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**“Thou Met’st with Things Dying, I with Things New Born”**

**From *King Lear* to *The Winter’s Tale*: Tragedies Transformed**

A Thesis Presented

by

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Abstract of the Thesis

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This paper looks back at *King Lear* through the lens of *The Winter’s Tale*, not in the hopes of superimposing an alternate interpretation of *King Lear* as an individual play but of illuminating Shakespeare’s own process of reevaluating and re-imagining his poetic project, his evolving understanding of theological truth, and his place during England’s transition from the Medieval to Early Modernism. This paper will analyze the starkly dichotomous criticism of *King Lear* and, through detailed comparison with the plot, character, imagery and themes of *The Winter’s Tale*, prove not only that a criticism of *King Lear* is incomplete without *The Winter’s Tale*, but that the latter is a deliberate reinvention of the former. As Shakespeare journeys from tragedy to romance (or tragicomedy), he discovers the paradox that all progress evolves from that backward glance. From the historical perspective, he realizes that reevaluation of the Medieval may be the best solution to the problems of Early Modernism.

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**“Thou Met’st with Things Dying, I with Things New Born”**

**From *King Lear* to *The Winter’s Tale*: Tragedies Transformed**

*Behold I cry suffering violence, and no one will hear: I shall cry aloud, and there is none to judge. He hath hedged in my path round about, and I cannot pass, and in my way he hath set darkness. He hath stripped me of my glory, and hath taken the crown from my head. He hath destroyed me on every side, and I am lost, and he hath taken away my hope, as from a tree that is plucked up. (Job 19.7-10)*

*A backward glance can often lift the heart. (Dante, Purgatorio 4.54, The Divine Comedy)*

The year is 1603. Outside Shakespeare’s Globe Theater lies the turbulent world of a divided England; inside, King Lear howls in agony as he holds the dead Cordelia in his arms, desperately searching her face for signs of life. The audience is doubtless struck silent from the unrelenting barrage of cruelty and suffering that has overwhelmed the stage for the past three hours. Shakespeare’s *Lear* has proven to be no Holinshead-style story with happy ending and restored justice, an ideal fantasy where Cordelia’s army reconquers Britain and Lear reclaims his throne. Instead, this *Lear* recalls the more realistic but much more painful story of Job--a story Shakespeare’s audience would recognize immediately but perhaps also be loath to accept.

The mixed reaction to *King Lear*, both at its debut and during the two centuries

following, is understandable. The popularity of Nahum Tate's 1681 revision of the play, which redeems a triumphant Lear and provides a fairy tale ending with the marriage of Cordelia and Edgar, highlights how distressing most theatergoers found Shakespeare's version of the story. While Job undergoes suffering despite his innocence, Lear certainly calls down upon himself just punishment. But is the punishment too severe for the crime? One is tempted to ask such a question when the play ends not in the redemption usually promised for repentance but in a barren wasteland of corpses. Lear dies before anyone is sure that his suffering has been worthwhile: "Look on her, look, her lips, / Look there, look there!" (*King Lear* 5.3.310-11). What are we being called to see? A faint glimpse of life, and thereby of hope? Or a nihilistic portrait of all that is unjust in the world? "Break, heart, I prithee break!" Kent cries out in despair (*King Lear* 5.3.310). The survival of Edgar implies that Britain will one day be rebuilt, but such a prospect seems a pyrrhic victory amidst such sorrow. In the biblical story Job is restored to prosperity after inconceivable suffering, but how is it possible to honestly believe that the loss of one's children can be adequately mitigated by the birth of others? England may find its footing again, but only at the cost of Lear's death and the ultimate sacrifice of the innocent Cordelia. Amends are made, but at what seems like too high a price. The "gor'd state" (cf. *King Lear* 5.3.319) may heal over time, but painful memories will forever scar its landscape. For the observer, the tragedy of *Lear* lies in its eternal ambiguity. It is the experience of the ultimately human reader of Job who forever mourns the loss of Job's first children.

This final ambiguity--this precarious balance between hope and despair, redemption and nihilism--is part of what makes *King Lear* the most disturbing and thought-provoking of

Shakespeare's plays, and perhaps even of all literature. But what Nahum Tate and many others fail to recognize is that Shakespeare, conscious of the mercy that should spring from justice, eventually does provide his own happy ending to his grimmest tragedy. "Look there, look there!" (*King Lear* 5.3.308). The final words of Lear echo in our ears and in the mind of the playwright. What if Lear were given a second chance--a second chance at redemption? What if Cordelia stirs? "If it be so, / It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt" (*King Lear* 5.3.264-6). By 1610, Shakespeare will devise an answer to Lear's plea. The play is *The Winter's Tale*.

"A backward glance can often lift the heart," Dante nostalgically states in *The Divine Comedy* (Purg. 4.54). This paper also purposes to throw a backward glance: to look back at *King Lear* through the lens of *The Winter's Tale*, not in the hopes of superimposing an alternate interpretation of *King Lear* as an individual play but of illuminating Shakespeare's own process of reevaluating and re-imagining his poetic project, his evolving understanding of theological truth, and his place during England's transition from the Medieval to Early Modernism. This paper will analyze the starkly dichotomous criticism of *King Lear* and, through detailed comparison with the plot, character, imagery and themes of *The Winter's Tale*, prove not only that a criticism of *King Lear* is incomplete without *The Winter's Tale*, but that the latter is a deliberate reinvention of the former. As Shakespeare journeys from tragedy to romance (or tragicomedy), he discovers the paradox that all progress evolves from that backward glance. From the historical perspective, he realizes that reevaluation of the Medieval may be the best solution to the problems of Early Modernism.

Shakespeare is not merely considered an Early Modern and a Renaissance man; he is the face of Renaissance modernism itself. Like all great authors, he has withstood the test of time because his works were before their time. Hamlet is the poster boy for modern man's malaise; *King Lear* may as well be the 16<sup>th</sup> century version of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. The marvel of *King Lear* in particular is how the play so accurately reflects the Renaissance (and hence, modern) notion of intellectual progress. Ironically, modernism also requires a backward glance, but one which reaches far beyond Dante and back into antiquity. The Renaissance's heightened interest in Greek and Roman culture and philosophy (conveniently cleaned of the more arbitrary influence of pagan religion) offered respite and rescue from what were thought to be the stifling superstitions of medieval Christianity. In *King Lear*, Shakespeare steps back for a glimpse into pre-Christian antiquity and finds it similar to his own era of a nascent post-Christian society. However, whether the perspective be ancient or modern, the conclusion is undeniably bleak.

Despite the relentlessly despairing outcome of *King Lear*, a more hopeful form of criticism still persists. Surely, such immense suffering must bear some redemptive fruit; surely, Lear's repentance of his crimes must be recognized by some mitigation of strict justice. William R. Elton, in *King Lear and the Gods*, enumerates the varieties of Christian optimism that color much of *Lear* criticism. *Lear* might easily be seen as a Christian play thanks to Christ-like figures such as Cordelia and Edgar. Seen through a Christian lens, the suffering of Lear and other characters in the play is the means of making souls "fit for heaven" (Elton 4). Following the purgative pattern of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the plot of *Lear* is seen by many critics to be an ultimately redemptive one: not only is suffering a meaningful and necessary step towards

regeneration; it is also conceived as part of an overarching divine plan. Elton surveys the often exaggerated lengths to which this Christian optimistic approach can go:

[S]ome critics envision not only Christian optimism, but Christ Himself: like G. Wilson Knight, who sees in each Shakespearean tragic hero 'a miniature Christ.' J. Dover Wilson remarks, 'It is impossible to contemplate the death of Lear without thinking of Calvary...' According to Geoffrey L. Bickersteth, Shakespeare was 'unconsciously inspired by a story taken...from Christian mythology,' with Cordelia in the part of Christ.' [...] While microcosmic suffering is, according to some critics, considered meaningful and, in the Dantean sense, ultimately 'comic,' the macrocosm, too, has a corollary orderliness. 'In the play itself,' affirms M.D.H. Parker, 'there is nothing wanton. There is justice, mercy, sacrifice and redemption.' Natural law, in the traditional sense, presides over the tragedy: 'Shakespeare,' Hardin Craig asserts, 'held very firmly to this belief in the ultimate punishment of the wicked, in other words, in eternal justice. He exemplifies it in all of his tragedies, and was certainly neither skeptical nor bewildered...*King Lear* is based on the doctrine of eternal law...Lear's faith in a divine providence, at least while he has reason, is complete.' (Elton 3-5)

While one may argue reasonably that some divine justice frames *Lear's* plot--the wicked receive punishments that match their crimes--that argument falls short with the death of Cordelia.

Wronged innocence justly deserves to be righted, not inflicted with the ultimate punishment. Cue the Christ-figuring, with a peculiar chiasmus for good measure: just as the baseness of mankind's original sin of disobedience requires the Son of God, the purest possible victim, to atone through self-sacrifice, so also the gravity of Lear's sin of wrongfully demanding obedience requires his innocent daughter, Cordelia, to be hanged. But the gap in this comparison gapes widely: in *Lear*, the innocent victim does not gloriously resurrect and confound former executioners. If "it is impossible to contemplate the death of Lear without thinking of Calvary," as J. Dover Wilson insists (Elton 3-5), it is just as impossible to compare Christ's triumph over death in His Resurrection with Lear and Cordelia's corpses. This yawning divide between Scripture and Shakespeare's tragedy becomes a mass grave: if divine justice plays a part in *King Lear*, it

overextends itself into the realm of tyranny; it becomes blind in the worst sense of the word, piling the dead bodies of the good and the wicked together.

What if one were so bold as to make an alternative argument for the “justice” of Cordelia’s death? If justice requires Lear to pay for disowning his most-loved daughter, then that rejection can only be completed through her death. Ironically, Lear’s punishment of Cordelia coincides exactly with the one he himself receives. Punishing Cordelia for not expressing her love the way he wants her to, Lear withdraws not only her dowery, but even the physical life he gave to her:

Let it be so; thy truth then be thy dower:  
For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,  
The mysteries of Hecate and the night,  
By all the operation of the orbs  
From whom we do exist and cease to be,  
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,  
Propinquity and property of blood,  
And as a stranger to my heart and me  
Hold thee from this for ever. (*King Lear* 1.1.106-114)

To withhold one’s fatherly care and material inheritance is one thing; to recall “property of blood” is entirely another. By disowning Cordelia, Lear wishes to separate her from his hereditary line. When Lear disowns Cordelia, she becomes the biological possession of the King of France: “Fairest Cordelia...Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon: / Be it lawful I take up what’s cast away” (cf. *King Lear* 1.1.249-252). Disowning children is only a formal act that separates parent from child in artificial ways; but essential biological identity, literal “property of blood,” can be withdrawn only if blood is shed, if the life that was given by birth is taken back by death. In short, the only way to really disown one’s daughter is to murder her. Ultimately, Lear accomplishes his goal. Though he does not murder her with his own hands, he does watch

her die in his arms. In any production of *King Lear*, the most harrowing scene is that of Lear howling as he carries Cordelia onstage. The “howl, howl, howl” (*King Lear* 5.3.256) that announces Cordelia’s lifeless entrance in the final scene, along with Lear’s careful cradling of her body like that of a delicate newborn’s, insinuates a mockery and perverted reenactment of childbirth, and a cruelly literal fulfillment of parental disowning of offspring. Further evidence of this mock birth may be found if we consider the biologically-infused metaphors of the womb-like “wall’d prison” (cf. *King Lear* 5.3.17) that confines Cordelia and the rope with which she is killed and which Lear must cut like an umbilical cord to bring her out into the world. Whereas Shakespeare’s comedies end in marriage and therefore the promise of new life, his tragedy ends in initially hopeful yet ultimately thwarted reunions. In effect, Lear delivers a stillborn child. His vengeful resolution to relinquish Cordelia’s “property of blood” is fulfilled. If this is divine justice, it is of the pagan variety: like the Sphinx’s riddle in *Oedipus Rex*, cruel fate throws repentance and other human concerns to the wayside. Declarations and oracles come to pass in clever ways that mock and defy free will. Justice becomes nothing more than an elaborate game for the gods at human expense, and, through mercilessly following the letter of the law, borders on injustice. “As flies to wanton boys, are we to the Gods; / They kill us for their sport” (*King Lear* 4.1.36-37).

Clearly, a pagan, not Christian, perspective of justice frames the play; and such justice, by its very literalness, can hardly be called justice at all when it decimates the plays’ innocents. If we cannot argue for a consistent application of Christian justice in the play, then how can critics like M.D.H. Parker say that there is also “mercy, sacrifice and redemption” (Elton 3-5)? Where there is no justice, there can be no mercy. The play flirts with Christianity when Lear, purged,

worn and morally enlightened by the storm and “a wheel of fire” (*King Lear* 4.7.46), recognizes his sinfulness and the just punishment he should receive:

*Lear:* If you have poison for me, I will drink it  
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.

*Cordelia.* No cause, no cause. (*King Lear* 4.7.72-76)

With the immediate and unassuming forgiveness of her father and sisters, Cordelia exhibits Christian mercy in its purest form. Even the structure of the poetic lines embodies the nature of mercy: it picks up where justice falls short and even extends beyond it. With merciful forgiveness also comes the redemption of the repentant sinner. Looking like “a soul in bliss” (*King Lear* 4.7.46) come to save Lear and, washing away his sin with baptismal tears, Cordelia seems the saving Christ-figure indeed. As if mercy and forgiveness were not proof enough of her love, Cordelia imitates Christ in the final sacrifice of her life. Yet, unlike the Savior she supposedly prefigures, she performs a vain sacrifice. Cordelia’s death empowers death rather than defeats it: Lear reverts back to his angry, vengeful, insane self, howling in pain as he did on the heath; he dies of heartbreak, overcome with the reality of death. Just as Lear opens the play with the negative and fundamentally anti-Christian belief that “nothing will come of nothing” (*King Lear* 1.1.89), likewise he concludes with a fivefold denial of the possibility of an afterlife: “Thou’lt come no more, / Never, never, never, never, never!” (*King Lear* 5.3.306-7). If death has the final say, sacrifice loses its redemptive value. To presume, like Edgar I. Fripp, that Lear and Gloucester die happy deaths -- “Lear achieves ‘lowliness, justice, tenderness,’ as Gloucester ‘attains’ in his way, ‘patience and happy death’” (Elton 4)--is as absurd as it is unfounded.

The argument for a Christianized *Lear* becomes even more dubious when we compare Shakespeare's tragedy with its source text, the anonymously-composed medieval *King Leir*. As Elton reiterates in chapter four of *King Lear and the Gods*, the original source bursts at the seams with explicitly Christian references:

[T]he religious references in the old play are, for the most part, explicitly Christian [...] Divine and poetic justice rule all; the anonymous play never questions them or allows them to be questioned, and the work ceaselessly drums its pious message. Although both heroes demand pardon of those they have wronged, as set down in the Establishment Homilies, the old *Leir* follows the ordinances in the ars moriendi tradition, which *Lear* does not. In contrast to *Hamlet*, a Christianized version of the pre-Christian Amleth story, *Lear*, in Shakespeare's hands, becomes a paganized version of a Christian play. (Elton 70)

In *Leir*, characters pray to and speak of one God, whom they address in such Christian terms as "King of Heaven" and even "Jehovah." Instead of Mount Olympus or temples, characters refer to "the Church," unambiguously inferring that a Christian context frames the play. Characters manifest Christian piety and concern for saving their souls: Leir, for instance, abdicates so that he may focus on the care of his soul and prepare for a holy death. Shakespeare's *Lear* provides a sharp contrast to the original, retiring instead for reasons of personal comfort; as Elton notes, *Lear*'s first command after relinquishing his crown centers on bodily needs: "Let me not stay a jot for dinner: go, get it ready" (cf. Elton 64). Even Cordella's speech reflects Scripture more clearly than Cordelia's does:

Yet God Forgive both him, and you and me,  
Even as I doe in perfit charity.  
I will to Church, and pray unto my Saviour,  
That ere I dye, I may obtayne his favour. (cf. Elton 66)

By employing recognizably Christian terms like God, charity, Church and Savior, as well as alluding to Christ's words of forgiveness on Calvary ("Forgive them, Father, for they know not

what they do”), Cordella establishes herself as a Christian and even Christ-like character. In comparison, Cordelia’s “No cause, no cause” (*King Lear* 4.7.74) portrays heroic natural virtue but not even the slightest flickering of deliberate Christianity. At best, Cordelia exemplifies the Augustinian (and popular Renaissance) concept of the virtuous heathen (*prisca theologia*), but this is not enough to Christianize her character or Shakespeare’s play. By so starkly distancing his *Lear* from the overtly Christian source text, Shakespeare very purposefully presents a pagan environment.

This clearly pagan environment gives a harsh picture of the divine: the fatalistic games of strict justice, as previously examined, demonstrate no concern for the welfare of individual human beings. While events seem to fulfill Fate as they unfold, there is no explicit indication that any knowable divine being is involved in the process. In *King Lear*, the gods are frequently mentioned or called upon, but rarely do they answer men’s prayers or reveal themselves unmistakably as gods to men. Lear’s gods give not the slightest sign that they listen; or indeed, that they even exist. Horrified at the first raging exhibition of Lear’s irrationality, Kent rebukes the king for unworthily invoking the name of the gods:

*Lear.* Now, by Apollo, --

*Kent.* Now, by Apollo, King

Thou swear’st thy Gods in vain. (*King Lear* 1.1.158-160)

Arguing from a divine perspective, one might conclude that Lear’s tragedy results from his flippant blasphemies. But this is arguing for the existence of the gods by negation; that is, by showing how they “sit back” and “allow” evil to happen. But without direct divine intervention, there is not enough evidence to prove the existence of the gods with certainty.

This pre-Christian uncertainty reflects the emerging post-Christian skepticism that pervaded Shakespeare's England. Lear embodies the Renaissance skeptic down to the smallest detail:

To summarize the criteria of the Renaissance skeptic: (1) he considers God's providence faulty; (2) he denies the immortality of the soul; (3) he holds man no different from a beast; (4) he denies creation *ex nihilo*, deriding the traditional tenet that God created the world out of nothing, and he ridicules it by applying to a natural context, concluding *ex nihilo nihil fit*; and (5) he attributes to nature what belongs to God. (Elton 54)

Lear exemplifies these criteria persistently throughout the play. The injustice of strict justice, as previously discussed, shows the faultiness of an unmerciful providence or Fate; Lear's persistent "never" over Cordelia's corpse denies the immortality of the soul. He equates human life with mere animal life more than once, but most notably during the storm scene and again at Cordelia's death. Stripped naked and bared to Nature's relentless barrage of mental and physical suffering on the heath, Lear experiences the truth of his speech to Regan a scene earlier: "Allow not nature more than nature needs, / Man's life is cheap as beast's" (*King Lear* 2.4.264-5). Likewise, death erases all distinction between man and beast. Lamenting over Cordelia's body, Lear doubts the significance or superiority of human life over that of animals: "No, no, no life! / Why should a dog, a horse, a rat, have life, / And thou no breath at all?" (*King Lear* 5.3.304-6). This view of death as last, unconquerable end invariably stems from a denial of creation *ex nihilo*. The threat of nothingness looms over the entire play: Lear proclaims his belief that "nothing will come of nothing" (*King Lear* 1.1.89) in the very first scene and reiterates that nothingness in his final lines. Significant and poignant is how Lear, doubting the worth of Cordelia's silent love, demands that she "speak again" (*King Lear* 1.1.89), and then at the end of the play reflects on the quiet nature of her voice:

I might have sav'd her; now she's gone for ever!  
Cordelia, Cordelia! stay a little. Ha!  
What is't thou say'st? Her voice was ever soft,  
Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman. (*King Lear* 5.3.269-272)

Like in Act One, Lear demands that she “speak again”: “What is't thou say'st?” (*King Lear* 5.3.271). In both scenes, Cordelia's silence signifies nothing for Lear, neither the possibility of a greater interior love nor that of a greater life beyond what can be grasped by sense perception.

When one sees nothing more than what is apparent to sense perception, one ultimately attributes to nature what belongs to God. From his climactic conflict with Goneril and Regan in Act 2, scene 4 to his rage against the storm in Act 3, scene 1, Lear's attitude towards the gods changes quickly and dramatically. In 2.4 he calls upon the gods to protect him from nature (nature meaning here his own nature, embodied in his daughters):

You see me here, you Gods, a poor old man,  
As full of grief as age; wretched in both!  
If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts  
Against their father, fool me not so much  
To bear it tamely; touch me with noble anger,  
And let not women's weapons, water-drops,  
Stain my man's cheeks! (*King Lear* 2.4.270-6)

He addresses the gods directly, not only petitioning them to look down upon his grief and give him strength to bear it manfully but also subtly accusing them of provoking his daughters' betrayal (“if it be you”). In this case, what Lear should attribute to his own nature (his daughters undeniably have inherited their father's propensity for stubborn selfishness), he blames on the gods. Yet Lear quickly forgets the gods as his raging fury overtakes him. In the climactic storm scene (3.1), after realizing that his repeated pleas have so far been answered only by deafening silence, Lear gives up on the gods and invokes the elements instead, raging against the ingratitude entrenched in human nature:

Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks! (*King Lear* 3.2.56-58)

Ironically, “women’s weapons, water drops” fall from heaven as if in mocking defiance of Lear’s earlier petition. More significantly, Lear not only redirects his address from the gods to Nature; he also demands that Nature destroy the concept of the the divine altogether. The seemingly misplaced “steeples” (rather than the more contextually appropriate “temples,” for instance) jolts the listener from the play’s ancient historical context and into the modern day, and for good reason: while Lear tears through the sham that is ancient pagan mythology, Shakespeare echoes the growing sentiments of his own times, as Renaissance humanism unleashed the floodwaters that broke down the bastions of Medieval Christian tradition by emphasizing man over God, reason over faith, the natural over the supernatural.

This Renaissance distancing from a belief in the existence or significance of divine influence invariably stems from shifting religious perceptions that make God less accessible to human understanding. Calvinism, which was gaining influence in England at the time that Shakespeare was writing *King Lear*, stresses the *Deus absconditus*--God as hidden, unknowable, and unapproachable--and the hopeless inadequacy of human reason. If man is unable to understand divine ways and, faced with a Calvinist God often resembling “a tyrant who arbitrarily and unpredictably saves and damns” (Elton 31-32), he will invariably turn from God to things he can grasp more easily. Thus Lear turns from the gods to Nature as found within himself and in the exterior world. Elton labels this shift, which obscures any sense of divine providence even further, as particularly Baconian: “Indeed, the *Deus Absconditus* concept, by distancing God from man, encouraged the empiricist of the Renaissance, in effect, to substitute a

visible second cause for the concealed First Cause, while maintaining at least the appearances of piety. Tending to sift 'nature' from theology to empiricism, this third alienating factor seems to be reflected, for instance in Lear's inquiries into the natural causation of things traditionally ascribed to heavenly causes" (Elton 32-33). Lear calls for another Great Deluge so that all reminders of the divine may be washed away and man can start anew. (Ironically, Edgar and Albany are the only ones who survive this metaphorical flood; the lack of female survival makes the hope for the rebirth of civilization even more doubtful.) Besides the mention of steeples, one other recognizably Christian reference is made and then quickly brushed aside: the Fool, shivering with cold, pleads to Lear that "court holy-water in a dry house is better / than this rain-water out o' door" (*King Lear* 3.2.10-11). Lear does not even acknowledge his Fool's words, and continues to address and provoke the elements: "Rumble thy bellyful! Spit fire! spout, rain!" (*King Lear* 3.2.14). According to Lear's experiences, renewal comes not from water of a blessed and supernatural kind, but from that of the natural; "rebirth" signifies awakening from theological stupor to natural reality. That reality, however, proves harsh, as Lear experiences Nature in all her fury when both the natural elements and the fruits of his own nature, his daughters, turn against him. Shakespeare the Renaissance man finds natural reality stripped of the supernatural: enlightenment turns out to be nothing more than awakening to nihilism and the destructive absurdity of the universe.

While Lear gradually turns from the gods to Nature and finds them both destructive, perhaps the best exemplar of Renaissance naturalism is Edmund, Gloucester's illegitimate son. Edmund skips initial belief in the divine entirely, fully embracing Nature from the onset. Edmund's first monologue summarizes the Renaissance humanist's credo:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law  
My services are bound. Wherefore should I  
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit  
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,  
For that I am some twelve moonshines  
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? Wherefore base? (*King Lear* 1.2.1-6)

His argument from a literal, individual perspective is understandable: why should a bastard be deprived of inheritance when his bastardy comes through no fault of his own? From a more universal perspective, however, Edmund stands as the reason-governed rebel against “the plague of custom.” He embodies the Renaissance’s rejection of outdated belief systems, particularly that of Medieval Christianity.

Edmund makes a valid point concerning the unfairness of his bastardy, and problems such as his merit a re-evaluation of tradition. Tradition or custom may indeed become staid and even foolish, falling into arbitrariness and superstition (a common fault often unfortunately found within Medieval Christian practice). Gloucester, by blaming or attributing actions and events to the stars instead of realizing the role of personal accountability, exemplifies the intellectual blindness that occurs when faith no longer complements reason but instead stoops to mere superstition:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no  
good to us: though the wisdom of Nature can reason  
it thus and thus, yet Nature finds itself scourg’d by  
the sequent effects. (*King Lear* 1.2.100-104)

For Gloucester, faith no longer builds on nature but rather serves as an easy escape from it. His superstitious behavior showcases the worst perversions of belief in the divine. Religious belief, when completely de-rationalized, becomes a laughing stock and a justification for Edmund’s atheism.

This irrational piety passes unquestioned from Gloucester to his legitimate son, Edgar, thereby casting doubt not only on religious belief but also on the claims of legitimacy. Edgar, in comparison with his bastard brother, comes across as naive and lacking proper judgment; his innocence denotes intellectual immaturity rather than desirable virtue. His noble nature, Edmund gleefully notes, “is so far from doing harm / That he suspects none; on whose foolish honesty / My practices ride easy” (*King Lear* 1.3.176-8). Like his father, Edgar walks onstage spouting astrologies: “I am thinking, brother, of a prediction I read this other day, what should follow these eclipses” (*King Lear* 1.2.136-7). Edgar’s naivete and Gloucester’s total submission to intellectual laziness merit Edmund’s disgusted criticism:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our own behavior, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars; as if we were villains on necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition to the charge of a star! (*King Lear* 1.2.115-125)

It is important, however, to note the different and often contrary uses of the word “Nature” within the play. Gloucester blames Nature for unfortunate events that befall him: in this case, Nature is an entity separate from the individual man and maintains an overruling power over him. For Edmund, “Nature” primarily refers to one’s own individual human nature. When Edmund proclaims, “Thou, Nature, art my goddess,” he essentially affirms his own self-mastery. Man becomes his own god. This self-worship is shared by Lear and Edmund, and their similarities are connected in the play even at the linguistic level. As Clare McEachern observes,

“the only character in the play who is convinced that Lear is a type of God (‘everything,’ as he’s been told) is Lear himself, and then only temporarily” (McEachern 219). In the opening court scene, Lear, as still-reigning king, makes clear the he (and everyone else) answers to no other will but his own. When Kent tries to interject, Lear assumes god-like rage and power with an according title: “Come not between the Dragon and his wrath” (*King Lear* 1.1.121). Similarly, after lambasting Gloucester’s foolishness, Edmund proclaims that “my father compounded / with my mother under the dragon’s tail, and my nativity was under *Ursa* major; so that it / follows that I am rough and lecherous” (*King Lear* 1.2.125-8). But the irony in his remark is more multi-layered than even Edmund intends: Edmund mocks belief in heavenly influence but then goes on to fulfill his supposed destiny of being “rough and lecherous” when he spearheads multiple murders and maintains adulterous affairs with Goneril and Regan. Gloucester and Edgar’s superstitions may cloud the truth, yet Edmund, rather than re-evaluate and reinvigorate the traditional customs of his father, leaps to complete rejection of them. Father and bastard son embody opposite extremes: one relies on faith alone and the other relies on reason alone; the balanced concept of faith building on nature is abandoned by the wayside.

But if the old customs, as embodied primarily in Gloucester, have lost touch with their rational origins, is Edmund’s rejection and replacement of them with his new “natural religion” any better or more successful? Invocations to the gods, whether by Lear or Gloucester or any other character, have been sent up to heaven in vain; does Nature answer Edmund’s prayer any differently? Judging from the play’s events, Nature can answer man’s prayers--that is, man can rule himself--only up to a point: Edmund achieves success but then ultimately fails at the end of the play. His self-willed actions turn against him when his treachery is found out and he receives

his just deserts at his brother's hand. Although the superstitious faith of Lear and Gloucester is not the answer, neither, says Shakespeare, is Nature: it is significant that Shakespeare chooses a villain and bastard to represent Renaissance humanism. Nature devoid of the supernatural leads to man's self-destruction, just as the supernatural loses its significance when divorced from its natural footing. The fragmentation of the natural from the supernatural shatters the integrity of society at large; hence, the barren wasteland and overwhelming number of deaths (death being fragmentation on the individual level) by the end of the play. The problem within nature is that it is fundamentally flawed by sin, as the ultimate inadequacy of nature suggests.

Because of this fundamental flaw, saints and sinners meet the same demise. The innocents of *Lear* are not entirely innocent, but inherit, to some degree, the flaws of their fathers. "Children, precisely because they are undeniably one's own, are bound to disappoint in that they reflect so uncannily parental imperfection, and so, recalling original sin ('my corrupted blood'), destroy any hope that they might better their kind" (McEachern 215). Edgar shares Gloucester's superstitious naivete; even Cordelia displays some of her father's stubbornness. Sins are passed not only from fathers to children, but also from masters to servants: for all his loyalty and virtue, Kent possesses a rashness and hot temper that resembles Lear's. No character, however virtuous, is perfectly Christ-like; no character, therefore, can offer themselves as a perfect sacrifice for the redemption of Lear and for the play as a whole. *King Lear* essentially shows the destruction that comes from trusting in Nature alone and the personal and social fragmentation that results from separating the supernatural from the natural (at either extreme). As historicist and social commentator, Shakespeare understands the Reformation and Renaissance's disgusted rejection of

the intellectual laziness and superstition that developed by the end of the Middle Ages, but he disagrees that the Reformation and Renaissance humanism provide the proper solution.

If Nature falls short of redemption--if Man cannot save himself from the effects of his own sin--then how and where can redemption be found? The stark terrain of King Lear's heath presents the cruel fatalism of antiquity and the emerging atheism of modernity as two sides of the same nihilistic coin. For Shakespeare the Early Modernist at the height of his career, drama is, as Hamlet so famously instructed, the art of simply "holding the mirror up to nature" (*Hamlet* 3.2.20). But for the playwright in the twilight of his life, reflecting grim reality--looking through a glass darkly--is not enough. When natural death becomes imminent, looking beyond nature becomes crucial. As Cynthia Marshall iterates in *Last Things and Last Plays: Shakespearean Eschatology*, "An artist's anxiety about personal mortality may be coupled with the desire for artistic immortality and both feelings exacerbated by fear of the cessation of creative activity. In looking back over his or her oeuvre, the artist may recapitulate earlier modes and directions. Often, there is an urge to summarize. Thus three identifiable characteristics of *alterswerk* are interest in death, formal recapitulation, and thematic summation" (Marshall 2). At the close of a career or life, the tendency is to revisit beginnings; old age is second childhood, as the saying goes. In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare revisits *King Lear*, eager to redeem the latter through a supernatural lens that is closer to home.

Shakespeare doubtless had *King Lear* in mind while composing *The Winter's Tale*, and it would not be illogical to consider *The Winter's Tale* as a redemptive re-imagining of *Lear*, as a justification and recompense for the intense suffering of that earlier play. The end of *Lear* is ambiguous, questioning the worth of suffering; *The Winter's Tale* replies with a more forgiving

and hopeful ending. The first three acts of *The Winter's Tale* parallel the plot structure of *Lear* almost exactly. This “formal recapitulation” can be found in even the smallest details of plot, language and character. Indeed, the first three acts of *The Winter's Tale* encompass the whole of *King Lear's* five acts in fast-forward motion: a proud and jealous king blinded by his own false judgments punishes those who love him most; he then realizes his errors too late, his loved ones dead. Leontes directly parallels the mad and self-consumed Lear; Hermione exudes the same saintliness and spirit as Cordelia; Polixenes, among a medley of other supporting characters torn between honesty and loyalty to the king, suffers a form of banishment thematically similar to that of Kent's. Differences in plot details thinly veil Shakespeare's obvious allusions to *Lear* in *The Winter's Tale*.

One of the most striking comparisons between both plays is the similarity between the leading kingly characters. Most critics, like Marshall, recognize Othello's jealousy in Leontes (cf. Marshall 4). But Leontes also shows as much furious madness as Lear, turning on his best friend and his wife in an instant. Of their friendship, Polixenes says that he and Leontes were

as twinned lambs, that did frisk in the sun,  
And bleat the one at the other; what we changed  
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not  
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed  
That any did. (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.67-71)

Neither had ever wronged the other. Camillo also speaks of the great love of friendship these two had shared since childhood: “Sicilia cannot show himself overkind to Bohemia. They were trained together in their childhoods; and there rooted betwixt them then such affection, which cannot choose but branch now” (*The Winter's Tale* 1.1.20-25). If the bond between Leontes and Polixenes has always been this strong, what causes Leontes to mistrust his friend now, and with

so little evidence of a fault? Likewise, he suddenly doubts the fidelity of his queen, Hermione, whose reputation of goodness and virtue is known in the court to be unparalleled.

Like Lear, Leontes falls so quickly and easily to jealousy and false judgment because he has an imperfect, self-centered understanding of love. *King Lear* “opens with a request that love show itself, and it devolves into the spectacle of so few loves being known, an ignorance that calls the very beneficence of the universe into question” (McEachern 227-228). Lear understands love to be a form of flattery, an opportunity for self-aggrandizement: hence the absurd love test in which his oldest daughters quickly learn to profit from the same adulteration of love with self-interest. Cordelia, on the other hand, shows a love that is as true and harsh as that of Dante’s Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*. “What can you say to draw / A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak” (*King Lear* 1.1.84-5). She obeys her father but does not give him the preconceived answer he seeks: “Nothing, my lord” (*King Lear* 1.1.86). No less than five times in only four lines, the haunting refrain of “nothing” reverberates across the moral chasm separating father and daughter. Aware of this breakdown of understanding and language, Cordelia attempts to explain her reasoning to her unreasonable father:

Good my Lord,  
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I  
Return those duties back as are right fit  
Obey you, love you, and most honor you.  
Why have my sisters husbands if they say  
They love you all? Happily, when I shall wed,  
The lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty. (*King Lear* 1.1.94-101)

Though her reasoning may seem unfeeling, she understands that false illusions would hurt her father more. Cordelia is concerned with the truth, and nothing less. Yet, because of her honesty

and unaffected love, Lear foolishly disowns her without a second thought. “I lov’d her most” (*King Lear* 1.1.122), he claims, but makes no effort to understand her words or actions.

In a similar way, Hermione unintentionally provokes the anger of Leontes simply by showing him spousal love and obedience. She may as well defend her innocence by repeating Cordelia’s words: “I obey you, love you, and most honor you” (*King Lear* 1.1.97). She acts in response to her husband the king’s command: “Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you” (*The Winter’s Tale* 1.2.28). In *King Lear*, Cordelia prefers to “love, and be silent” (*King Lear* 1.1.61). So also Hermione does not utter a word before Leontes asks her to. “I had thought, sir, to have held my peace until / You had drawn oaths from him not to stay” (*The Winter’s Tale* 1.2.28-9). Leontes has been trying to persuade his best-loved friend, Polixenes, to stay at court for some time longer rather than return to his homeland. When his efforts of persuasion fail, Leontes turns to his queen to help him in the task. She responds with all obedience but, like Cordelia, does not give the exact answer the king was hoping for.

In some ways, Hermione can be considered even more of an innocent than Cordelia: while Cordelia answers truthfully knowing that her answer may offend her father’s pride, Hermione obeys her husband’s command in precise detail without any qualification. In fact, by appealing to Polixenes with the memory of his and Leontes’ childhood friendship, Hermione gives Leontes the exact goal he asked her to achieve: “He’ll stay, my lord” (*The Winter’s Tale* 1.2.86). But when the answer is given, Leontes has changed his mind, perhaps regretting the superior virtue and charm that makes his wife more persuasive than he is. Hermione has done nothing less than what her husband asked, and yet Leontes becomes immediately suspicious of her honest and selfless intentions. “At my request he would not (stay). / Hermione, my dearest,

thou never spok'st / To better purpose" (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.87-9). Like in *Lear*, a mantra of negatives embodies the moral, emotional and intellectual rift that begins to divide the two characters. Instead of Lear and Cordelia's "nothing," Leontes and Hermione's "never" shows the breakdown of understanding and unequivocal communication:

*Leontes:* Hermione, my dearest, thou *never* spok'st  
To better purpose.

*Hermione:* *Never?*

*Leontes:* *Never* but once.

*Hermione:* What! Have I said twice well? When was't  
before?

I prithee tell me; cram's with praise, and make's  
As fat as tame things: one good deed, dying tongue-  
less,

Slaughters a thousand waiting upon that. (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.88-95,  
emphases mine).

The above section is worth quoting at length for many reasons. It is clear that Leontes is responsible for introducing any negative thoughts; Hermione simply repeats his claim of "never" in the form of a surprised question. The dark suspicions and heavy-handed judgments of Leontes contrast starkly with Hermione's ebullience. To the reader who already senses trouble in Leontes, Hermione's playfulness seems almost naive. She jokes with her husband, exclaiming with light sarcasm at the revelation that she has "said twice well" and playfully begs him to "cram" her ears with praise. Leontes, on the other hand, partakes in none of this humor, but associates their wedding vows with Hermione and Polixenes' innocent friendship. He equates the power of her marriage vows ("I am yours forever") with her power to persuade Polixenes to stay at court (for Leontes' sake, nonetheless): "I have spoken to th'purpose twice: / The one forever earned a royal husband; / Th'other, for some while a friend" (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.106-8). Hermione speaks in jest, in the joy of friendship; Leontes interprets the same to hide dark intentions of adultery.

Too hot, too hot!  
To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods.  
I have tremor cordis on me; my heart dances,  
But not for joy, not joy. (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.109-112)

The miscommunication between husband and wife is further physicalized on the page: the lines are short, and the negativity of the words are reinforced by intentional gaps in the text. Such hollowness on the part of Leontes inhibits him from understanding the innocence of Hermione's intentions. And he will fill those holes of misunderstanding with his own fantasies, and thus quickly devolve into madness.

Leontes' sudden change in character can be explained as nothing less than madness. In *King Lear*, even the depraved Goneril and Regan detect that their father's mind is losing health and soundness, and that Lear's natural faults have become gross with the process of aging: "The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then we must look from his age, to receive not alone the imperfections of long-engrafted condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and choleric years bring with them" (*King Lear* 1.1.294-8). Leontes' age is unclear in *The Winter's Tale*, but his mercurial temper is described in a similar fashion by Camillo as a crippling disease: "Good my lord, be cured / Of this diseased opinion, and betimes, / For 'tis most dangerous" (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.297-9). Like in *Lear*, which couples spiritual blindness with the physical, so also Leontes' diseased mind distorts the proper use of his senses as he claims to both "see" and "feel" (cf. *The Winter's Tale* 2.1.152) the supposed truth of his own delusions. Leontes' own fabricated jealousy overwhelms any remaining semblance of sound judgment he may have possessed in the past. The particular disease of madness is the mind's attempt to find substance in nothingness, to create narratives that have no grounding in reality. In convoluted form, the mind will also simultaneously take a contrary course, and attempt to grind true

substance into oblivion. The line between reality and fantasy therefore becomes dangerously blurred. “Nothing will come of nothing,” Lear is fond of saying. Cordelia’s silence, however, evokes her love, not a lack thereof. So Hermione’s obedience to Leontes is falsely viewed as betrayal as Leontes constructs his own narrative for her, striving to grant significance to nothingness:

Is whispering nothing?  
Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?  
Kissing with inside lip? [...]  
Is this nothing?  
Why, then the world and all that’s in it is nothing,  
The covering sky is nothing, Bohemia nothing,  
My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings,  
If this is nothing. (*The Winter’s Tale* 1.2.284-6, 292-6)

He trusts his own jealousy rather than his wife’s actions and reputation, and by doing so believes his own thoughts rather than external evidence. Leontes even admits the irrationality of his thoughts, but crowns them supreme nonetheless:

Thou dost make possible things not so held,  
Communicat’st with dreams -- how can this be? --  
With what’s unreal thou coactive art,  
And fellow’st nothing. (*The Winter’s Tale* 1.2.139-142)

In fact, having so much faith in his own false intuition, Leontes constructs scenes for Hermione and Polixenes to potentially play the adulterous roles he has imagined for them. He instructs Hermione how to act a part that he can easily misinterpret for his own designs: “Hermione, / How thou lov’st us, show in our brother’s welcome” (*The Winter’s Tale* 1.2.175-6). Like Cordelia, Hermione’s faithful love and true obedience damages her reputation with the maddened king.

Just as the intensity and suddenness of Leontes' madness rivals that of Lear, so also Hermione's virtue matches and even exceeds Cordelia's to place her among the highest ranks of Shakespeare's heroines, and makes her one of the paradigms of womanhood that G. K. Chesterton describes as "a demigod...on whom rests something of the mystery which is beyond man [...] To the old Hebrews this sacred being was the prophet; to the men of Christian ages it was the saint. To the Elizabethans this sacred being was the pure woman" (Chesterton 133-134). Other characters incessantly refer to Hermione as "the good queen," and Paulina heightens that description to the level of a Homeric epithet in her passionate defense of the queen's virtue:

Good queen, my lord, good queen, I say good  
queen,  
And would by combat make her good, so were I  
A man, the worst about you. (*The Winter's Tale* 2.3.57-9)

Hermione and goodness become interchangeable; she is the exemplar of virtue. And her goodness remains not merely at the natural state of ordinary human kindness, but seems to rise above to supernatural heights. The purity of her virtue exudes a sense of the supernatural, of the sacred and otherworldly. "No court in Europe is too good for thee," (*The Winter's Tale* 2.2.3) Paulina exclaims, and Polixenes even addresses Hermione as if in prayer: "O my most sacred lady" (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.77). Camillo frequently refers to Hermione's exalted state in the court as something approaching a sacramental mystery, speaking of her as "my dread mistress, / So sovereignly being honorable" (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.322-3). Something or someone beheld with dread entails a profound reverence and awe, and the repeated references to her sovereignty imply who actually holds stronger sway over the hearts and minds of the courtiers. She is indeed the pearl of great price that lends significance to everything around her, including Leontes himself and his authority as king. She is undisputedly his better half. Her virtue approaches the

realm of sainthood, such that Polixenes can even understand and forgive Leontes' jealousy: "This jealousy / is for a precious creature; as she's rare, / Must it be great" (*The Winter's Tale* 1.2.453-4). His words echo those of the King of France extolling Cordelia's virtue as a dowry in itself: "Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor; / Most choice, forsaken; and most lov'd, despised" (*King Lear* 1.1.249-250). In Cordelia and especially Hermione, Shakespeare presents us with a portrait of virtue that surpasses the mere human.

Hermione's innocence does not simply depend on descriptions provided by other characters; she proves her good reputation true in the loving way she treats her husband even while he is slandering her. When Leontes spits accusations of calumny and adultery in her face, Hermione responds by giving him the benefit of the doubt.

Should a villain say so,  
The most replenished villain in the world,  
He were as much more villain; you, my lord,  
Do but mistake. (*The Winter's Tale* 2.1.78-81)

In her goodness and forbearance, she cannot see her husband for the villain that he is; instead, she brushes off his detractions as simply mistakes and is eagerly ready to forgive his shortsightedness. When Leontes assures her that the mistake is not his--that, in fact, "You have mistook, my lady, / Polixenes for Leontes" (*The Winter's Tale* 2.1.82-3 emphasis mine)--she still concerns herself primarily with how such a detraction will hurt Leontes rather than herself.

[H]ow will this grieve you,  
When you shall come to clearer knowledge, that  
You thus have published me! Gentle my lord,  
You scarce can right me throughly then to say  
You did mistake. (*The Winter's Tale* 2.1.96-30)

Hermione shows true selflessness by considering first how Leontes will be affected before she thinks to defend herself. Her insistence on Leontes' "mistake" rather than his villainy is as

touching as Cordelia's quick forgiveness of Lear: "No cause, no cause" (*King Lear* 4.7.74). Even when Leontes refuses to recognize his error, Hermione does not accuse him of villainy nor does she explicitly blame him but rather accepts her unjust fate as simply the inexplicable plan of the gods: "There's some ill planet reigns; / I must be patient, till the heavens look / With an aspect more favorable" (*The Winter's Tale* 2.1.105-7). Even at her trial, when Leontes publicly shames her in the presence of all the court, not once does Hermione berate him or explicitly accuse him of any wrong.

You, my lord, best know --  
Who least will seem to do so -- my past life  
Hath been as continent, as chaste, as true,  
As I am now unhappy [...]  
I appeal to your own conscience, sir, before Polixenes  
Came to your court, how I was in your grace,  
How merited to be so. (*The Winter's Tale* 3.2.31-4, 44-7)

In her defense, she appeals to the king's conscience and his prior knowledge of her reputation. She knows, loves and respects the king in such a way that allows her to tactfully defend her own virtue without doling any offense to him. Nor does she cry out to the "powers divine" for revenge, but trusts that all things will end in justice, that "Innocence shall make / False accusation blush, and Tyranny / Tremble at Patience" (*The Winter's Tale* 3.2.29-31). Her patience is nothing less than heroic, her selfless suffering a form of martyrdom.

Unmerited suffering confronts the innocent in both *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*, but the plays differ in their views of that suffering. Cordelia may be just as much the martyr--the sacrificial victim--as Hermione is, yet the cruelty of her death seems almost too tragic to bear. Except for returning Lear to a state of sanity in the short space between their reunion and her death, Cordelia's suffering is rather isolated from any sense of a providential plan. Lear swears

by Apollo and calls upon Nature throughout the play, but if these gods hear his cries they answer them with an inhuman voice, in the form of abandonment to the storm and the inevitability of the grave. By contrast, the world of *The Winter's Tale* seems imbued with a divine presence. This is sensed not only in Hermione's curious trust in "powers divine" that "behold our human actions" (cf. *The Winter's Tale* 3.2.27-28) but is witnessed directly in the form of the oracle. Whereas Lear swears by Apollo in vain and never receives an answer to his prayers, Leontes invokes presumably the same Apollo and in return receives a message directly from the oracle at Delphi. In contrast to the futile attempts to interact with the divine sphere in *King Lear*, when Leontes declares that "the great Apollo suddenly will have / The truth of this appear" (*The Winter's Tale* 2.3.199-200), the god answers promptly and the oracle read before the court so that acknowledgement of the divine is public: "Hermione is chaste, Polixenes 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" (*The Winter's Tale* 3.2.130-134). The slight sense of mystery surrounding the last phrase notwithstanding, the oracle pronounces clear and coherent judgment, leaving no room for debate. Leontes feels the wrath of Apollo on the instant that he rejects the oracle, and suffers the death of his son and presumably of his wife as well. Leontes remembers his place immediately: "Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves / Do strike at my injustice" (*The Winter's Tale* 3.2.143-4). The power of the gods is blatant; this divinity does not tolerate hubris of any kind, and Leontes immediately submits to repentance. Not only do the gods exist, but they unequivocally demonstrate to men that a divine plan governs the universe.

Not only does *The Winter's Tale* emanate the presence of the gods; the divine is also reflected in Hermione. This is evidenced most explicitly, of course, in her miraculous resurrection. The miracle of Hermione's resurrection picks up where *King Lear* falls short, and presents *The Winter's Tale* as an example of grace building on nature. This miraculous transformation from statue to living being provides the axis for all of the play's criticism. The audience leaves the theater, puzzled; the experience can be compared to the often futile attempts of average spectators to catch the loopholes in a magic trick. Critical perspectives on the return of Hermione run the full gamut of possibilities, from viewing the event as a miracle to be taken literally, to treating it as mere analogy, to even explaining it away through natural circumstances.

The return of Hermione is at once far more concrete than the 'symbolic birth' theory would have it and far less mundane than appeals to Paulina's household can suggest. Criticism of *The Winter's Tale* is divided between approaches that discover miraculous or transcendent elements and those that insist on seeing the action as naturalistic. Brian Cosgrove suggests that the critical split might be encompassed by defining 'cyclical rebirth' as 'an analogy of redemption from death.' He sees in the play 'an attempt to present, within the secular limits of drama, certain truths we would usually think of as Christian.' (Marshall 42)

Some critics argue that there is enough evidence to see through the illusion, and their observations may be clearly found within the text. For example, Leontes notices that the likeness of Hermione is an aged version of the woman he knew sixteen years prior, suggesting that the statue is perhaps more than what it seems: "But yet, Paulina, Hermione was not so much wrinkled, nothing / So aged as this seems" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.27). Paulina's response may seem like a frantic and thinly-veiled cover up. Although she acts as sorceress or priestess guiding the miracle, her desperate efforts to disallow anyone from approaching the statue too closely seem suspicious. When Leontes wonders at the striking realism of the statue and its curiously aged complexion--"Chide me, dear stone, that I may say indeed / Thou art Hermione" (*The*

*Winter's Tale* 5.3.24-25)--Paulina quickly deflects any questions about the true nature of the "statue," interjecting with praise for the artist: "So much the more our carver's excellence" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.30). So also, when Perdita kneels to kiss the statue's hand, Paulina nearly leaps to prevent her from doing so, insisting that "the statue is but newly fixed, the color's / Not dry" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.47-48). She also appears worried that the miracle may occur prematurely: when Leontes' curiosity grows more intense the more he gazes, Paulina orders that "[n]o longer shall you gaze on't, lest your fancy may think anon it moves" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.60-61); and again, "My lord's almost so far transported that he'll think anon it lives" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.68-69).

Although Paulina's worry causes ample reason for suspicion, the accusation that she is veiling the truth would indicate a striking departure from character. Throughout the play, Paulina is the most loud-spoken and truthful; in fact, she serves as the king's conscience, openly condemning his jealousy and blindness and extolling Hermione's virtue. Her brutal honesty with Leontes in especially 2.3 enrages him; Leontes--or any man--cannot control her unrelenting defense of truth and justice. She also declares her own honesty while simultaneously revealing the king's madness, comparing their two opposing traits as equal in measure: "I am...no less honest than you are mad; which is enough, I'll warrant, as the world goes, to pass for honest" (*The Winter's Tale* 2.3.70-71). If she be the loudspeaker for the truth and the conscience of the king, then hiding the truth about Hermione and the statue would be a departure from her own natural impulses for truth-telling. The sense of secrecy, instead of indicating dishonesty on Paulina's part, may actually just indicate the necessity of preserving the sacredness and mystery of the sacramental miracle which is about to occur. Paulina's role as priestess is clear and

analogous to not only an Old Testament priesthood (in which the priest alone was allowed access to the inner sanctum behind the veil of the temple) but also to the priesthood of the New Testament that, with Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, rends the temple veil in two.

As Paulina acts out the transition between the Old and New Testament priesthoods, it is then significant and fitting that Hermione, as both sacrificial victim and the cause of redemption, becomes not simply a Christ figure but another Christ in the flesh. As previously explored, the extent to which her virtue and goodness are praised by the court reaches the level of sainthood. In her extraordinary goodness and virtue, Hermione is presented as a demigod, a two-natured being: the divine in human form. Her superior goodness and innocence, combined with her self-sacrifice and limitless capacity for forgiveness--these are the most basic traits of a hero or heroine that conveniently and generally compare with Christ's sacrifice. But, by virtue of his heroine's miraculous resurrection, Shakespeare ensures that Hermione is not simply just another Christ-figure but that she is, in as literal a sense as possible, an *alter Christus*. The last scene of the play bursts with the language, imagery and symbolism of Catholic liturgy. In fact, the entire transformation process from statue to living being acts out the eucharistic mystery of transubstantiation: in the sacrificial and saving victim, a miraculous change of substance occurs while maintaining accidental qualities. Leontes expresses his desire for reunion (or communion) with Hermione and his joy at beholding her via eucharistic terms. Marveling at Hermione, Leontes refers to both the wine and bread used in the Catholic mass: he describes the bittersweet moment of looking upon Hermione's likeness as an "affliction [that] has a taste as sweet / As any cordial comfort" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.76-77) and, when she descends from her pedestal, he exclaims that "[i]f this be magic, let it be art / Lawful as eating" (*The Winter's Tale* 5.3.110-111).

These exclamations are then immediately followed by physical reunion, thus imitating the physical union of man with God in the communal sacrament: “She embraces him” (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.3.112). Through these liturgically-infused words and actions, Hermione not only represents but becomes the person of Christ on the cross and on the altar.

By essentially presenting a female version of Christ, does Shakespeare mean to play with or reinvent Christian beliefs and prototypes? The answer clearly emerges upon discovery of more explicitly Catholic imagery: in particular, expressions and actions which reflect Marian theology. Beyond the eucharistic reenactment already observed, critics have listed various other Catholic references which inevitably lead to a discussion of Hermione as not only Christ but also as his inviolable mother:

To begin with, the statue scene that takes place in a “chapel” stages, as Julia Reinhard Lupton has pointed out, the visual conditions of Catholic image worship. Paulina’s gallery is strikingly loaded with the signs of both Italian secular art and Catholic forms of worship: there is the reference to Julio Romano, whose name cannot be extricated from the contaminating context of papal politics; and then, of course, there are the pervasive images evocative of Marian iconography. (Lim 320)

Walter S. H. Lim, in “Knowledge and Belief in *The Winter’s Tale*,” continues to enumerate the passages that stand out most notably as Marian. Before the transubstantiation takes place, Perdita addresses the statue of her mother, asking for her intercession: “And give me leave, / And do not say ‘tis superstition, that / I kneel, and then implore her blessing” (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.3.42-44).

While these lines demonstrate the particularly Catholic practice of venerating icons to facilitate prayer, the words that follow Hermione’s transubstantiation echo Mary’s cooperative role in Christ’s act of redemption. In addressing both Perdita and Hermione in a breath, Paulina establishes Hermione as both a Marian or mother figure as well as the Heavenly Father figure in the parable of the prodigal son: to Perdita, she says to “kneel, / And pray your mother’s

blessing;” and to Hermione, “turn, good lady, / Our Perdita is found” (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.3.119-121). In the act of redemption, Christ redeems with Mary as co-redemptrix. Hermione unifies diverse dualities in her resurrection: in the natural sense, body and soul; in the sacramental sense, bread/body and wine/blood; and in the redemptive sense, the male Redeemer with his female Co-Redemptrix. Her Marian role as prime intercessor and mediatrix of all graces is defined in her only words in this last scene: “You gods look down, / And from your sacred vials pour your graces / Upon my daughter’s head” (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.3.122-124). She does not bestow grace of her own accord but acts as the medium through which the divine can communicate to man.

Shakespeare’s purpose, of course, in the eucharistic symbolism, the Marian iconography, and the feminization of the Christ figure is to cast that backward glance, to find the worth of Lear’s suffering in a more ancient, more merciful faith than that presented by Reformation Calvinism or by the Renaissance and the pagan antiquity it echoes. Shakespeare’s female Christ figure seems not so new or heterodox when held up next to Dante’s Beatrice or the innumerable other female paradigms of medieval chivalric literature. And indeed, the character type of Hermione is not the play’s only medieval influence: *The Winter’s Tale*, despite its loosely pre-Christian context and allusions to ancient myths (Pygmalion, for instance), imitates the thematic structure of medieval miracle and mystery plays. The pattern for these plays follows the biblical understanding of history: original innocence spoiled by sin; contrition and atonement for those sins committed; and finally, a return to innocence through God’s mercy and forgiveness. The journey towards forgiveness requires faith and works: Robert Grams Hunter, in *Shakespeare and the Comedy of Forgiveness*, explains that “the forgiveness of sins depended on the penance of the

sinner and, with his customary care and clarity, St. Thomas defines precisely the nature of that supremely important act. Full penance consists of three parts: contrition, confession, and satisfaction” (Hunter 20). Paulina gently urges Leontes that “[i]t is required / You do awake your faith” (*The Winter’s Tale* 3.5.94-95). But the power of faith to merit forgiveness of sins rests on sixteen years of penitential acts. Leontes’ dedication to atoning for his sin roots him in the medieval Christian tradition and distances him from Reformation theology. “Contrition makes God’s mercy available to men, and it is thus at the center of the answer of medieval Christianity [...] to the supreme question, ‘What shall a man do to be saved?’” (Hunter 20). That many of these medieval plays were grouped and performed in cycles, imitating the cyclical nature of the liturgical year, emphasizes the perseverance of divine mercy despite the persistence of human frailty. This cyclic process reinforces Christ’s answer to Peter’s question regarding how many times one should forgive: “I say not to thee, till seven times; but till seventy times seven times” (Matthew 18:22). *The Winter’s Tale* partakes in the message of medieval Christianity and its dramatic tradition, of mercy, forgiveness, and a view of suffering as ultimately meritorious.

Despite the ambiguity that at first glance surrounds Hermione’s resurrection, Shakespeare provides other allusions and comparisons that further help to dispel doubts. The resurrection may also be deemed miraculous when compared with other “miracles” in *The Winter’s Tale* and in previous works. Within *The Winter’s Tale*, the seemingly miraculous return of Perdita provides a counterbalance to Hermione’s. Perdita’s return seems at first miraculous to Leontes, Hermione and other onlookers, but is then easily explained through natural events, thereby highlighting by comparison the supernaturalness of Hermione’s return. Hermione’s story is also reminiscent of Hero’s in *Much Ado About Nothing*--false accusations, resulting apparent death and, upon the

accuser's proof of contrition and recompense, seeming resurrection--but with one significant difference: Hero's "miracle" is clearly explained by the woman herself as being no miracle at all but rather a ploy in order to test Claudio's contrition and conversion to the truth. Hermione's miracle remains ambiguous: no explanation is offered, and Paulina insists on the supernatural aura of the event. Although Paulina's words, as outlined above, may seem untrustworthy in their insistence on the supernatural, Hermione's resurrection, when directly compared to Perdita's and Hero's, begs to be viewed as truly supernatural. Whereas comedy deals on the natural level, romance simultaneously reiterates and springboards beyond the comic frame into divine comedy.

If romance then imitates comedy in order to go beyond it, it does so in order to redeem the most horrific of tragedies. Shakespeare's early comedies contain slights, sins, mistaken identities--the kind of smaller, less damaging injustices that could often be ordered through mere human intervention. But his tragedies require a much more powerful form of intervention if they hope to be redeemed. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, destructive division remains at the level of the individual; hence, Hero need only simulate a miracle for Claudio's conversion. In *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*, the sins of kings have a more cosmic impact; salvation therefore must come from beyond the realm of the mere individual human being. As the figure of redemption in the play, Hermione is and must be beyond the ordinary.

Lear dies repentant -- his change of heart grants him a clarity of vision, but he is given little time to act on it. His gods remain deaf, even to his cries of remorse. Leontes, on the other hand, though severely punished, is granted the faintest of hopes in the midst of his sixteen years of penitence: the warning of the oracle--that "the King shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found" (*The Winter's Tale* 3.2.132)--is also a promise of the possibility that something

may be regained. And indeed, the youthful innocence of Cordelia is rejuvenated again in *The Winter's Tale* in Hermione's child, Perdita. When Lear awakes from a night of madness in the storm, he is greeted by the radiant face of his daughter whom he mistakes for an angel. Cordelia's presence has a healing power over Lear, as the doctor notes with awe how "the great rage...is kill'd in him" (*King Lear* 4.7.79). This reunion is echoed by the reunion of Leontes and Perdita. As an infant in the arms of Antigonus, Perdita survived the tempest at sea and abandonment in the wilderness, and finally finds her way back safely to her father's shore in a reunion that recasts the roles in the parable of the prodigal son. Indeed, this possibility of new life marks the point where *The Winter's Tale* goes beyond *King Lear*. The two plays parallel each other through Act 3 of *The Winter's Tale*; at that point, however, tragedy begins to turn to romance. The hopeful sound of Fortune's turning wheel rings out with the Shepherd's discovery of the royal infant. "But look thee here, boy," the Shepherd exclaims to his son. "Now bless thyself; thou met'st with things dying, but I with things new born" (*The Winter's Tale* 3.3.111-13). "Look there, look there," cried Lear before giving up the ghost (cf. *King Lear* 5.3.308). In the image of this new-born babe, Perdita, Lear's final words are resolved and are answered with new life.

One can say metaphorically that Perdita's preservation is miraculous. But if *The Winter's Tale* ended simply with the happy reunion of father and daughter, and the marriage of Perdita and Florizel to ensure the continuation of life, the play would remain at the human level of comedy. To an extent, it would provide the bittersweet joy of Job who begets new children but surely, we feel, must remember those that were lost. Yet, in Shakespeare's vision, the intense suffering and true repentance of his characters earn something more--not a mere continuation of life, the

younger generation replacing the old, but literal, miraculous resurrection. In the heart-wrenching last act of *King Lear*, Lear claims that “he knows when one is dead and when one lives; she’s dead as earth” but still begs for a feather or glass to test for signs of life (*King Lear* 5.3.259). He knows Cordelia is dead, but hopes beyond hope, desperately wishing to be wrong. At the end of *The Winter’s Tale*, Paulina presents the “statue” of Hermione. Leontes knows that his wife has been long dead, but the realism of her likeness encourages him to hope for what seems impossible. “See, my lord, / Would you not deem it breathed? And that those veins / Did verily bear blood?” (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.3.63-5). Paulina reveals the key to that seemingly impossible end: “It is required / You do awake your faith” (*The Winter’s Tale* 5.3.94-5). In the mysterious resurrection of Hermione, justice gives way to mercy and suffering to reward. Leontes arrives full circle at redemption. And, in the midst of that joy, Lear’s suffering may also be validated. Shakespeare ends his career not with tragedy, but with the hope of life’s second chance.

In *Last Things and Last Plays: Shakespearean Eschatology*, Cynthia Marshall describes Shakespeare’s romances as recapitulations of earlier plays: “As in dreams and remembrances, echoes and images from earlier experiences--earlier plays--fade in and out of focus” (Marshall 4). But as this analysis argues, the similarities between *The Winter’s Tale* and *King Lear* are too numerous and meticulous to be compared to mere dreams or remembrances. *The Winter’s Tale* is re-enactment. Of course, in the later play, a wife is wronged instead of a daughter. Yet is it not conspicuous that, in the tragedy, Lear’s wife is never mentioned? Ian McKellan, playing Lear in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2007 production, speculates that perhaps Cordelia’s mother died in childbirth. Could the ill treatment, banishment and apparent death of Hermione be the prequel to *King Lear* as well as its transformative sequel? One can only speculate. But such

comparisons, negating the linear concept of time, introduce the medieval perspective of history and time as cyclical. Shakespeare the Early Modernist evolved full circle to become Shakespeare the Late Medievalist by the end of his career. From this perspective, the backwards glance is that which redeems the past and, as a result, transforms present and future.

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