

THE LAST PLAYS OF SHAKESPEARE: A STUDY IN COMPARISON

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Abstract

About the last plays of Shakespeare i.e. *Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, critics are not of one opinion. Majority of them think that there were much more in Shakespeare's mind when he wrote these plays, and there is almost general agreement that at this time he was particularly interested in the theme of reconciliation. Quiller Couch considered that as reconciliation needs space and time, Shakespeare was for a while battled and simply did not know how to do it. That *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, although show progress are diffused and clumsy, and on the whole are failures, but the success was only there in *The Tempest* as *The Tempest* brought down his quarry from the sky. But some critics are of the opinion, holds that full success is reached both in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*. Time, Growth, Decay and Regeneration are related themes in the last plays of Shakespeare. In pattern, there is fluctuating light and shadow in all the plays. The plays show striking similarities in the turns of fortune's wheel. There are marked similarities also of scenes and incidents within this pattern.

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Pericles, *The Prince of Tyre*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* were written at the end of Shakespeare's career. It may be dangerous to assume that Shakespeare himself regarded these plays as his last which are notable for distinguishing characteristics common in varying degrees to them all¹. With the exception of *The Tempest* they are roamy

plays in that they have scenes in many places and countries and they all show or recount events taking place over a lengthy period of time. They have been called romances and are romantic in true Elizabethan sense of the term, which deal with love in people of high state, events, normally controlled by supernatural agency like chance and heroic adventure in both courtly and Arcadian settings. Also, the style of these plays appear to be similar with the same peculiarities of language and versification. There may be seen amalgamation of virtue, beauty, and happiness in all of them together with presence of evil, misery and ugliness. At a point of time, they all come near to tragedy, but surprisingly, all of them do not end in tragedy, rather they end in the mood of happiness. Their story is of and about the evil caused by ' Jealousy, hatred, treachery, and the evil, conquered in course of time by integrity, constancy, and courageous love aided by good fortune. It has been pointed out that these plays are closely related in relation to the theme and style, and one can easily understand *Cymbeline* if he has read *Pericles* or *The Winter's Tale*. *The Tempest*, one may find a little bit different in this regard, but it must certainly be agreed that these plays are of the same kind².

Most critics feel that there was much more in Shakespeare's mind when he wrote these plays, and there is almost general agreement that he was particularly interested in the theme of reconciliatin'³. He considered that, because reconciliation needs space and time, Shakespeare was for a while battled and 'simply did not know how to do it'⁴. His view was that *Pericles*, *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, although they show progress are diffused and clumsy, and on the whole are failures, but the success was only there in *The Tempest* as *The Tempest* brought down his quarry from the sky'⁵. This view about the playwright experimenting with new material is also developed by J.M. Nosworthy in his discussion of *Cymbeline* as an experimental romance, but he holds that full success is reached both in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* ⁶.

These plays are mainly experiments in dramatic art are those which regard having profound philosophical significance which is largely expressed through imagery and symbolism in words and structure, and to many the plays are myths or allegories. 'Interpretations range from simple analyses of *The Tempest* as an allegory of Shakespeare's dramatic life of *The Winter's Tale* of his personal life a scarcely concealed autobiography⁷. EMW Tillyard in his last plays, and F.C. Tinkler in his *The Winter's Tale* regard the last plays

as developments from the tragedies, showing not only destruction but also, what is only “suggested in the Tragedies, & Reconstruction and Rebirth brought about by virtue and time. For D.A. Traversi the plot of *The Winter’s Tale* is a perfect example of Shakespeare’s symbolic technique. The play is on the virtue of grace. When Perdita mentions carnations and stroked gilly-flowers it is obvious that the corn-stem has a clear connections with the flesh, and steak’d gillyvors” realm of grace that is crown. Its connection is with crown⁸.

The basic plot of *The Winter’s Tale* and *Pericles* have close similarities, and *The Tempest* and *Cymbeline* are close in echoes of thought and word. In the former two plays, there is a wide gap of time in which infants grow up, and there are scenes in different countries. In each a king stays nearly a year away from his realm and believes his wife to be dead, whereas in fact, she is in a form of religious retreat. In each case, the royal couple have one daughter who is separated from them immediately after birth endangered at sea, and later believed, at least by the king-to be dead. In each case, the king’s life is in danger who escapes on the advice of his counsellor, and the queen’s daughter is a mistress of the east. In final act, the daughter is first restored to the king and then all three are reunited and the daughter kneels to her mother. Each play contains the theme of jealousy, although this is much more prominent in *The Winter’s Tale* than in *Pericles*. An essential difference between the play is that in *Pericles* the king does not sin or cause the separations and, therefore, the question of final forgiveness and reconciliation dose not arise.

Cymbeline is also close to *The Winter’s Tale* in plot and language, but the plots of *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* do not have a time gap. They depend on a preplay story. The plot of *The Tempest* is different which is not like the other plays, a central character is sinned against and there is forgiveness and reconciliation at the close. In all the plays there are parents and children.

In each there is one of the normal dramatic conclusions of comedy. In three there is the immediate prospect of marriage of the central young couple, and, in the other the reuniting of a young couple, who were recently married when the play opened. But there is also ahead a re-established life for the older central characters. A vital characteristic is that in varying degree both these main groups of characters suffer and have to win their rewards by hard struggle against adversity. Here again the comparison is closest between *Pericles* and *The Winter’s*

Tale. In each the old suffer severely, in each the young woman is put to great physical danger and subsequent hardships. The young men are not called upon to suffer. Florizel has his resolution tested but Lysimachus has not tested after his conversion. In *Cymbeline* the young suffer. As far the old, there is not, the same way as in *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest* again shows differences from the others. The young have no real suffering. They do not, in any comparable way, win their ultimate happiness by suffering and struggle, if the significance is mainly symbolic. The women in these plays have exposed to mortal dangers at sea, which was also the first hazard of the young, women in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. In each play, except *Cymbeline*, the sea offers dangers to most of the young and in *Pericles* and *The Tempest* also to the old.

Time, Growth, Decay and Regeneration are related themes in the last plays of Shakespeare's. They all, in various ways, show the effect of the passage of time. In *The Winter's Tale* and in *Pericles*, this is done in a similar way. In *Cymbeline*, although the action covers only a few months, there is the effect of the passage of considerable time, and even in *The Tempest*. Where the time of the action is short, the same effect is present, due largely, as in *Cymbeline*, to the pre play history of events and the fact that at the end of the play an older generation sees grown up those who were last seen as babes. The growth is not only physical, but is also in the development of character and moral nature and in the winning of self-knowledge⁹. In *The Winter's Tale*, it occurs in Hermione, Antigonus Leontes, and Autolycus. In *Pericles*, it is seen in Pericles, Marina and Thaisa. In *Cymbeline* it is in Posthumus, in the King and the Princess, and in Imogen. With growth there is in the lives of the old, the unmistakable theme of Decay. Regeneration in the old is shown in *Pericles* and *Cymbeline* where they are helped by the young. In *The Winter's Tale* and in *The Tempest* the old achieve promise of a new life largely by their own efforts aided by other adults. The young play little active part in the struggle. The young men in *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, and Particularly in the first three, achieve a new spirit, largely by the influence was with a power almost divine, of Feminine Beauty and purity, Particularly of the young, and this aspect is very strong in all the plays. In *Cymbeline* and in *Pericles* the young women have to undergo the harshest trials and suffering, comparable with that of the older women in *The*

Winter's Tale, whereas the young women in that play and *The Tempest* have no comparable trials and dangers in their adult lives. Resolute womanhood, the trials and fortitude of women of noble character accused unjustly, is a marked theme in every play except *The Tempest*.

In pattern, there is fluctuation in all the plays, though they show striking similarities in the turns of fortunes wheel. There are marked similarities also of scenes and incidents within this pattern for example, the storms and shipwrecks in *Pericles* and *The Tempest*, which bring immediate evil or appearance of evil. It extend the sense of violence and disruption into a wider context. The passions of men are felt to be a part of the natural order.

The role of supernatural and dream in these plays cannot be rejected. There is the supernatural and the dream. In *Pericles* and in *The Tempest* there are magicians, and magic and chance are more important in these plays than they are in *Cymbeline* and *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* has its Jupiter and soothsayer and in *The Winter's Tale*, its oracle and the apparent magic of the statue have dreams containing supernatural manifestations. Also, there are the masque¹⁰, dancing, music and songs, which play their part in varying degree in all the plays. Needless to say that *Pericles* has no formal masque as in *The Winter's Tale* but there is something of the function of a presenter of a masque, which is explicit in Diana's vision, and one cannot miss dance and music. *Cymbeline* has a form of masque in the dream of Posthumus, and *The Winter's Tale* has the sheep shearing feast and dances as well as the statue scene. *The Tempest* has the dancing of the strange shapes at the banquet (III, III) and the masque of ceres. Music and songs grow in importance from *Pericles* to *The Tempest* . Music is used in Shakespeare, on both solemn and formal occasions to mark happiness and jollity, particularly for the dance.

To conclude, it may be said that these elements combine in the last plays of Shakespeare to create a rhythmic development which is similar in all the plays. Harmony is broken by evil in human character, and is corrected by human virtue aided by the Gods, yet this virtue acts in conjunction, with the neutral processes of continuing life working silently through time, and so, together, man and nature finally succeed in recreating peaceful harmony.

Notes and References :

1. Crutt well in *The Shakespearean Moment*, 1954- p-94
2. Tillyard, EMW, *Last Plays P.I.*
3. A. Harbage, *Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions* 1952. P. 53-56.
4. Quiller-couch discussed this in several works. *Shakespeare's workman ship*, 1918 :
studies in Literature 1929 119-15 N.C. Wint., XVIII-XVI
5. Ibedem
6. Wint, N.C. 1921 XXVII
7. Nosworthy, J.M.N.C., TP 1921 XXVII
8. L. Dobbs, *Shakespeare Revealed* 1948, 192-93.
9. As noted by Daniel p. 119.
10. A masque is a form of courtly entertainment music, dancing, singing and acting
out a story.