

A Symphony of Delusions

The Comedy of Errors was a work of Shakespeare's springtime. In his season of mellow fruitfulness, when he wrote *The Winter's Tale*, was there in his mind's ear a symphony of delusions?

Delusion is everywhere at work in *The Winter's Tale*. Delusion overpowers Leontes and possesses him. The deluded notion that his Queen is tainted drives him not merely to talk stark nonsense, but to act like a fiend. When he is rid of that, another fallacious belief—that Hermione is dead—pricks him to perform 'a saintlike sorrow'; so that grace itself seems working through delusion. Delusion conditions even that idyllic paradise at the sheep-shearing, where Florizel, pretending to be what he is not, is himself under the error that Perdita is a shepherdess. In this masterpiece of Shakespeare's, delusion is a master-theme.

These are important delusions of important persons in the play. The humble old Shepherd too has his delusions. Towards the close of the long scene that includes the shearing festival, Autolycus, the old Shepherd and the Shepherd's son are on the stage. The two rustics have fallen foul of King Polixenes, who supposes that the old Shepherd has schemed a marriage between Perdita, his reputed daughter, and Prince Florizel. In their distress they hope to appease the King by proving to him that Perdita is not the old Shepherd's daughter. Overhearing their talk, Autolycus pretends to be a courtier, able to further their cause before the King.

They believe him. 'This cannot be but a great courtier', says the son. 'His garments are rich', says the father.

The garments Autolycus wears at this moment are not rich. A few minutes before this, in full view of the audience, Autolycus and Florizel have exchanged garments. What the prince was wearing before the exchange was not the dress of a prince; it was the guise of a shepherd.

Singer supposed that Shakespeare's memory had made a slip here.¹ The value of Singer's comment lies in the fact of Singer's having realized that the words of the old Shepherd amount to stark nonsense.

Later commentators think there may be some sense in the words. Mr. Bethell, citing Professor Dover Wilson and Mr. Granville-Barker, claims for the costume a distinctive richness—'rich enough to transform Autolycus later into a "courtier cap-a-pe"'.² Undoubtedly Florizel at the shearing is 'distinguished from the rustics'; but not by his dress: he is distinguished, in spite of

1. S. W. Singer's edition of Shakespeare's Plays, George Bell and Sons (1875), Vol. IV, p. 102.

2. *The Winter's Tale: A Study*, by S. L. Bethell, Staples Press Ltd., p. 66.

his shepherd's dress, because of the great lover he is and the great language he utters.

Yet another suggestion is that Florizel 'was only outwardly disguised and that Autolycus was wearing also the fine clothes that had been concealed'.³ But is this anything more than an attempt to bolster up the matter by interpolating, beneath the shepherd's dress, a layer of princely padding of which the playwright says nothing? In this play, as Shakespeare wrote it, there is mention of Florizel having obscured himself 'with a swain's wearing'; there is mention of Florizel being 'vilely bound up': of hidden finery there is no mention. When Shakespeare makes the old Shepherd say those garments are rich, why not give the words their plain meaning, which is that this Shepherd is seeing the things not as they are, but as he is told they are.

As a matter of merely textual criticism, the passage may be of no great importance. Yet if the old Shepherd speaks those words under a delusion, this delusion, however insignificant in itself, may have a significant bearing on the whole symphony.

Autolycus is no courtier. No longer does he wear three-pile and serve Prince Florizel. That belongs to his past. Now he is a vagabond and a cutpurse. His 'revenue is the silly cheat'. Beating and hanging are terrors to him. He is a good salesman: when he is out to sell, 'they throng who should buy first'. His art lies in operating an irrational persuasion. And to this end the old Shepherd is apt.

When the old Shepherd comes on the stage for the first time—in Act III, Scene 3—he shows himself a ready leaper to illogical conclusions:—'Sure some scape: though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape'.—The conclusion is wrong; the method of reaching it has been illogical.

'This has been some stairwork, some trunk-work, some behind-door work'. Illogical again, and again wrong.

Enter clown, who tells the old Shepherd what has befallen Antigonus at the jaws of a bear. 'Would I had been by', says the old Shepherd, 'to have helped the old man!'—Illogical again, but this time not wrong; for Antigonus is an old man. The old Shepherd, his human sympathy stirred, pictures Antigonus as an old man like himself. That is natural, perhaps; but, since the old Shepherd has never seen Antigonus, it is illogical and irrational—so illogical and irrational that here too Singer blames Shakespeare for inadvertence in giving to the old Shepherd knowledge which he could not reasonably have had.⁴ It is not inadvertence. The old Shepherd speaks in character as Shakespeare imagined him.

3. *The Winter's Tale*, edited by J. H. Lobban, Cambridge University Press (1950) p. 172.

4. *Op. cit.*, p. 61.

Moreover, at the moment when this Shepherd is becozened into believing those garments are rich, he is not his normal self. A stunning blow has come down on him; his mind, for the time, is unhinged. At his shearing feast one of the guests has suddenly turned out to be King Polixenes; Doricles in a swain's wearing has proved to be Prince Florizel; in an outburst of royal rage the King has told the Shepherd:—

I am sorry that, by hanging thee, I can but
Shorten thy life one week.

Scared out of his wits, the rustic is apparently too frightened to grasp what he is told, when Polixenes speaks on:—

Thou churl, for this time,
Though full of our displeasure, yet we free thee
From the dead blow of it.

But his terrified ear is deaf to the comfort it hears. Still he fancies that he is to die a shameful death; that some hangman must put on his shroud and lay him 'where no priest shovels in dust'.

By an Elizabethan audience a priest shovelling in dust would be remembered as a Christian burial custom of days that were no more. From the smiting present this old man's wits have gone reeling back to the past. He is out of character now, in some such sense as Leontes had acted out of character when jealousy suddenly overthrew him.

In this unbalanced state, quaking with fear, his mind and memory disjointed, the old Shepherd asks Autolycus, 'Are you a courtier, an't like you, sir?'

'Whether it like me or no', answers the sharper, 'I am a courtier'. Flaunting the swain's wearing which Florizel has cast off, Autolycus swaggers, 'See'st thou not the air of the court in these enfoldings? Hath not my gait in it the measure of the court?'

And then the bewildered old Shepherd takes the swagger of Autolycus for the measure of the court; he takes Autolycus the rogue for the courtier Autolycus pretends to be; and he sees the clothes Autolycus vaunts not as they are, but as Autolycus says they are. 'His garments are rich', the old Shepherd tells his son, 'but he wears them not handsomely'. Badly shaken as the old Shepherd is, he still has a hold on sanity. Amazingly deceived in regard to the vesture, he is still shrewd enough in his judgment about the fantastic wearer of another man's clothes.

For what dramatic purpose has Shakespeare drawn this old Shepherd? King Leontes casts out the baby Perdita, and Perdita becomes 'that which is lost'. That new life, that redeeming hope, which the King sought to destroy, imagining the baby was a bastard, the Shepherd, imagining the baby was a

bastard, finds and fosters. The one is contrapuntal to the other. The good producer of a Shakespeare play, Professor Wilson Knight considers, 'will study to make the grouping and action continually reflect, not the passing incident only, but its relation to the whole'.⁵ Has this passing incident—the Shepherd mistaking the garments Autolycus wears for the rich apparel of a courtier—any relation to the play's wholeness? Has it that 'quality of the significant moment, continual in Shakespeare?' Should producers and actors of *The Winter's Tale* seek by every available means to convey to the audience not only that the old Shepherd is under a delusion here, but that this is one in an orchestration of delusions?

II

A modern view of *The Winter's Tale*, taken by Professor Wilson Knight in *Crown of Life* (1929), has been greatly developed in recent years. Dr. Tillyard for one deems it not fantastic to see in *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare's attempt at rendering the complete theme of *The Divine Comedy*.⁶ The motives of hell and purgatory he finds obvious enough in Leontes.⁷ There can be no question that Leontes is jealous because of his delusion. His, in the orchestration, is the supreme delusion.

Now Leontes and Polixenes, though in their boyhood they may have been 'as twinned lambs that did frisk in the sun', show themselves, when grown men, to be a brotherhood of ramping lions in their full-blown anger. King Polixenes, faced with his son and heir about to wed Perdita, becomes as terrible as King Leontes had been when jealousy swept over him. Each King is furious under a fallacy: the notion of Polixenes is that Perdita is a shepherd's daughter. In Leontes, both Dr. Tillyard⁸ and Mr. Bethell⁹ see the agent of destruction; while in his child Perdita, whom he had cast out, they see a symbol of the contrary process—the powers of recreation and regeneration. Is there not a like symbolic relation, based once more on the physical relationship, between Polixenes and Florizel? When the son seeks a sacred contract, divorce is the word of doom which the father thunders:—

Mark your divorce, young sir,
Whom son I dare not call; thou art too base
To be acknowledged: thou a sceptre's heir,
That thus affect'st a sheep-hook!

5. *Principles of Shakespearian Production* by G. Wilson Knight, Faber and Faber Ltd. (1936), p. 54.

6. and 7. *Shakespeare's Last Plays* by E. M. W. Tillyard, Chatto and Windus (1938), p. 84.

8. *Op. cit.*, p. 44.

9. *Op. cit.*, pp. 89 and 90.

Clearly Polixenes too is jealous; he is jealous to keep the sceptre's lustre unblemished. Judged by human standards, Polixenes is right. Even the old Shepherd, when he knows who Perdita's lover really is, blames her for daring 'to mingle faith with him'. Cottager and King both feel it as an outrage to their feudal sense of law and order.

Yet the jealous anger of Polixenes is destructive, and Perdita sees it as subversive of something more sacred than the feudal order. She sees that while she forbears to tell him—

The self-same sun that shines upon his court
Hides not his visage from our cottage, but
Looks on alike.

What a weight of unconscious irony there is in Perdita **forbearing** to tell Polixenes that. When her father in his delusion wrongly suspected Polixenes of violating his sacred union with Hermione, he had raved insanely. But she, while she plainly sees Polixenes bent on putting asunder her and her lover, on forbidding their union, on blasting their young paradise, forbears to speak.

It is true that Polixenes jealous, unlike Leontes jealous, remains a reasonable man. Polixenes behaves as any reasonable parent might in comparable circumstances. He is not vindictive, but prudent and practical. Though he fulminates about hanging the old Shepherd and about having Perdita scratched with briars, he quickly relents. He frees the Shepherd 'from the dead blow' of the royal wrath: all he wants is that never more must those rural latches be open to Florizel's entry. No doubt there is error in the jealousy of Polixenes too: Polixenes is mistaken in deeming Perdita the old Shepherd's daughter. But that belief is not peculiar to him; he shares it with many; it is a mistake of fact which they have reason for making. It differs vastly from the delusion of Leontes, which is completely void of rational foundation. The delusions of these two Kings are at opposite ends of a scale.

In this orchestration of many delusions, most of the delusions have, like the fallacy of Polixenes, a rational foundation. Among these other delusions is the belief that Hermione is dead. That belief, natural and understandable, is held by Leontes and nearly all his court. Perdita is not the old Shepherd's daughter, but they who suppose she is have reason for supposing it. In sight of Hermione living, all but Paulina take her for a stone statue. Delusion it is, but they who are deluded are in full possession of their reasoning faculty.

So was the old Shepherd in possession of his reasoning faculty when, on finding the baby Perdita, he was deceived by appearances. An abandoned baby does indeed, more often than not, turn out to be one whose birth has been the result of 'some stair work, some trunk-work, some behind-door work'. And this particular baby had indeed been abandoned only because her father

fully believed she was a bastard. In believing that, Leontes had been altogether irrational. The old Shepherd, on the other hand, had some *prima facie* evidence for his conclusion. He was merely misinterpreting the evidence and indulging his habit of leaping to illogical conclusions—conclusions which would prove wrong at one time, and right at another. Then he was speaking in his character of a simple shepherd apt to be hasty in his judgment. Then he was sanely believing what Leontes had believed insanely.

But something verging on the insane has come over him before he is brought to believe that those garments are rich. That belief, irrational and abnormal, is put upon him at a time when he is scarcely in possession of his reasoning faculty. When he is off his balance ; when his knees tremble and his judgment totters, he is prevailed upon to see in the garments a richness no sober eye can see.

For then he imagines as insanely as Leontes. Leontes too had in imagination seen what no other could see. Leontes and Leontes only saw Hermione and Polixenes ' paddling palms and pinching fingers ' ; ' making practised smiles, as in a looking-glass ' ; ' leaning cheek to cheek ' ; ' meeting noses ' ; ' horsing foot on foot ' ; ' skulking in corners ' . All that was the figment of his fevered fancy ; yet he not only believed he saw it, he refused to believe that others had not seen it.

But if the old Shepherd's delusion about the garments and the delusion of Leontes are alike irrational, there is between them this capital difference : the one is humanly irrational ; the other is not. In the Shepherd's delusion, we discern the human cause ; we see the trickery of Autolycus ; we know his purpose ; we follow his method ; we trace each cunning step by which the impostor makes his advance.

By no such palpable swindler is Leontes deceived. For Leontes being deluded there is no visible motivation. Delusion, as Mr. Bethell well observes,¹⁰ ' comes upon him with no warning, apparently from without ' . Paulina, Camillo and others try all they can to cure him of his mania. Says Antigonus :—

You are abus'd, and by some putter-on
That will be damn'd for't ; would I knew the villain.

Yet they fail. This putter-on is not of their earth. They wrestle not against flesh and blood.

The Shepherd's delusion, because it holds a middle place, serves to distance the undiscovered cause of Leontes's delusion. Poised between the natural and the supernatural, the human and the demonic, it is like a note in counterpoint ; nothing but as it appertains to the notes before and after it and, more especially, to the notes below and above it.

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10. Op. cit., p. 78.