travel diary from Sunday 23 August to Saturday 18 October 1752.

Throughout the eighteenth century it was generally believed that the sixteen-year gap announced by TIME at the beginning of Act Four of *The Winter’s Tale* contravened the so-called Aristotelian unities of action, time and place. Charles Gildon, writing in 1710, was one of the first critics to insist that the entrance of time in *The Winter’s Tale* could only be read as an *apology*:

Natural Reason indeed show’d to Shakespeare the Absurdity of Making the Representation longer than the *Time*, and the *Place* more extensive than the Place of acting, as is plain from his Choruses in his Historical Plays, in which he apologises for the Absurdity, as in the Beginning of the fourth Act of *The Winter’s Tale* among other things’.

Despite what Gildon says of the history plays, there seems to be little apology when RUMOUR enters triumphantly at the beginning of *The Second Part of Henry the Fourth*. When CHORUS twice asks for the audience’s ‘pardon’ in the opening of *The Life of Henry the Fifth* it is perhaps more to *celebrate* the fact that the ‘vast fields of France’ can fit ‘within this wooden O’.

While the critical response to Shakespeare has long since moved on from measuring his strict adherence to the so-called Aristotelian unities, it is worth recalling that in the eighteenth century it was widely believed that Shakespeare introduced TIME in *The Winter's Tale* to apologise to Aristotle. Constrained by his source material, Robert Greene's *Pandosto*, Shakespeare brings time on stage to apologise to all those readers of Aristotle in his audience and, ultimately, to the great philosopher himself. Of course, one problem with this interpretation is that Shakespeare apologises and *still* breaks all the rules. At least one critic in the eighteenth century described the appearance of time as an apology but added, 'in the Days of our great Poet the Unities of the Drama were very little understood'. Shakespeare was apologising, but he didn't even know what he was apologising for.

If the entrance and 'wide gap' of time was almost uniformly condemned in the eighteenth century, from the 1950s it has been celebrated by critics as 'a breathing space', as an 'orderly and spacious' division, a graceful changing of tone, a shift from death to life, a move from tragedy to comedy: in other words, *a perfect hinge* that separates the play in two symmetrical halves. In the second half of the twentieth century the entrance of time became a scene of order, of decorous transition, of symmetry and structure. In short, it is only in the twentieth century that TIME becomes a genuinely eighteenth century concept.

More recently, the entrance of TIME has also been linked to 'a time that lacks any sense of causality, development, fullness, or even duration'. Rather than linger in this dreamtime, this time without time, or set our watches to the *Zeitalter der Aufklärung*, it is perhaps worth holding on to the eighteenth century preoccupation with Shakespeare as a negligent reader of Aristotle. And if we question the predominant eighteenth century assumption that Shakespeare is *apologising* to the Aristotelians, what is Shakespeare trying to say when he *addresses* Aristotle?

If, as Virginia Woolf had wished in *Orlando*, we could imagine Shakespeare as ‘a rather fat, rather shabby man ... sitting at the servant’s table [in a country house] with a tankard beside him and paper in front of him’, we could also imagine him wandering into the library of the country house and picking up a copy of Aristotle’s *Poetics*. We could imagine him objecting from the start to Aristotle’s insistence that ‘it is not appropriate in a female character to be manly, or clever’ (1454a). And if he had taken Aristotle’s judgement that the worst kind of play ‘is when the personage is with full knowledge on the point of doing the deed, and leaves it undone’, there would have been no *Hamlet* (1453b). If Shakespeare was a reader of Aristotle, he evidently decided not to follow the august and narrow guidelines of the *Poetics*.

When Shakespeare does *address* Greek philosophy, when he depicts a Greek philosopher in *The Life of Timon of Athens*, he describes Apemantus as a ‘churlish philosopher’. The word churlish has a very particular history in English. Prior to the Norman Conquest, a churl was a member of the lowest rank of freemen, but after 1066 a churl became a serf or bondsman. This traumatic fall in status developed into a more general sense of churlish as being of low birth (a peasant, a rustic), and eventually to acting *as if* one were of low birth. Whatever one’s position in society, one could be described as *acting* churlish, as being surly, boorish, rude or ill bred. A ‘churlish philosopher’ is then a philosopher who performs, who acts as if they were of low birth: the philosopher as an *actor*.

*First Lord*: What time o’day is’t, Apemantus?

*Apemantus*: Time to be honest.

*First Lord*: That time serves still.

*Apemantus*: The most accursèd thou, that still omitt’st it.

When Apemantus the philosopher-actor laments that the time is not honest, he is not that far from that other actor-philosopher, Hamlet. Apemantus the philosopher charges that the time is dishonest, and that one can only reply to the *particular* question ‘What time is it?’, by answering with the *general* observation, the time is dishonest – Hamlet does much the same with women. Apemantus the actor, the churl-ish philosopher, the feigner of low birth, says that the time is *dishonest*. It is perhaps not by chance that Apemantus says this just as he is about to go to a banquet that Alcibiades is attending. Plato’s *Symposium* (or *The Banquet*, as it is called in French) opens with Socrates arriving late for the banquet with Alcibiades: the philosopher is always getting the time wrong.

Shakespeare plays with Greek philosophy, he turns the philosopher into a *player*. And whether or not Shakespeare read the *Poetics*, he did *play* with Aristotle. In Act Two of *Troilus and Cressida* Hector says:

Paris and Troilus, you have both said well,  
 But on the cause and question now in hand  
 Have glossed but superficially – not much  
 Unlike young men, whom Aristotle thought  
 Unfit to hear moral philosophy.

According to the editors of the Norton Shakespeare this is a reference to Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. While some have responded to the passage in *Troilus and Cressida* by raising the possibility that Shakespeare didn’t know that Aristotle came *after* Homer, others have used it as grounds for his acute reading of the *Ethics*. Whether unintentionally or intentionally, in *Troilus and Cressida* Shakespeare treats Aristotle *anachronistically*: he confuses the proper order of the *before and after*.

As Nicholas Royle has shown, Shakespeare was preoccupied with anachronism, and the uncanniness of this anachronism is at the heart of Derrida's readings of Shakespeare. As the unities of action, time and place – which were only formulated in the 1570s by Castelvetro – the question of anachronism, of 'how a text deals with its own datedness', was also a recent innovation in Shakespeare's lifetime. Peter Burke has argued that the recognition of anachronism in the early modern period created a new 'sense of historical perspective'. Anachronism, the problem of the date, of dating, becomes the origin of a new kind of historiography. How does one respond to this heightened sense of dating, of confronting what it is out of date, of the strange relation between the before and the after?

In *Troilus and Cressida* it appears that, like travellers to England after 1582, Aristotle arrives *before* he has departed. Let's imagine that Shakespeare knows what he is doing: he is making a joke, a very serious joke about *time* — Aristotle *before* Homer. He is playing with Aristotle, playing with Aristotelian time. As Hamlet suggests, it all a question of *looking* before and after:

What is a man

If his chief good and market of his time

Be but to sleep and feed? – a beast, no more.

Sure, he that made us with such large discourse,

*Looking before and after*, gave us not

That capability and god-like reason

To fust in us unused.

Looking before *and* after, we must first turn to Aristotle's account of time in Book IV of the *Physics*. Time, Aristotle argues, is 'a kind of number' (219b). Number, if you think about it, is always one *and* has the capability to be more than one. In other words, it is



*always* the same and *always* different, which is what makes it the *same*. Time is *at once* ‘continuous and divisible’ (220b). Time is *always* a dividing continuity, and this is what constitutes its nature. This is how Aristotle resolves the problem of the apparent non-existence of time. It could seem, Aristotle writes, that time ‘either does not exist at all or barely, and in an obscure way. One part of it has been and is not, while the other is going to be and is not yet. Yet time ... is made up of these’ (218a). For Aristotle, it is because time is ‘a kind of number’ that the past and the future, the before and the after, do not threaten the *existence* of time.

‘We apprehend time’, Aristotle observes, ‘only when we have marked motion, marking it by before and after’ (219a). For *us*, it seems there is only time when there is the *movement* of before and after. The limitations of our perception of time could undermine the recognition that ‘time is present equally everywhere and with all things’ (218b). There is always time, but there are *gaps* in our perception of time. To get beyond this limited perspective, Aristotle accounts for the relation of movement to time through number.

‘Time’, he argues, ‘is not motion, but number of motion’ (221b). Number, as we have seen, is both the one and the more than one, a dividing continuity, and also accounts for what is counted, enumerated or measured. Time is ‘what is counted’. It is ‘number of motion in respect of ‘before’ and ‘after’ ’ (219b). Number, Aristotle writes, as the dividing continuity that counts and measures motion (the movement of before and after), is the *now*. One and more than one, always the same and always different, time is ‘both made continuous ... and divided’ by the *now* (220a). The *now* is divided into ‘one before and one after’, and *accounts for* the movement of before and after (219b). Time, or the *economy* of the *now* as number, is the *now as* the movement of before and after. For Aristotle, time becomes ‘what is bounded by the ‘now’ ’ (219a). It is a kind of number, and the *now* is a kind of *boundary*. ‘The ‘now’’, he writes, ‘is the link of time ... (for it connects past and future time), and it is a limit

of time (for it is the beginning of the one and the end of the other)' (222a). The now divides and connects, terminates and unifies: it is 'the boundary of the past and the future' (223a).

In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger argues that our traditional relationship to time as 'that which is **counted**' and defined by 'the use of clocks', has its origins in Aristotle's interpretation of time in the *Physics*. By 'following the positions' of the hands or 'pointer' of a clock, Heidegger observes, one 'counts' time. To count time, one always assumes that a 'travelling pointer' is *present*. For Heidegger, this positional accounting for time demonstrates that since Aristotle it has been accepted that 'time is what shows itself in ... a making-present'. One counts time, one *retains* an earlier or before by 'making it present', and one *awaits* a later or after by 'making it present'. One always counts, accounts for and measures time from *the now*: the before is always the 'now-no-longer' and the after always the 'now-not-yet'. The before and after are always co-opted, put to work for 'making present'. This traditional ontological concept of time is founded on an assumption that begins with Aristotle, namely that *time is defined by space*. The 'travelling pointer' that marks the *position*, the location and movement of the now ... the now ... and the now ... is *spatial*.

In *Of Grammatology* (1967) Derrida refers to Heidegger's reading of Aristotle and his description of 'a concept of time thought in terms of spatial movement or of the now' as 'intrinsic to the totality of the history of the Occident'. This is what the West does: it thinks time in terms of space and in terms of the now. For Derrida, however, there is an important difference between thinking time in terms of *space* and thinking it in terms of the *now*. In his own reading of Aristotle's *Physics*, in the 1968 essay 'Ousia and Gramme', Derrida emphasizes the differences between time as the *now* and time as *presence*. If one takes the now simply as the essence of time, time appears to be *incompatible* with being. As the *no longer* now (the before) and the *not yet* now (the after), the now 'accommodates

nonbeingness’, and therefore, Derrida argues, ‘cannot participate in presence, in substance, in *beingness* itself (*ousia*)’. Aristotle resolves this problem by arguing that time is a dividing continuity, or the now *as* presence.

According to Derrida, time in the *Physics* is not just the now *as* presence (as Heidegger implies). It is the now *working for* presence – and this makes all the difference. Aristotle argues that the now as time can *only* be successive. In other words, the now cannot endure two nows existing *at the same time*. But this is what time *as presence* does (the now as the *just* before co-existing with the now as the *soon* after). For Derrida, this highlights that the *possibility* of presence presupposes, relies on, a *spatial* difference.

For Heidegger, time is inauthentic and fallen since Aristotle because it has been defined by and characterised as *a kind of space*. For Derrida, on the contrary, this reliance of time on space suggests that time (as presence) needs *spacing*. It *also* suggests that space (as presence) needs *temporalization*. Working *for* presence, the now cannot avoid what Derrida calls *différance*. The differing *and* the deferring of the rhythms and speeds of space becoming time *and* of time becoming space, *différance* becomes both the only possibility *and* the unavoidable ruin of time (and space) as presence, as being. For Derrida, Western philosophy has always relied on the inadmissible inseparability of time and space. In this instance, he questions Heidegger’s denigration of space. In his earlier objections to structuralism, on the other hand, he challenged its privileging of space (as structure) to unify meaning and form at the expense of time. This oscillating inseparability of time and space is Derrida’s great and disturbing contribution to philosophy.

Differing and deferring time can never be *itself*, can never *arrive* as itself. *Enter* TIME and we are always looking before *and* after. It would be far too easy to think that Shakespeare with all his verbal brilliance somehow just throws off the Aristotelian inheritance, and that he could simply stand “outside” of the great ontological tradition of

Western philosophy. But we can perhaps ask if Shakespeare merely remains the other of Aristotle.

For Hamlet, who may or may not be able to speak for William Shakespeare, part of what constitutes man is the capability to *look* ‘before and after’. The editors of the Norton Shakespeare helpfully explain that ‘looking before and after’ can be read as ‘able to see past and future’, but I am not so certain of this Aristotelian interpretation. *Looking*, looking and searching for something, is not quite the same as *seeing* something that has been found. For Derrida, what is *before* can always suggest both what is behind (in the past) *and* what is *in front* (in the future). The phrase, ‘it is before us’ can always be anachronistic, untimely. Even Aristotle in the *Physics* admits to a certain indeterminacy of the before: ‘‘before’ is used contraiwise with reference to past and to future time; for in the past we call ‘before’ what is farther from the ‘now’, and ‘after’ what is nearer, but in the future we call the nearer ‘before’ and the farther ‘after’ ’ (223a).

And if we take Shakespeare as an anachronistic, an untimely, reader of time in Aristotle, it is perhaps not fortuitous that in the opening of a play where TIME enters, Shakespeare gives us an instance of an indeterminate ‘before and after.’ Speaking to Hermione of his childhood friendship with Leontes, Polixenes says,

We were, fair Queen,  
Two lads that thought there was no more behind  
But such a day tomorrow as today,  
And to be boy eternal.

At first glance, this passage doesn’t seem to make much sense. The two boys ‘thought there was no more behind / But such a day tomorrow as today.’ How can tomorrow be *behind*? As both the editors of the Riverside and Norton Shakespeare point out, the word *behind*

means to be at the back, at the rear of something, but it in a more archaic usage it *also* meant what was held in reserve, what remained *still to come*. The ‘two lads thought that there was no more behind [still to come] / But such a day tomorrow as today.’ *Enter* TIME and we are caught in the strange dislocation, the hovering uncertainty of a ‘behind’ that can be *at once* behind us (at the back, in the past) *and* behind us (in the front, in the future). *Enter* TIME, and the now doesn’t know whether it is coming or going, whether it has arrived *before* it has left. As Hamlet says: ‘This bad begins and worse remains behind [still to come]’

When TIME arrives in Act Four of *The Winter’s Tale*, without the possibility of arriving as itself, wonder of wonders, TIME speaks. When time enters and speaks, its syntax is strange, and may echo a long tradition of pageantry and festival: of time as destruction; of time as the revelation and restitution of the truth; of time with a scythe, wings and hourglass, the symbol of rushing, imminent mortality. But when TIME *speaks*, when it accounts for its own attributes, it claims amongst its first qualities the ability to make and unfold *error*, to be untimely, to be anachronistic:

I that please some, try all; both joy and terror  
Of good and bad; that makes and unfolds error

Like the Sphinx, TIME speaks in riddles. TIME begins, ‘I that please some, try all.’ I ... *try* all. I examine, I submit to trial, I test the patience of everyone. I sift, strain and single out everyone. Time *singles* out *everyone*: an amazing *singular universal* that is worthy of Aristotle’s definition of time as a *divided continuity*. Shakespeare’s understanding of time initially seems very close to that of Aristotle. But TIME then says: I single out everyone *and* ‘I please some.’ I give some pleasure, but in the end I catch everyone. I single out *everyone* *and* I please *some*. What wondrous machine is it that can *universally* reach every individual and, at the same time, can also only touch *some*, can single out an indeterminate portion, an

*indefinite* number? Shakespeare alludes to the possibility that there is an aspect of time that is unaccountable, that cannot be counted. This is what the theatre does: it *plays* with time. It ranges ‘o’er sixteen years ... in one self-born hour’.

For Aristotle, it is indispensable that time can be *counted* by the now (as the number of the movement of the before and after). The now is the *hinge* of time. The objections to Aristotle’s association of time with movement are very old. Responding to Aristotle in the third century, Plotinus had asked: ‘is Time the Measure of any and every Movement? Have we any means of calculating disconnected and lawless movement? What number or measure would apply?’ Shakespeare offers what might be called an anachronistic variation on Plotinus’s criticisms of Aristotle. Time may be a unique relation – singular universal, divided continuity, the other *of* being – but this does not necessarily suggest that time can always be counted or that the sequence and order of the before and after can be distinguished and measured by the now. When it comes to time, there is always a *some* that is incommensurable with the *all*.

It is from this incommensurability that TIME also appears indifferent to faith or morality, bringing ‘both joy and terror / Of good and bad.’ Time — rushing imminent mortality — delivers both ‘joy and terror’ to ‘good and bad’ *alike*. Time “itself” is neither just nor unjust: it is the possibility of justice and injustice. It is this unsettling time beyond measure (at once all and some) and beyond morality (at once just and unjust) ‘that makes and unfolds error’. Time both creates *and* reveals error. One can easily imagine that the passage of time reveals error, but how does time *make* error? How does ‘looking before and after’ create error? Time *makes* mistakes, transgressions, flaws and malformations. Time *makes* wandering, digression and deviation. Time ‘makes and unfolds error’. It makes and spreads out, unfurls, unwraps everything that is untimely and anachronistic when we are ‘looking before and after’ and, arriving before we have departed, only find the ‘wide gap’ of time.

Incommensurable, unequal, neither good nor bad and open to the *possibility* of the loss of direction, of the assured orderly sequence of the before and after, the behind and in front, TIME in *The Winter's Tale* is also, as critics have long pointed out, entirely *redundant* to the plot and narrative. The information that TIME passes on to the audience – chiefly that sixteen years have now elapsed – is immediately repeated at the start of Act Four scene two. In other words, Act Four scene one is a *detachable* scene. You can put it in, you can take it out – and the narrative of the play is unchanged. The entrance of time is not an integral part of the ‘complete whole’, and manifestly fails to follow Aristotle’s criteria for a good play in the *Poetics*.

This redundant, detachable scene in *The Winter's Tale* was described by William Blisset as ‘the hinge of the diptych’ and by Frederick Kiefer as ‘the hinge, the joint that puts time back in order’. The entrance of TIME is therefore ‘the central principle, the cardinal or critical point, on which everything turns or relies’ *and* a ‘moveable joint or mechanism by which a door is hung on its side post to permit opening and shutting’ (*OED*). In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida associates ‘the hinge’ with the oscillation of space becoming time and time becoming space that challenges the traditional concept of time which conserves ‘its homogeneity and its fundamental successivity by demonstrating ... that the past present and future present constitute originarily, by dividing it, the form of the living present’. In other words, the before and after do not work for the now. The now is not, as Aristotle argues, the *measure* of the before and after. *For us*, time moves, time changes *and* we have no guarantee, no assurance that time “itself” does not move, does not also change. Derrida returns in *Spectres of Marx* (1993) to the hinge in his extended reading of Hamlet’s lament: ‘The time is out of joint. O cursèd spite / That ever I was born to set it right!’ The entrance of TIME in *The Winter's Tale* can be seen as a remarkable personification or representation

of that which is out of joint, of that which comes off its hinges, of that which always leaves us with a ‘disjointed or disadjusted now’.

*Aristotle before Homer.* If we accept that Shakespeare knew what he was doing in *Troilus and Cressida* and that he was playing anachronistically with Aristotelian time, we could see the beginning of Act Four of *The Winter’s Tale* as an audacious and unprecedented disjointed hinge, as a ‘movable joint’ that permits not only the ‘opening and shutting’ of the sixteen year gap between Act Three and Act Four, but also allows at least for the *possibility* of playing with the assured sequence of the before and after and the behind and in front. *Enter TIME* and there is no longer a fixed and certain order for the events in Sicily and Bohemia.

*Aristotle before Homer? Bohemia before Sicily? Enter TIME,* the ‘movable joint’, and *The Winter’s Tale* could begin with *either* Act One *or* Act Four. This may not be so improbable and audacious as it sounds, and might even account for the strange echoes in these *two* openings:

*Act One scene one.* Archidamus and Camillo speak of the imminent visit of Leontes. Though separated for many years, they have remained in contact and ‘have seemed to be together, though absent’. The two men talk of the King’s son, Prince Mamillius, ‘a gentleman of the greatest promise’. *Act One scene two.* Polixenes has been visiting his brother for nine months and, anxious about what may ‘breed upon our absence’, wishes to return to Bohemia. First Leontes and then Hermione try to persuade him to stay and he relents. Leontes then reveals that he has adopted a disguise to hide his jealousy; a disguise that he will not be able to keep. Leontes then tries to convince Camillo to poison Polixenes, and the scene ends with Camillo and Polixenes leaving for Bohemia ...

*Act Four scene two.* ‘*Enter Polixenes and Camillo.*’ It is sixteen years since Camillo has left Sicily and he now wishes to return. Polixenes pleads with him to stay and to not go back to Leontes, whose actions have led to the exile of Camillo and the ‘loss of his most precious



queen and children'. The two men talk of Polixenes's wayward son, Prince Florizel, whose absence from the court has been 'missingly noted' by his father. The Prince spends most of his time at the house of an unaccountably wealthy shepherd who has a beautiful daughter 'of most rare note'. Polixenes's persuades Camillo to put aside his thoughts of going to Sicily and to visit in disguise the shepherd's house ...

One could almost stage these opening scenes of Act Four and Act One *concurrently*, in the style of Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia* or *The Coasts of Utopia* with a revolving stage shifting back and forth, before and after: Camillo in Bohemia thinking of returning to Sicily; Polixenes in Sicily thinking of returning to Bohemia. Both kings adopting disguises; both kings (who have ostensibly overcome the absence between them) unable to respond to the real or imaginary absence (the betrayal) of those that they love most; both kings who, as children 'thought that there was no more behind / But such a day tomorrow as today', as adults can make no sense, no order, of what comes behind and in front of them, before and after them.

*Enter TIME* and Shakespeare is hinting at an unthinkable theatre *to come* where the unities of time, action and place are unhinged. Sicily *before* Bohemia. Is such an anachronism possible?

The play *begins* with Camillo thinking of his sixteen-year absence from Sicily and his going with Polixenes to spy on Florizel and Perdita. Polixenes then forbids the marriage of his son to the shepherd's daughter and Camillo returns to Sicily with the young lovers. Off stage, Leontes discovers Perdita as his lost daughter and Polixenes blesses the wedding of the young prince and princess. On stage, the statue of the seemingly dead Hermione is revealed. It is a statue that has been aged sixteen years, a statue that appears to take *account* of the 'wide gap' of time. It is statue that moves, a living Queen that endures and overcomes the 'wide gap' of time.

*And then, playing with Aristotle, Shakespeare's great and terrible insight: Enter TIME on the stage and the future of the past is always somehow still to come.* Camillo finds himself talking to Archidamus about the king's planned visit to Bohemia. At the prompting of Leontes, Hermione pleads with Polixenes to stay a little longer in Sicily. Polixenes and Camillo leave in fear of their lives. Hermione is imprisoned and her newborn baby is taken away from her. Hermione is tried and collapses at the court. Her death is announced and the play *ends* with the first sight of Bohemia. Antigonus leaves the baby exposed to the elements and exits, *'pursued by a bear.'* An old shepherd and a clown find a baby ...

*Enter TIME, the Chorus.*

I that please some, try all; both joy and terror  
 Of good and bad; that makes and unfolds error  
 Now take upon me in the name of Time  
 To use my wings. Impute it not a crime  
 To me or my swift passage that I slide  
 O'er sixteen years and leave the growth untried  
 Of that wide gap, since it is in my power  
 To o'erthrow law, and in one self-born hour  
 To plant and 'o'erwhelm custom.