

LOSING AND FINDING IN SHAKESPEARE'S LAST PLAYS

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Shakespeare's last plays are often called tragi-comedies or romances. In these plays Shakespeare revealed to us a quite different world from that of his tragedies or his early comedies. The most dominant theme in his last plays is that of reconciliation. Before discussing Shakespeare's last four plays I want to say a few words on the reconciliation scene in *King Lear*. It is the scene in which the old king is reunited with his daughter Cordelia. Lear wakes up from his mad sleep and finds his faithful daughter beside him. After cruel sufferings, he is at last in the arms of a loving daughter. He cannot perceive this reality when he first awakes.

You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave;
Thou art a soul in bliss: but I am bound
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears
Do scald like molten lead.

(IV, vii, 45-8)

Lear thinks he is still in purgatory or hell. He would rather end his life than be tortured on the cruel rack of this ruthless world. However, he finds a different situation. Here is a momentary heaven. He is humbled. "I am a very foolish and fond old man" (IV, vii, 84). Lear, although only momentarily, returns to full sanity.

Lear. I know you do not love me; for your sisters
Have, as I do remember, done me wrong:
You have some cause, they have not.

Cor. No cause, no cause.

(IV, vii, 73-5)

This scene is full of beauty and compassion. Forgiveness purifies the

natural relationship between father and daughter. If the play had ended in this reconciliation [scene, *King Lear* would be a tragicomedy—a tragedy with a happy ending—the type of play Shakespeare wrote in his later period. However, the tragic wheel is in full circle and Lear has become one of its cogs. The play cannot stop yet.

On the other hand, the emphasis is put on reconciliation and regeneration in Shakespeare's last plays. In *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, we can find a similar pattern of reconciliation, the theme of losing and finding. Here I will trace this theme in a sketchy summary of the four plays.

It seems to me that *Pericles* is a pretty feeble play in structure. Acts I and II are unnecessary to the meaning of the play, and the principal matter is in the last three acts. In any case the basic rhythm of *Pericles'* adventures is one of losing and finding. We first see him wooing the daughter of Antiochus at Antioch. Pericles is greatly shocked in finding out the incestuous relationship between Antiochus and his daughter. Uncovered the secret, Antiochus tries to kill Pericles with an assassin. He flees to Tyre, but he has to leave there to escape the assassin's stroke and reaches Tarsus, where he relieves the famine. The assassin still follows him and Pericles has to sail again to flee Tarsus. Fortune is cruel and kind. A tempest causes a shipwreck and Pericles loses his ship, his companions and all his possessions. This shipwreck proves a happy misfortune, for Pericles is cast upon the shores of Pentapolis, where he meets Thaisa and finds true love in her. All seems to be well for a while. Pericles leaves for Tyre with his wife, but he encounters another tempest, in which he loses his wife.

O You gods!

Why do you make us love your goodly gifts,
And snatch them straight away?

(III, i, 22-4)

Their new-born baby Marina is left to the care of Cleon and Dionyza at Tarsus. Thaisa survives and henceforth lives at Ephesus as a priestess.

Fourteen years pass. Pericles, who rules Tyre, is ignorant of his wife's survival. Thaisa, a votaress at Diana's temple in Ephesus, is ignorant that her husband and her child still exist. Marina has grown up a beautiful girl at Cleon's court in Tarsus. Dionyza plots to kill Marina, because she wants her daughter to be peerless in her country. She commands Leonine to do this vile action. However, pirates suddenly appear on this scene and snatch Marina from under the sword. They sell her to a brothel. Meanwhile, Pericles visits Tarsus to see his daughter, where he is persuaded by the monument of Marina that she has been dead. Pericles departs in sorrow, believing that he has lost her forever. He rides out into a stormy sea. Marina escapes the brothel and Pericles arrives in Mytilene where his daughter dwells. He finds Marina. The long-separated father and daughter are finally reunited. Here is harmony and bliss. Pericles sleeps peacefully.

Most heavenly music!

It nips me unto list'ning, and thick slumber
Hangs upon mine eyes; let me rest.

(V, i, 231-3)

Diana appears to Pericles in his dream and orders him to visit her temple at Ephesus. He finds his wife Thaisa there and the process of finding is achieved in the end.

You gods, your present kindness

Makes my past miseries sports. You shall do well,
That on the touching of her lips I may
Melt and no more be seen.

(V, iii, 40-3)

In *Cymbeline*, when the king banishes Belarius and takes a second wife, the result is that he loses his two sons, Guiderius and Arviragus. The king, Cymbeline, makes a fatal mistake in believing the false witness of two villains who accuse Belarius of being a traitor. The banished Belarius takes revenge on the king by abducting Cymbeline's two sons. Cymbeline commits another error in demanding the marriage

of Imogen with his step-son Cloten. When he knows that Imogen has secretly married a humble gentleman, Posthums, the king banishes him with anger. The consequence is that Cymbeline loses his remaining child, Imogen, for she leaves the court to meet her banished husband, Posthumus. The process of finding works, though, through these same lost children. Guiderius and Arviragus are brought up in the Welsh mountains by Belarius. Though they are brought up in the rural area, they retain the noble nature of royalty. Belarius says;

These boys know little they are sons to th' king,
 Nor Cymbeline dreams that they are alive.
 They think they are mine, and though train'd up thus meanly,
 I' th' cave wherein they bow, their thoughts do hit
 The roofs of palaces, and Nature prompts them
 In simple and low things to prince it, much
 Beyond the tricks of others.

(III, iii, 80-6)

These boys happen to be involved in a war between England and Rome. They save Cymbeline and his army from the Romans and restore his fortunes. When Cymbeline finally finds his lost children, he finds himself—that is, he finds his old evil self and so repents. He asks forgiveness of Belarius and Posthumus and he spares the Roman captives. Thus a reconciliation is effected between Cymbeline and his children, between the banisher and the banished, and between England and Rome. Cymbeline says blissfully, “Pardon’s the word to all” (V, v, 423). Thus the process of finding is effected in the rural scene, Welsh mountains. This fact is significant when we remember the vital role Bohemia plays in *The Winter’s Tale* and the island plays in *The Tempest*.

The theme of losing and finding is much more clearly and obviously presented in *The Winter’s Tale*. The story begins with exposing Leontes mad in jealousy.

Should all despair
 That have revolted wives, the tenth of mankind

Would hang themselves. Physic for 't there's none ;
 It is a bawdy planet, that will strike
 Where 'tis predominant ; and 'tis powerful, think it,
 From east, west, north, and south ; be it concluded,
 No barricado for a belly.

(I, ii, 198-204)

He suspects and finally believes that Hermione has committed adultery with Polixenes. Leontes is self-deceived. In other words, he loses himself. This tragic flow of jealousy destroys, first of all, the friendship which has existed between Polixenes and Leontes. He asks Camillo to poison Polixenes, but Camillo flees away to Bohemia with Polixenes. Thus Leontes loses Polixenes and Camillo. Leontes' jealousy grows so strong that he puts the pregnant Hermione into prison and banishes his new-born daughter from Sicilia. The poor child's name is Perdita, which means "a woman lost". Leontes is so mad that he even denies the truth of an oracle. His self-deception and loss of himself finally brings about the death of his son Mamillius and the feigned death of his wife Hermione. In this way Leontes destroys and loses all his family. However, the shocking loss of his son and wife makes Leontes find himself. The crazed madman is eventually shocked, frightened, and sobered into repentance. This finding of the truth, though, leaves Leontes the prospect of only a living death. At this point Leontes' tragedy is at its height ; he seems to have recovered too late. A long penitence is before him. However, we know the oracle has said, "and the king shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found" (III, ii, 134-6). This gives Leontes the hope that that which has been lost may be found. Leontes' finding himself starts the process of finding. Perdita, a woman lost, has been found by a shepherd and brought up in the pastoral country of Bohemia. She has also been found as a lover of Florizel, the son of Polixenes. Finally all are reconciled when Leontes finds Perdita. That which has been lost is found and an heir secured — Perdita marries Florizel.

Our king, being ready to leap out of

himself for joy of his found daughter, as if that joy were now become a loss, cries 'O, thy mother, thy mother!' then asks Bohemia forgiveness; then embraces his son-in-law; then again worries he his daughter with clipping her; now he thanks the old shepherd, which stands by, like a weather-bitten conduit of many kings' reigns.

(V, ii, 50-7)

Through the union of Perdita and Florizel, Leontes finds again the love of Polixenes and Camillo. To crown all these findings, he is re-united with his supposedly dead wife, Hermione. The process of losing is rapid, but the process of finding or healing takes time. The reconciliation is not realized until Perdita has grown up to be a fair maid of fourteen.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare pushes backward the process of losing and emphasizes the process of finding. Prospero tells Miranda about his loss of the position of the Duke in the second scene of the first act. The process of losing is in the background. *The Tempest*, begins with a tempestuous storm and a tragic-seeming shipwreck. We feel sorry for those who have perished and even suffer with Miranda, who has watched the cruel power of Nature; but when we know that the tempest was caused by Prospero's magical art, we feel safe. He assures Miranda and us that no one has been lost, saying:

"Be collected:

No more amazement: tell your piteous heart
There's no harm done."

(I, ii, 13-4)

Prospero's explanation of his intention gives Miranda and the audience the absolute assurance that all is well, that all must be well. On the enchanted island the wrongers and the wronged, the vile and the good, the corruption and the virtue, are all brought together by Prospero's magical art. These two opposing worlds are to be harmonized and reconciled at one spot and at one point of time. We are assured now that the shipwreck was a happy misfortune. Prospero governs and directs the play from the beginning to the end.

"Lie there, my Art. Wipe thou thine eyes; have comfort.
 The direful spectacle of the wrack, which touch'd
 The very compassion in thee,
 I have such provision in my Art
 So safely ordered, that there is no soul —
 No, not so much perdition as an hair
 Betid to any creature in the vessel
 Which thou heard'st cry, which thou saw'st sink."

(I, ii, 24–32)

Harmony and reconciliation start when Miranda finds Ferdinand. They fall in love at first sight. Prospero's happy scheme is working out. In an other part of the island, villainous plot of Antonio and Sebastian to kill Alonso and Gonzalo is arranged. Another vile scheming is planned on another part of the island by Caliban and his new masters, Stephano and Trinculo, a plot to kill Prospero. Meanwhile, Ferdinand and Miranda get married and are blessed by an airy pageant. It is the scene of a beautiful harmony which seems as prologue to the last reconciliation and forgiveness in the final act. These two vile schemings are useless and powerless in the face of Prospero's magic and art. The final turning point comes when Prospero finds sympathy with the enemies and the wrongers when he sees them suffer. His rigorous thought of revenge vanishes, and instead the thought of pity and forgiveness wells up in his heart.

"Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick,
 Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
 Do I take my part: the rarer action is
 In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent
 The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
 Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel;
 My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,
 And they shall be themselves."

(V, i, 25–32)

Thus the reconciliation is completely achieved through Prospero's finding of his virtuous mercy and forgiveness. The wrongers and the wronged, the vile and the good, the corruption and the virtue are harmonized.

The audience is delighted to hear the innocent cry of Miranda.

“O, Wonder
How many goodly creatures are there here
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in 't.”

(V, i, 181-4)

The wrongers have suffered a sea-change. They really are new creatures that Miranda sees. Thus in *The Tempest* Shakespeare presents a world re-found and created anew, and also a mankind redeemed, re-born, and reconciled.

Note: All Shakespearian quotations are taken from the Arden editions.