The Winters Tale: A Christian Tragedy

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THE WINTER'S TALE: A CHRISTIAN TRAGEDY

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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of the play—What is presented in The Winter's Tale is something not contrary to but beyond human tragedy—Though the play ends happily, it does not, for all that, become a "gay" play—Conclusion: The Winter's Tale, working on two levels, has represented an action of high tragic significance, but it has added to the tragic action the Christian element of hope, pardon, and a "chance to try again."

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BIBLIOGRAPHY
INTRODUCTION

This thesis offers an interpretation of a play which has often proved difficult to classify, William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. It is the argument of this thesis that what Shakespeare offers in the play is best described as a Christian tragedy. Consequently, it would be good at the outset to define what is meant by the term Christian tragedy.

Any discussion of the traditional Western view of tragedy must be centered around the classic work on tragedy: the *Poetics* of Aristotle. For, as W. Macneile Dixon has said, "If not in the foreground of all discourse upon tragedy, then in the background, a dominant figure, stands this authority of authorities, for so long a kind of intellectual Jupiter, not lightly even in our modern and irreverent age to be set aside."¹

What, then, does Aristotle say about the nature of tragedy?

In Section VI of the *Poetics* he sets forth his famous definition of tragedy:

Tragedy . . . is an imitation of an action that is

serious, complete in itself, and of certain magnitude; in language made beautiful by different means in different parts of the work; in dramatic, not narrative form; through scenes of pity and fear bringing about a purgation of such emotions.²

Throughout this discussion the noun tragedy and the adjective tragic are always used in the sense that Aristotle had used them—i.e. either as a play of high seriousness with a theme of certain magnitude or as something pertaining to such a play.

What is meant by Christian should be clear enough: a quality pertaining to the ethical and religious teachings of Jesus Christ. Fundamental to these teachings is the awareness of Christ's redemptive act which makes every man an actual or an eventual sharer in the life of grace, the realization that through Christ sin can be forgiven, a man united to God, and destined for heaven.

The two terms—Christian and tragedy—when taken together refer, then, to a play of high seriousness which relies for its tragic effect on the recognition of the complete Christian ethico-religious code. In other words, the Christian tragedy is a play in which some great catastrophe overtakes the hero, a play in which the hero suffers defeat. However, it is also a play which admits the possibility of the regeneration of the hero precisely because it acknowledges the redemptive influence of Christ in the life of man. The Christian tragedy is, then, tragedy with hope.

The purpose of the thesis is twofold, with a primary and a secondary end. The primary end of the thesis is, of course, to show how *The Winter's Tale* is a Christian tragedy; and then, secondarily, having established this major contention, the thesis will show that this play might well stand as an argument against those critics who claim there is an incompatibility between Christianity and true tragedy. Most of these critics argue that the hope for future life which Christianity holds out takes away from the true tragic effect which a play of this type ought to have. It is maintained that a play with a Christian theme cannot end on a note of finality and, therefore, loses all tragic power. The other objections which are sometimes raised against Christianity in a tragedy concern peculiarly Christian virtues such as faith, hope, and humility which are said to weaken the humanism of the tragic hero.  

It is hoped that what will be offered in these pages will show how it is possible for a play to be at one and the same time Christian and tragic.

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The thesis is divided into four parts. In the first part of the study the theme idea of *The Winter's Tale* will be considered. Here it will be shown that the dominant theme of the play is a Christian ethical-religious theme of Sin-Repentance-Forgiveness-Restoration. The second chapter will present an analysis of the chief characters of the play, while the third chapter will give an analysis of the imagery. The fourth chapter will explain the play's structure. Finally, the Conclusion will show how the separate elements of the play treated in the earlier chapters of the thesis are united to form what is best described as a "Christian tragedy." Hence the play, insofar as it unites true tragedy and Christianity, might well stand as a kind of argument against those who claim that tragedy and Christian ethics or dogma are incompatible.
CHAPTER I

THE THEME IDEA OF THE WINTER'S TALE

Fundamental to an intelligent understanding of this present study is an appreciation of the legitimacy of the Christian ethico-religious approach to Shakespearian literature. In more recent years there has been a renewed interest in viewing the plays of Shakespeare from the vantage point of ethics and religion.¹ Such studies have done a great deal in offering new insights and in prompting keener appreciations of many of the plays. Actually the ethico-religious approach to any literature is not a new one. There have always been critics who seemed to have realized that if literature is "talk about the whole of life,"² then literature cannot help offering value judgments about how people live that life. Moreover, the reader of literature, and this would include the critic, is expected to go beyond the surface, to question the representation of life given by the author, a representation which

¹S.L. Bethell, The Winter's Tale: A Study (London, 1950); Alfred Harbage, As They Liked It (New York, 1947); Laura Jepsen Ethical Aspects of Tragedy (Gainesville, 1953); Donald A. Staufer, Shakespeare's World of Images (New York, 1949); and Virgil K. Whitaker, Shakespeare's Use of Learning (San Marino, 1953).

cannot escape including at least implicit moral considerations.

This particular approach takes on an even greater significance when applied to the plays of Shakespeare. For notwithstanding the contributions which the new critics have bestowed upon literary criticism with their emphasis on "the work in itself", there is still a place in criticism for the historical approach, i.e. an attempt to see in the particular work a reflection of the man who wrote that work, the times in which he lived, and the people for whom he wrote. This being the case, the balanced student of Shakespeare will not ignore the value—if not the absolute necessity—of bringing together the techniques of both the new critics and the critics of the historical approach. From these latter the Shakespeare student will learn the importance of Shakespeare's early moral training in influencing his dramatic thought, the strong Catholic heritage Shakespeare possessed, whatever his personal religion, and the all-important relation between

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4 Whitaker, 3-44.

his dramatic art and the prevailing Christian ethics of his
times.  

Therefore, the Christian ethico-religious approach to
Shakespeare is most assuredly a legitimate literary approach, an
approach which will concentrate on the work itself against the
background of Shakespeare's education, times, and dramatic
orientation.

Before applying the Christian ethico-religious analysis to
The Winter's Tale, it would be good to review the general drama-
tic action of the play. The action of the play centers around
Leontes, the king of Sicily, who surrenders to an irrational
jealousy. His crime is to suspect his wife, Hermione, and his
boyhood friend, Polixenes, the king of Bohemia, of adultery,
without the slightest bit of evidence. He orders a faithful and
just counselor, Camillo, to kill Polixenes. Above this, Leontes
orders his innocent wife to be tried before the entire court,
disregards the advice of those around him who protest his wife's
innocence, and goes so far as to order the abandonment of his in-
fant daughter in the senseless belief that she is not his. Even

6Lea, Cormican, "Shakespeare and the Medieval Ethic,"
Scrutiny: XVII (March 1951), 296-317.

7The edition which is used throughout this thesis is that of
The Yale Shakespeare. Frederick E. Pierce, ed., The Winter's
Tale New Haven, Yale University Press, 1918). Further references
to The Winter's Tale will omit explicit references to this
edition.
assurance of God fails to placate the king. Only when Leontes' son dies as a result of the harsh treatment of his father towards his mother, does the monarch realize the ugliness of all that he has done. His reaction is one of horror and remorse. His groundless suspicions have cost Leontes his wife, his newly-born daughter, his boyhood friend, his counselor, and a trusted lord. The third act and the first part of The Winter's Tale end on this note. The last view which Shakespeare gives of Leontes is, then, one of a repentant sinner who openly declares his intention of making amends for his crimes by acts of penance and contrition.

Between the third and fourth acts there is a lapse of some sixteen years. Time acts as a chorus which bridges the gap between the two sections of the play. During these years Leontes has lived the life of a penitent; Perdita, discovered by Bohemian shepherds, has grown to young and beautiful womanhood; Florizel, the son of Polixenes, has fallen in love with Perdita. In the fourth and fifth acts of the play the lovers, seemingly so separate in rank, are violently opposed by Polixenes who threatens to disinherit Florizel, hang the shepherd who has acted as Perdita's father, and scratch Perdita's beauty with briers. The lovers flee to Sicily and there all the parties are finally reconciled: Polixenes with Perdita and Florizel, Leontes with Perdita whose identity is revealed and eventually with Hermione who did not die
after all but who was merely hidden away by her lady-in-waiting, Paulina, until the lost infant was restored, and finally, the two kings themselves.

From this brief digest of *The Winter's Tale* it should be evident that the dramatic action centers around a culpable moral defect—unfounded and destructive jealousy. From this initial moral defect stream several other culpable moral defects including attempted murder, false accusation, and even blasphemy. Only when all these crimes have taken their course and brought seemingly irredeemable harm upon all concerned, does Leontes realize the baseness of his suspicions and the terrible extent to which his jealousy has led him. The remaining two acts of the play center around the repentance of Leontes and his final reconciliation with his wife and child.

The dominant theme throughout the play is precisely the sin of Leontes, its consequences, and its final resolution. In other words, the general dramatic action—i.e. Shakespeare's theme idea—is a concrete picturization of the Christian concept of sin, repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. This is not the same thing is saying that Shakespeare wrote primarily as a moralist or a trained theologian; nor is it the same thing as that he wrote with the accuracy of the professional moral theologian. However it is to say that there exists between the basic plot, or the theme idea, of *The Winter's Tale* and the code of Christian ethics
and religion a remarkable parallel. Moreover, it is to suggest that the power and the significance of this play will increase in proportion as this parallel is understood and appreciated. That is the task of the remainder of this study.
CHAPTER II

AN ANALYSIS OF THE CHIEF CHARACTERS OF THE WINTER'S TALE

In this chapter five characters from The Winter's Tale who exemplify distinctly Christian personalities, types, truths, and ideals will be discussed. These are: Leontes (the sinner); Hermione (the innocent victim); Paulina (a concrete expression of conscience); and Perdita (an example of full Christian living) and Florizel (partner with Perdita in the expression of chaste love). This chapter is not designed to make The Winter's Tale some kind of allegory with its characters becoming more symbols than actual people. Nothing like that is intended. What is intended is that the Christian character of The Winter's Tale be further illustrated by the various personalities involved in its dramatic action.

The Winter's Tale opens pleasantly enough with Leontes and Polixenes renewing their boyhood friendship.¹ The introduction presents a scene of happiness and peace. It shows, too, that Leontes has everything in the world to make him contented and secure. However, it is in these first few lines that the sin-motif is heard when Polixenes speaks of the boyhood days of Leontes

¹W.T. I.ii.66-74.
and himself.

**Polixenes.** We were as twinn'd lambs that did frisk i' the sun.
And bleat the one at the other: what we chang'd
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dream'd
That any did. Had we pursu'd that life,
And our weak spirits ne'er been higher rear'd
With stronger blood, we should have answer'd heaven
Boldly, 'not guilty;' the imposition clear'd
Hereditary ours.  

(W.T. I. ii. 67-75)

This speech with its reference to original sin and its effects upon human nature, actual sin, and the necessity of purgation from sin before the possession of heaven sets the mood for the peculiar Christian tone of *The Winter's Tale*. However, here it might be advisable to recall the warning of Mr. Bethell, who interprets this passage in much the same way. The author of *The Winter's Tale: A Study* insists that to call the reader's attention to the reference to original sin is not to suggest that these images and references are "to be wrested into a plain theological meaning but merely by these means the audience are prepared (unconsciously for the most part) to seek religious significance in what follows."² This would appear to be a perfectly legitimate reading of the phrases: "the doctrine of ill-doing" (original sin); "weak spirits reared with stronger blood" (human nature, weakened by original sin, prone to temptations to actual sin); "the imposition cleared" (the necessity of purgation before the entrance into heaven).

²Bethell, 77.
Having established the ethico-religious coloring of the play with this speech, Shakespeare is prepared to show the effects of "weak spirits reared with stronger blood" (W.T. I.ii.72). That weak spirit is in Leontes.

When Hermione succeeds in persuading Polixenes to remain in Sicily, she also sets off the first spark of suspicion in the heart of Leontes. Then, as the brooding monarch watches Hermione give Polixenes her hand, he seems to feel also the stifling pall of sexual jealousy fall over his soul.

Leontes. 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. This entertainment May a free face put on, derive a liberty From heartiness, from bounty, fertile bosom, And well become the agent: 't may, I grant: But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers, As now they are, and making practis'd smiles, As in a looking-glass; and then to sigh, as 'twere The mort o' the deer; O! that is entertainment My bosom likes not, nor my brows. Hamilius, Art thou my boy? (W.T. I.ii.109-120)

Thus Leontes sins, for sin it must be called since the subsequent action clearly shows that this is more than a mere passing temptation. It remains, however, a sin of the intellect, not yet finding expression in action. Still, it might be objected at

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3 W.T. I.ii.28-87.
4 Ibid., I.ii.209-305 (the conversation with Camillo).
this point, that all this jealousy on the part of Leontes has been unmotivated. After all, if sin is the underlying theme of the first part of The Winter's Tale, then how is its origin to be explained satisfactorily in Christian terms? Mr. Bethell in his own study answers a similar objection by pointing out that this seeming lack of motivation actually brings out the unique Christian tone of the action.

The lack of motivation cannot be ascribed to the exigencies of the Elizabethan drama; an address to the audience could have summarized Leontes' psychology and his psychological history, like Gloucester's opening soliloquy in Richard III. But Shakespeare never seems to have been content with mere psychology. Sin comes from without, as in the Christian scheme it comes from the temptation of the devil—we are concerned, I think, with the general origin of evil as well as the origin of this particular sin in Leontes. Leontes' sin comes unmotivated, but sin is necessarily without any truly rational foundation (cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa, Pars Secunda, Quaest. LXXXVI, a.1).

It might be added in substantiation of Mr. Bethell's remarks and also of this particular study that this revolt against reason is fully in accord with sound Christian doctrine. Moreover, that Shakespeare was fully aware of the connection between irrationality and sin and that he used this in other plays has been demonstrated by Mr. Whitaker.

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5Bethell, 78. Mr. Bethell's citation of St. Thomas is somewhat misleading. He is referring to S.T., I-II, 86, 1 c.


7Whitaker, 201; 219; 275-82; 308; 328.
From this point on Leontes' whole character seems to undergo a drastic change. His surrender to sexual jealousy brings in its wake disorder, irrational motivation for actions, suspicions which breed other suspicions worse than their sires. Indeed, it is only in the soliloquy of Camillo, immediately following his conversation with Leontes, that normality is again brought upon the stage. Camillo's observations serve to give a cool, rational, ethically sound appraisal of Leontes in this present state of jealousy and suspicion. It should be remembered that the king has just ordered Camillo to kill Polixenes.

*Camillo.* O miserable lady! But, for me, What case stand I in? I must be the poisoner Of good Polixenes; and my ground to do't Is obedience to a master; one Who, in rebellion with himself, will have All that are his so too. To do this deed Promotion follows. If I could find example Of thousands that had struck anointed kings, And flourish'd after, I'd not do't; but since Nor brass nor stone nor parchment bears not one, Let villainy itself forswear't. I must Forsake the court: to do't, or no, is certain To me a break-neck. Happy star reign now! Here comes Bohemia. *(W.T., I.ii.351-364)*

This is an accurate analysis of the actions of Leontes. He is one "in rebellion with himself," one in the grip of sin. For sin is essentially a turning away from the Divine Law, an open re-

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8W.T. I.ii.209-305.
bellion. Leontes has disturbed the moral order on several counts, but his greatest offence seems to be his breach of pietas. For his suspicions and denunciations of Hermione violate the very nature of the marriage contract insofar as they would hinder her right to enjoy the good name, the favor, and the respect due to every wife and mother of a man's children. Moreover, it is a serious violation because Leontes has virtually accused Hermione of adultery which, if it were true, would be on her part a grave violation of her part of the marriage contract. As for Polixenes, Leontes is again guilty of a serious sin against the virtue of pietas, for the relationship between friend and friend is a sacred one, falling under the greater virtue of justice.

Having been warned by Camillo of the danger to his life if he should remain in Sicily, Polixenes, taking the upright Camillo with him, flees to Bohemia. When Leontes learns of the escape of his former friend and of his chief adviser, he is convinced that his suspicions were well founded and turns the full fury of his anger upon Hermione, deprives her of the sight of their son, publicly

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11S.T., II-II, 101, 1c-4c.
calls her an adultress, and, despite her pregnancy, casts her into prison. After this Leontes heaps injustice upon injustice, refuses to listen to the pleadings of his court, and in general conducts himself like a tyrant. His sin thus grows in its malice and ugliness, building a wall between him and all that is good, true, and noble. His judgment becomes distorted and seems to be incapable of anything like an objective evaluation of events. There is, in other words, for Leontes—as for every sinner—no sense of order. So it is that when all about him argue the innocence of Hermione, his only answer is "Hold your peace" (W.T. II.ii.138). Presented with the infant daughter born to Hermione in prison, Leontes, certain that the child is not his but Polixenes', orders Antigonus to carry the infant to some distant land and to leave it there to the care of chance.

The second scene of the third act marks the climax of the play and the change in the character of Leontes. The scene opens at the trial of Hermione. The formal accusation brought against her

12 W.T. II.i.59; 65-78; 103.
13 Ibid., 126-198.
14 Whitaker, 198, and especially 275-276, the comments on Othello, Macbeth, and Lear.
15 W.T. II.iii.170-183.
is especially cruel and shows how the sin of Leontes has led him to break the bonds of common sense. The original charge he hurled against Hermione was merely one of adultery; but now to that crime he has added two others, treason and attempted murder. In his treatment of Hermione he remains resolute and hard. It is at this point that the messengers whom Leontes has dispatched to the oracle of Apollo return and, at the king's bidding, read the judgment of the god on the accusations of Leontes against his wife.

Officer. '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.' (W.T. III.ii.133-137).

Still, even in the face of truth itself, Leontes remains unconvinced and commits the sin of impiety by denying the integrity of the oracle. No sooner has this newest sin been committed than a servant enters and announces the death of Mamillius, a death brought about by the cruel suffering which he has seen his

16 Ibid., III.ii.12-22.
17 Ibid., 83-92.
18 Ibid., 141-42.
mother endure. At that moment the blindness of Leontes leaves him—a terrible moment of realization as he cries out, "Apollo's angry, and the Heavens themselves do strike at my injustice" (W.T. III.ii.147-48). Hermione, overcome at the swift and tragic course of events, faints, and immediately all the old tenderness which Leontes felt towards his wife returns. Then, in a speech of sincere humility, Leontes formally acknowledges his guilt and his desire to make amends.

Leontes. Apollo, pardon
My great profaneness 'gainst thine oracle!
I'll reconcile me to Polixenes,
New woo my queen, recall the good Camillo,
Whom I proclaim a man of truth, of mercy;
For, being transported by me jealousies
To bloody thoughts and to revenge, I chose
Camillo for minister to poison
My friend Polixenes: which had been done,
But that the good mind of Camillo tardied
My swift command, though I with death and with
Reward did threaten and encourage him,
Not doing it, and being done: he, most humane
And fill'd with honour, to my kingly guest
Unclap'd my practice, quit his fortunes here.
Which you knew great, and to the certain hazard
Of all incertainties himself commended,
No richer than his honour: how he glisters
Thorough my rust! and how his piety
Does my deeds make the blacker! (W.T. III.ii.154-173).

This speech is an extremely important one in analyzing the character of Leontes. Obviously, there is in this speech a full

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19Ibid., 144-46.
20Ibid., 150-54.
confession of personal guilt and a clearly worded declaration of the innocence and the nobility of those who have suffered most from his sin. The terms which Leontes uses have the peculiar stamp of the Christian ethico-religious view: mercy, transported by jealousy (which seems to be another way of saying "yielded to temptation"), and the admission, does my deeds make the blacker (which may be a concrete expression of the effect of sin upon the soul). However, it is interesting to note that Leontes in this speech actually does more than merely own up to his personal guilt and the outraged innocence of Hermione, Polixenes, and Camillo. Leontes also looks ahead, desiring to set everything in its original order: "I'll reconcile", "New-woo my Queen", "recall the good Camillo." However, Leontes must learn that he cannot begin exactly where he had left off; for sin, as has been pointed out earlier, disrupts the moral order; and, though the sin may be forgiven, its effects remain. Leontes' reaction is typical of a certain type of repentant sinner who, in the first flush of forgiveness, naively believes that everything can go on as it did before his sin. What is forgotten is that while repentance is good and necessary, at the same time it does demand concrete satisfaction for the evil deeds which have been committed. As a matter of fact, more often than not,

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the very sincerity of a conversion is tested by the willingness of a sinner to work out his particular restoration. Leontes' repentance is certainly sincere, but it is not yet practical. Only when he learns from Paulina of the supposed death of Hermione and is soundly rebuked by that blunt lady-in-waiting for his crimes, does Leontes take on a deeper sense of penance and sorrow.²² Earlier he had, as it were, remained somewhat aloof from his guilt, at least the psychological awareness of this guilt. The death of his wife gives him a deeper "I-have-sinned" realization which will effect a profound change in his character.²³

In the final speech of Leontes in this act all the elements which are thought characteristic of Christian resignation are in evidence.

Leontes. (To Paulina) Thou didst speak but well, When most the truth, which I receive much better Than to be pitied of thee, Prithee, bring me To the dead bodies of my queen and son: One grave shall be for both: upon them shall The causes of their death appear, unto Our shame perpetual. Once a day I'll visit The chapel where they lie, and tears shed there Shall be my recreation: so long as nature Will bear up with this exercise, so long I daily vow to use it. Come and lead me To these sorrows. (W.T. III.ii.233-244).

²²W.T. III.ii.176-217.

I daily vow to use it. Come and lead me
To these sorrows. (W.T. III.ii.233-244).

This final view of the young Leontes shows his resolve to do penance, to remind himself daily that he has indeed sinned, to change his life; but these expressions of sorrow and penance are always to be disciplined. Leontes is not supposed to be in despair or completely crushed; he is to continue working and living; he is to continue earning his salvation. There is guilt in the soul of Leontes, to be sure; but it is a Christian guilt, not a pagan guilt for

In an unredeemed world, guilt is but deadweight. All it can do is pull down. In the world of the Gospel, it is no longer deadweight; it becomes building material. In Greek tragedy, the guilty man is hunted by the Furies. Guilt is purely of the past, it follows from behind, it does not beckon from in front. It is part of a world of blinding necessity, not of free motivation.  

Leontes is a sinner—but a Christian sinner, not a pagan one. His subsequent actions are the actions of a man in "the world of the Gospel" not in the world that is "hunted by the Furies."

"Real contrition has a transforming influence on a man's character."  

This well sums up the character of Leontes as he appears in the second half of The Winter's Tale. A careful and


intelligent reading of the fifth act easily substantiates the application of this statement to the character of Leontes. In fact, Cleomenes' opening speech indicates the change which has been wrought in the character of Leontes during the intervening years:

Cleomenes. Sir, you have done enough, and have performed A saintlike sorrow. No fault could you make Which you have not redeemed, indeed paid down More penitence than done trespass. At the last, Do as the Heavens have done, forget your evil, With them forgive yourself. (W.T. V.i.1-6).

Although the profound over-all change in Leontes is evident, there are two distinctly Christian virtues which especially shine forth in his character; and since this study is more immediately concerned with the Christian qualities of the characters, it would be good to concentrate on these. These two virtues are charity and humility, virtues which are considered uniquely Christian virtues.26 These virtues are pre-eminently Leontes' in the second part of The Winter's Tale. For example, his response to Cleomenes' opening remarks is genuinely humble in tone and content.27 Following this, his willingness to abide by the decree of the god and not to remarry shows a spirit that can only be termed humble.28


27W.T. V.i.6-12.

28Ibid., 49-54 and 71.
The gentle charity of Leontes shows itself especially in his treatment of Perdita and Florizel. It is a charity which even in the face of adversity remains sympathetic and understanding.\(^{29}\)

In summary, it might be said of the character of Leontes that in the end Leontes attains full purification. Weakness in him becomes strength; pride, humility; remorse, repentance; sudden judgments, temperate acts; sorrow, sympathy with others; punishment, a means of progress; violence, a steadfast obedience to law. As to his native jealousy, it has been worked through. It cannot occur again.\(^{30}\)

Thus the character of Leontes—the character of a truly repentant sinner—is a Christian character. The movement from temptation to sin to repentance to the final growth of a man who has found himself parallels almost perfectly Christian concepts which it seems Shakespeare knew, appreciated, and employed.

Now that the Christian character of Leontes has been seen and examined in some detail, it will be comparatively easy to move with some dispatch through the other leading characters of The Winter's Tale. It would be advisable to recall, however, that much of the argument for the remaining characters will draw its support from matter already covered and verified in the treatment of Leontes.

\(^{29}\) Ibid., 210-215.

\(^{30}\) Stopford Brooks, Ten Plays of Shakespeare (London, 1948), 259.
The Character of Hermione. Perhaps the best description of Hermione is "innocent victim." Even a cursory knowledge of the play would justify such an epithet since she remains from the beginning of the play until the end completely without blame, and, at the same time, a kind of offering sacrificed to the jealousy of Leontes and dedicated to propitiate the god. The goodness of Hermione is especially appealing in the judgment scene, a scene in which her actions afford a splendid contrast to those of Leontes. In this scene Hermione appears at all times quiet, rational, and dignified, with the quietness, the rationality, and the dignity of the sincerely innocent. In summary, it might be said that Hermione is a character in whom "a sense of spiritual acceptance is deliberately stressed." As such a character, she plays a highly important role in the Christian character of The Winter's Tale.

The Character of Paulina. The character of Paulina brings out the Christian atmosphere of the play by serving as a concrete expression of conscience. This is not intended to make Paulina a symbol; she remains a character in her own right, acting and speaking in ways that are personal and individual. It is to indi-

32 Ibid., III.ii.23-55; 92-117.
cate, however, that her role in the peculiar Christian coloring of the play parallels, to a remarkable degree, the role of conscience in the ethical order. For in reading *The Winter's Tale* it becomes evident that throughout the action Paulina acts as a moral commentator on Leontes' actions: in the early part of the play, rebuking, threatening, and pleading with Leontes; in the latter part of the play, reminding, warning, and guiding the monarch; all actions which are generally associated with a man's own conscience. Still, it might be objected that this hardly justifies making Paulina a "concrete expression of conscience" for any honest friend would perform the same services without being so termed. Such an objection would be valid if it were not for the consistency with which Paulina displays these conscience-characteristics. There does not seem to be any break in her activity of ethical commentator and adviser. Moreover, the complete mastery which Paulina exhibits over the lives of both Leontes and Hermione—hiding the Queen for sixteen years and making certain that king and

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33Higgins, 125. Conscience in the broad sense is meant here in contrast to conscience in the strict sense. Conscience in this broad sense means "all the intellectual acts which discern the goodness or badness of a concrete human act either past, present, or future."

34W.T. II.iii.27-129; see also III.ii.176-233.

queen are reunited only when all the conditions which have been dictated by the god are fulfilled—seems to substantiate interpreting Paulina's character as that of someone who is closely allied to the divine will in working out the complete repentance and restoration of the unhappy ruler of Sicily.

The Character of Perdita. In the second half of The Winter's Tale the character of Perdita is of prime importance in carrying out the ethico-religious theme of the play by presenting an example of true Christian living, an almost ideal characterization of one who has not fallen into sin and yet of one who is fully alive to the grandeur of life. To understand Perdita in this light, to see in her something more than a merely pretty personality whose actions are, more or less, inconsequential to the Christian ethico-religious theme of The Winter's Tale, it is very important to grasp as Shakespeare had, the true meaning of Christian morality.

Perhaps Gerald Vann, O.P. comes closer than many of the literary critics of The Winter's Tale in catching the spirit of Perdita when, in describing Christian morality, he writes

Christian morality is worship: not the worship of the divine mind by the human reason, but the worship by the whole man of the whole God. You worship with the whole man in so far as instincts, passions, emotions, mind, will are integrated and fulfilled in the unity of

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36 Ibid., V.iii.
the personality by being "harnessed to the service of Light." And again how is this brought about? By child-like obedience to the power and the sharing in the life of God; by laboriously acquiring the maturity and the mastery of manhood.37

Here Father Vann indicates that Christian morality is not a life-denying principle but a necessary discipline which channels independent yearnings and inclinations into organized actions that reflect the whole personality working as a moral unit. Thus the ideal Christian personality is truly a humanistic personality; it is the richer, fuller life of the whole personality.38 The ability to integrate the various powers of man into a well-organized, well-disciplined entity which is governed by moral and religious ideals is the mark of the true Christian; and Shakespeare has given literature such a portrait in the daughter of Leontes and Hermione. A closer examination will illustrate how this is so.

First of all, from what has been pointed out as the heart of true Christian living--i.e. the ability to govern and guide the natural without dimming or deadening what is good in it--it is easy to see that sin, the satisfying of one instinct, of one passion, of one idea, of one will-action, to the detriment of the whole personality, is essentially the foe to that full, organized


living which was outlined above. Now in the first half of *The Winter's Tale* this effect of sin was clearly presented in the character of Leontes. A full appreciation of what Perdita is and of what she brings to the Christian ethico-religious theme of the play comes only when the contrast between deadening sin and vitalizing virtue is seen. Such a perception is basic to what follows.

In Perdita dwells that seemingly contradictory trait of Christianity, the side-by-side existence of liberty and restraint. For example, Perdita is not afraid to exchange true love for true love, and yet she remains realistic to the dangers of that love; 39 throughout the play she displays a beautiful chastity, and yet she is not ignorant of the physical element in sexual love; 40 she is charmingly fearless in the face of Polixenes' threats and yet she is sincerely humble in accepting a casual compliment. 41 There is in Perdita an awareness of life in all its manifestations which might best be described as a *lively innocence*. 42

That is—if there should be some doubt as to the significance of that phrase—an innocence that is not ignorance, an innocence that is not a turning away from life but an open acceptance of all that is really good and beautiful in the process of living. Well can Florizel exclaim of Perdita, "I bless the time/When my good falcon made her flight across/Thy father's ground" (W.T. IV.iv.14-16).

Here, then, is not a loveless or colorless display of moral niceties but the vibrant testimony of true Christian morality which seems to inspire virtue and goodness, or, at least, admiration, in those with whom it comes into contact. Witness Florizel's beautiful testimony to her power to inspire virtue, "...my desires/Run not before my honour, nor my lusts/Burn hotter than my faith" (W.T. IV.iv.30-32); or again, the shepherd's to her natural ability and grace, "...If young Doricles/Do light upon her, she shall bring him that/Which he not dreams of" (W.T. IV.iv.177-80); while even Polixenes, though alarmed at the prospect of his son marrying a supposedly "lowborn lass," readily admits:

Polixenes. This is the prettiest low-born lass that ever
Ran on the green-sord; nothing she does or seems
But smacks of something greater than herself;
Too noble for this place. (W.T. IV.iv.156-159)

Although one may be reluctant to admit the entire analysis of Mr. Bethell when he treats of Perdita's character in The Winter's Tale: A Study, he should be quick to add that there are several points in his analysis which are worthy of note. For the purposes of this present study two such points help substantiate, somewhat,
the interpretation of the character of Perdita which has been offered here. The first is to recognize in the second part of *The Winter's Tale* a movement of "regeneration" in which Perdita is highly instrumental; and the second is to note the parallel with, and the contrast between, the older love of Leontes and Hermione and the younger love of Florizel and Perdita.

There is no denying that when one reads the play carefully, the sweetness and the freshness of Perdita cannot be taken for granted, or taken as something merely light and diverting, accidental to the main action of the plot. She is, even as far as the bare plot is concerned, the key to the final solution of Leontes' basic difficulty, restoration with those whom he had injured. Over and above her function in the plot structure of the play, is her more important contribution to the spirit of the play. And it is here that Mr. Bethell's remarks are especially helpful. For in the framework of the Christian thought-structure of *The Winter's Tale* (Sin-Repentance-Forgiveness-Restoration), Perdita's significance as the concretion of regeneration cannot be exaggerated.

Unfortunately, this might seem to be echoing the viewpoint of Mr. Tillyard whose excessive "symbolism" in interpreting *The Winter's Tale* has been attacked by Mr. Pettet in his *Shakespeare*.

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43 Bethell, 89.

44 Ibid., 95-100.
and the Romance Tradition. Actually, however, as in the treatment of Paulina, this is not really an attempt to make a symbol out of Perdita. It is a perfectly legitimate attempt to make sense out of her within the Christian framework of the play. Within that framework Perdita is, in matter of fact, the one person who does bring about Leontes' complete restoration; and this restoration is a restoration with both moral and religious significance.

The second of Mr. Bethell's points which will prove helpful in this analysis of Perdita is the parallel with and the contrast to the old love of Leontes and Hermione and the young love of Florizel and Perdita. Briefly put, it is this: As the cause of disorder was lack of faith on the part of Leontes towards Hermione, so, in the mending of that disorder, a love built on faith (that of Perdita's and Florizel's) is instrumental in restoring that order. Reflected in the mutual trust of Perdita and Florizel are the other virtues which have been indicated: honesty, chastity, courage, and modesty.

In summary then, of the character of Perdita, it would be

legitimate to conclude that she is a well-integrated Christian personality whose lively innocence is instrumental in the restoration of Leontes to that peace and happiness which were formerly his. As such, Perdita can be called a concrete picture of the power of grace.

The Character of Florizel. In the latter part of the treatment of the character of Perdita the character of Florizel was touched upon. It will not be necessary, therefore, to repeat that analysis here. It should suffice to indicate that Florizel, like Perdita, is a truly Christian figure. His assurance to Perdita that his love for her is completely honorable,46 his high regard for Perdita,47 his steadfastness to that love even in the face of opposition,48 and his faithfulness49—all bespeak a young lover whose attitudes and actions are a worthy complement to that portrait of lively innocence which Shakespeare painted and called Perdita. Leontes sacrificed everything to jealousy and ruined his own life and the lives of others. Florizel sacrifices everything to his pure love and his courage produces the circumstances which

48Ibid., 472-476.
49Ibid., 495-514.
restore all that the jealousy of Leontes had ruined. 50

Thus the characters of The Winter's Tale who carry out the Christian ethico-religious theme of the drama are themselves reflections of particular Christian ideals and ideas. Therefore, there is a consistency between the general dramatic action of the play and the characters; and this consistency is seen to be primarily in the realm of the Christian ethico-religious interpretation of the play. The next step to be taken will be in the direction of the play's imagery. Does this, too, carry out this Christian theme of Sin-Repentance-Forgiveness-Restoration?

50 Brooke, 277-278.
CHAPTER III

THE IMAGERY OF THE WINTER'S TALE

The Winter's Tale has often been called a play "of contrasts,"\(^1\)
of course, the particular thesis of this study is that the heart of the contrast in the play is in the ethico-religious conflict between sin and virtue which takes place in the characters of the young Leontes and Perdita. In the following pages how this ethico-religious conflict is carried out in the imagery of The Winter's Tale will be discussed. The discussion will be limited to considering the setting of the play and the images of the two characters of Leontes and Perdita. Limiting the inquiry to these two characters is, in no way, ignoring or neglecting the rest of the characters; for, actually, the ethico-religious theme of the play revolves mainly around Leontes and Perdita. Then, too, the dominant images in the play are those of these two characters, the other characters serving, for the most part, as echoes of their images or as occasions for their employing such images.

In talking about the imagery of The Winter's Tale, one could cause some confusion on exactly how he was using the term imagery. To avoid that difficulty, it seems advisable to define how the word

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\(^1\)Mark Van Doren, *Shakespeare* (New York, 1939), 313.
will be used here. In the wide sense, an image is the creation of a mental picture, though the appeal to sight is not necessarily involved in every image. There are simple and complex images, the simple being images which appeal to one of the five senses, the complex, to more than one of the five senses. Imagery, the technique of using images, more often than not, enters the area of analogy or comparison where the artist's gifts of spiritual intuition and sensuous perception are so combined that the unique thing called poetry is born. What is meant by the term imagery in this discussion is, therefore, the language of The Winter's Tale in which Shakespeare's thoughts and pictures are combined. It is the purpose of this chapter to demonstrate that the pictures which are presented carry out the theme idea of the play—the Christian ethico-religious idea of Sin—Repentance—Forgiveness—Restoration.

In examining the over-all setting of The Winter's Tale in the seasons of winter and spring, one notices that the play appears to be "dedicated to the task of stating with all the force that poetry is capable of the opposition between age and youth, cruelty and

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3Caroline F.B. Spurgeon, Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us (New York, 1952), 7.
goodness, jealousy and faith." This opposition is brought out in the seasons. "The abstract symbols it (the play) employs are winter with its blasts of January and its storm perpetual, spring with its virgin branches and its daffodils that come before the swallow dares."  

While agreeing with all that Mr. Van Doren offers, one might go one step further and ask, "How exactly do these symbols, winter and spring, fit into the ethico-religious pattern of The Winter's Tale?" The answer, actually, is not too difficult. Winter has always been considered a season of death; spring, a season of new life. Such symbols are perfect for bringing out the basic theme of the play: part one (from act one to act three) with its tragic action of sin and the effects of sin in the lives of all the characters is aptly represented by the symbol of winter; on the other hand, part two of the play (act four and act five) with its movement of final restoration through the young love of Perdita and Florizel is equally well-represented by the symbol of new life, spring. If The Winter's Tale is "a dream of love lost only to be restored, and of a love that is never lost, and of a love that is

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4Van Doren, 313
5Ibid.
born afresh,⁶ then that love is lost in winter, when Leontes suspects Hermione who could not stop loving him, and "born afresh" in the spring, when Perdita restores her parents, one to the other. And, might it not also be added that with that love dwelt grace, for when Leontes fell from love, he fell, too, from the life of grace; but he was to regain that love and with it grace when he and his queen were reunited? In other words, it is difficult to imagine that Shakespeare, poet as well as dramatist, did not mean to create an atmosphere which would, in turn, help convey an idea, when he set his play in the seasons of winter and of spring.⁷

Moreover, the general themes of sin and restoration correspond so well to the emotional response that is generally associated with the seasons of winter and spring that it does not seem to be straining to interpret the setting of The Winter's Tale in the way that has been done.

In considering the character of Leontes and his images, one expects that if the images of the play are to bring out the Christian ethico-religious theme of the play, then it follows that the images of Leontes in the first part of the play must reflect the mind of a man morally sick, while those of the second half of the

⁶Stauffer, Shakespeare's World, 295.

play must reflect a man cured of his spiritual illness and re-
awakened to the beauty of the life of grace. It will be seen that
Leontes' images do do this.

In the first part of the play, when Leontes is under the
pressure of sin, his images are indicative of a man at war with
himself. In the first stages of his temptation to suspect Hermione
and Polixenes of adultery he speaks in "quick, broken, urgent
language" in which Shakespeare "strikes out the picture of this
sudden distempered passion in Leontes."

The best example of this, a speech which was quoted above in the section on Leontes' character, is the soliloquy in act one, scene one, lines 108-119. Following quickly upon this, is Leontes' speech to Mamillius, in which the images are vulgar and coarse.

Leontes. Thou want'st a rough pash and the shoots
that I have,
To be full like me: yet they say we are
Almost as like as eggs; women say so,
That will say anything: but were they false
As o'er-dy'd blacks, as wind, as waters, false
As dice are to be wish'd by one that fixes
No bourn 'twixt his and mine, yet were it true
To say this boy were like me. Come, sir page,
Look on me with your welkin eye: sweet villain!
Most dear'st! my collor! Can thy dam? --may't be?--
Affection! thy intention stabs the centre:
Thou dost make possible things not so held,
Communicat'st with dreams;--how can this be?--
With what's unreal thou co-active art,

And fellow'st nothing: then, 'tis very credent
Thou mayst co-join with something; and thou dost,
And that beyond commission, and I find it,
And that to the infection of my brains
And hardening of my brows. (W.T. I.ii.129-146)

From this point on, Leontes speaks with an infected brain:

characterizing Hermione as "slippery" (W.T. I.ii.273), a "hobby-
horse" who "deserves a name / As rank as any flax wench that puts
to / Before her troth-plight" (W.T. I.ii.276-78), and claiming that
Polixenes "wears her like her medal, hanging / About his neck"
(W.T. I.ii.307-8). By self-admission Leontes lives in a world of
"goads, thorns, nettles, and tails of wasps" (W.T. I.ii.329).
Camillo, in commenting on his master's suspicion, continues the
image-pattern of sickness and disease in describing Leontes' dis-
order.

Camillo. There is a sickness
Which puts some of us in distemper; but
I cannot name the disease, and it is caught
Of you that yet are well. (W.T. I.ii.383-387).

In the second act of The Winter's Tale, the language of
Leontes continues in the same vein of darkness and disease.

Leontes. There may be in the cup
A spider steeped and one may drink, depart
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge
Is not infected. But if one present
The abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,
With violent hefts. I have drunk and seen the spider.
(W.T. II.1.39-45)

When Paulina would entreat the king to reconsider what he is
doing to the innocent Hermione, Leontes' answer is that of "an in-
fected mind." He calls Paulina, "a mankind witch" (W.T. II.ii.67), "a most intelligencing bawd" (W.T. II.ii.68), "Dame Partlet" (W.T. II.ii.75), "a crone" (W.T. II.ii.76), "a callat" (W.T. II.ii.90), "gross hag" (W.T. II.ii.108)—in other words, in the space of some eighty-eight lines Leontes has addressed Paulina in terms that are anything but the language of a man who is complete master of himself.

The trial scene in act III, scene ii which marks the change in the character of Leontes presents, too, a similar change in his language. From this point on, the Leontes who speaks, speaks in the language of a man who is both gentle and kind; but within the terms of that gentleness and kindness dwells a great and abiding sorrow which knows no comfort. This tone of sadness cannot but break through. It is this gentleness and kindness and sense of quiet sorrow which characterize Leontes' speeches in the second half of The Winter's Tale. Obviously, such language is in complete accord with the idea of a repentant sinner. There are but two scenes in the fifth act which give this picture of Leontes. Nevertheless, they are enough to show that the language is radically different from the language of Leontes in the early part of the play; and this difference is precisely in that tone of gentleness and kindness colored by a sense of sorrow. A few examples of

9Traversi, 117.
this quality, or better, combination of qualities, should illustrate this point.

In the opening scene of the fifth act, when Cleomenes urges Leontes to forget his evil and to forgive himself as the Heavens have done, Leontes answers

Leontes. Whilst I remember Her and her virtues, I cannot forget My blemishes in them, and so still think of The wrong I did myself; which was so much, That heilless it hath made my kingdom, and Destroy'd the sweet' st companion that e'er man Bred his hopes out of. (W.T. V. i. 6-11).

It is to be noted that the emotion of sorrow is, perhaps, uppermost in this speech; it is, however, a sorrow that is marked by a restraint which is best typified as gentle. It is a speech which, in tone and content, is typical of the Leontes of the second half of The Winter's Tale.

During the scene between Leontes and Florizel when the latter seeks shelter in the court of Sicily, the tenor of Leontes' conversation is again marked by those qualities mentioned above: gentleness, kindness, and a touch of sorrow. Nor does this quality alter when Leontes discovers that Florizel and Perdita have fled to Sicily with anything but the blessing of Polixenes and that that king, accompanied by Camillo, has come to Sicily in hot pursuit of the two young lovers. His response to this situa-

10 W.T. V. i. 124-78.
tion is completely sympathetic, a sympathy, it may be suggested, which has been won by personal suffering and the recognition of his own weakness. As a matter of fact, at the end of the first scene Leontes is quick to promise his own aid to the lovers.11

In the final movement of the play, Leontes speaks with the sweet melancholy of a man who has known an ideal love and has, nevertheless, seemingly destroyed that love.

Leontes. As now she might have done, So much to my good comfort, as it is Now piercing to my soul. O! thus she stood, Even with such life of majesty,--warm life, As now it coldly stands,--when first I woo'd her. I am asham'd: does not the stone rebuke me For being more stone than it? O, royal piece! There's magic in thy majesty, which has My evils conjur'd to remembrance, and From thy admiring daughter took the spirits, Standing like stone with thee. (W.T. V.iii.32-42).

Finally, in his last speech, Leontes' language really parallels not only his growth in character but the beautiful atmosphere of the second half of The Winter's Tale, an atmosphere of complete reconciliation, but, for all that, a reconciliation that seems to carry with it a note of sadness that there should ever have existed a breach.

Leontes. O! peace, Paulina. Thou shouldst a husband take by my consent, As I by thine a wife: this is a match, And made between's by vows. Thou hast found mine; But how, is to be question'd; for I saw her,

11W.T. V.i.227-233.
As I thought dead, and have in vain said many
A prayer upon her grave. I'll not seek far,—
For him, I partly know his mind,—to find thee
An honourable husband. Come, Camillo,
And take her by the hand; whose worth and honesty
Is richly noted, and here justified
By us, a pair of kings. Let's from this place.
What! look upon thy brother: both your pardons,
That e'er I put between your holy looks
My ill suspicion. This your son-in-law,
And son unto the king,—whom heavens directing,
Is troth-plaint to your daughter. Good Paulina,
Lead us from hence, where we may leisurely
Each one demand and answer to his part
Perform'd in this wide gap of time since first
We were dissever'd: hastily lead away. (W.T. V.iii.135-155).

In discussing the characters of The Winter's Tale, it was
shown that Perdita reflects the Christian spirit of lively inno-
cence, an innocence that is instrumental in reuniting Leontes and
Hermione and in effecting the regeneration and restoration of
Leontes. It is to be expected, then, that Perdita's language will
reflect this spirit. Since much of the matter has already been
covered in treating directly of the character of Perdita, it does
not seem necessary to do more than to indicate exactly where in
the play Perdita's lively innocence is reflected.

If the two words which are offered as being descriptive of
Perdita are taken separately and examined one at a time, it will
be easily seen that Perdita's language carries out her peculiar
role in the Christian ethico-religious theme. First of all,
lively indicates an awareness of life in all its manifestations.
Now how do Perdita's images bring out this awareness of life?
Well, right from the first scene in which she appears, Perdita shows an alert recognition of the every-day practical life that is going on about her. She is fully aware of who Florizel is, of the character of the peasants' feasts which she has witnessed, of the names and the distinctive features of the country flowers, of the country dances. Perhaps even more important is the indication which Perdita's images give of her awareness of psychological connotations, especially in the fourth act, the flower speech, where she assigns to Polixenes "flowers of middle summer" which are appropriate to men "of middle age" (W.T. IV.iv.107-08). To Camillo's passing quip, "I should leave grazing were I of your flock, / And live only by gazing" her reply is charmingly apropos, "You'd be so lean that blasts of January / Would blow you through and through" (W.T. IV.iv.109-11).

Although it may be true that no one of these references, if taken singly, is particularly persuasive, still, their cumulative effect cannot be ignored. For, taken as a unit, they convey

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ IV.\ iv.5-10.\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \ 10-14.\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \ 73-77; \ 79-85; \ 103-108.\]
\[\text{Ibid.}, \ 132-134.\]
within a brief space of time the impression of a young woman who is vitally alive to what is going on around her. Then, too, this awareness is not a mere passive acceptance or appreciation of that life. The impression of Perdita's images and language is that they belong to one who is deeply immersed in the flow of life about her.

The second word which was used to describe the character of Perdita and to indicate the nature of her contribution to the general theme of The Winter's Tale was innocence. In connection with this particular term it should suffice to indicate that in the examples which were cited to illustrate the response to life which is Perdita's there is never any hint of anything like moral sophistication. Perdita's choice of words and pictures are all taken from those aspects of life which are generally thought to be indicative of purity and innocence: country flowers, the seasons of the year, rural feasts. In other words, in Perdita's speeches, there is an atmosphere of fresh country air in the spring, a preference for "great-creating Nature" (W.T, IV.iv.88) which affords the reader a powerful and unmistakable impression of untarnished life. And that, it would seem, is precisely the impression which Shakespeare intended to convey with the poetry which he assigned to Perdita. Indeed, the reader is forced to agree with Florizel in that beautiful tribute to Perdita:
The conclusion from this study of the imagery of The Winter's Tale is this: the significance of the winter-spring setting of the play is to bring out the ethico-religious contrasts in the plot, namely that of sin and the final restoration to grace, winter as a cessation of life, spring as a resurgence of life; the images of Leontes, diseased by sin, are precisely in keeping with the idea of sin being a kind of sickness and mental disorder; on the other hand, the images of Leontes in the second part of the play are marked by gentleness, kindness, and a quiet sorrow for the past—all of which are characteristic of the truly repentant sinner; finally, the images of Perdita are fully in keeping with the character analysis which was offered earlier in the thesis, that of lively innocence. Thus, the language of The Winter's Tale also contributes to this Christian ethico-religious theme of Sin-Repentance-Forgiveness-Restoration.

The next consideration will center on the structure of the play, showing that it, too, like the general theme of the play,
the chief characters of the play, and the language of the play, plays a major role in this ethico-religious interpretation of The Winter's Tale.
CHAPTER IV

THE STRUCTURE OF THE WINTER’S TALE

The casual reader’s general impression of The Winter’s Tale might be that the play is neither fish nor fowl. The play might seem to be full of contradictions, not really one play, but two, divided as to exactly what kind of effect it is intended to produce in the reader or spectator. One half of the play seems to be entirely serious, the other, gay and carefree; many of the situations—for example, Antigonus being slain by a bear\(^1\), Hermione, in the guise of a statue\(^2\), and, for that matter, the incident which starts the whole dramatic action, Leontes’ sudden jealousy\(^3\)—appear to be rather far-fetched and dramatically distressing; the total impression which the casual reader might have is that The Winter’s Tale is a rather silly piece of writing, beautiful and charming in spots, but still, rather silly. This section of the thesis takes up where the casual reader is apt to leave off.

First of all, it might be said that the casual reader’s con-

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\(^1\)W.T. III.iii.86-99.

\(^2\)Ibid., V.ii.

\(^3\)Ibid., I.ii.
fusion in trying to understand and to appreciate the play has been paralleled by many critics. As a matter of fact, one has called The Winter's Tale, "charming but tricky and silly." Other critics have not been quite so blunt, but their efforts at trying to classify The Winter's Tale have done anything but clear up the meaning of this play. One is able to find arguments for calling it "a romantic play," and "a weak sort of tragedy," a "tragicomedy," a "tragedy," and a "romance." Nor is all this just a problem of terminology, for the critics do not seem to be certain of what Shakespeare was trying to do in the play: Was he trying to be serious? Is the play really a mystical tour de force? Maybe it is, after all, only a comedy. Therefore, one must not be too hard on the casual reader; he is in good company.

This thesis attempts to answer these difficulties, and highly

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5Lewis Campbell, Tragic Drama of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Shakespeare (London, 1904), 267.

6Ibid., 267-268.


9Clemen, Shakespeare's Imagery, 195.
important in formulating that answer, is this present section. It is the argument of this part of the thesis that the contradictions in the construction of The Winter's Tale are only seeming contradictions, that the play is a whole but its parts are two, that the unity of the play is achieved through the carrying out of the ethico-religious theme in the person of Leontes, that this unity and division of The Winter's Tale effects the plot structure of the play so that what is offered is something highly unique in Shakespearean drama.

The division of The Winter's Tale is this: acts one to three make up the first part of the play, while acts four and five constitute the second part of it. Both parts of the play are necessary for the Christian cycle which the play presents: the first three acts cover the matter of temptation, sin and initial forgiveness, while the last two acts treat the movement of final forgiveness and restoration. Consequently, each section of the play needs the other, i.e. the first part makes sense only in relation to the rest of the play; the second part must be understood to be the fulfillment of what has gone on in the first three acts. Again, both parts achieve a unified effect because of the over-all Christian ethico-religious theme. Now it remains to examine their relationship in greater detail.

The first part of The Winter's Tale (acts one to three) follows the pattern of tragedy on a purely human level. Even though
the Christian theme of the play is evident right from the begin-
ing,\(^\text{10}\) it has not, as yet, affected the structure of the play.
In other words, in the first three acts of The Winter's Tale what
is offered seems to be a tragedy; for the dramatic action of the
first part of the play certainly fulfills the idea which Aristotle
had of tragedy when he called it:

> the imitation of an action that is serious,
> complete in itself, and of certain magnitude;
> in language made beautiful by different means
> in different parts of the work; in dramatic,
> not narrative form; through scenes of pity
> and fear bringing about a purgation of such
> emotions.\(^\text{11}\)

The drama of a king who accuses his wife and boyhood friend of
adultery and thereby causes the death of his son, the (supposed)
death of his wife, the flight of that former friend, and the exile
of a once-trusted courtier and then, too late, discovers that all
his suspicions were merely the unfounded fancies of a diseased
mind is surely a serious and important happening which has a tragic
completeness and note of finality. Suppose, too, that this tale
is told in dramatic not narrative form, in beautiful language,
and told so that the spectator feels pity for the leading charac-
ter's self-inflicted defeat and fear for himself. As far as the
first part of The Winter's Tale does do this, \(\square\) it may safely be

\(^{10}\text{See Chapter I of the thesis, 6-7.}\)

\(^{11}\text{Aristotle, Poetics, VI, 2-3, 23.}\)
Furthermore, it can be said that the first part of The Winter's Tale bears a striking resemblance to the great tragedies of Shakespeare, especially to Othello. This likeness between the first part of The Winter's Tale and the great tragedies of Shakespeare is an important one. It is difficult to believe that it is only an accidental one; in fact, it seems much more reasonable to say that Shakespeare was deliberately trying to draw that parallel. In any case, this much may certainly be legitimately argued: there is at least as much reason for acknowledging the parallel between the great tragedies and the first part of The Winter's Tale as there is for ignoring it. For even though there has been a certain amount of importance placed on the idea that the Shakespearean hero must die in a tragedy, the points of similarity between the first part of The Winter's Tale and even Mr. Bradley's analysis of Shakespearean tragedy are not a few. Indeed, even if someone were to insist on the death of Shakespearean tragic hero as being essential to true tragic action, a good case

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12 Brooke, Ten Plays of Shakespeare, 265, see also Knight, G. Wilson, The Crown of Life, 76.

13 Stauffer, Shakespeare's World, 292.


15 Ibid., 16. Especially is this true on the point of conflict being the heart of the tragic action, the conflict often rising in the hero first.
could be made for the first part of *The Winter's Tale*—if one
would also be willing to accept the Christian ethico-religious
theme as effecting the play's structure right from the beginning.
If he would be willing to do so, then, it certainly could be
argued that Leontes does die in the first part of the play, since
sin is a kind of death, a death more disastrous than any physical
death. This is not proposed as the interpretation of this paper;
it is offered as a kind of counter-argument against those extreme
literalists who fail to see the genuine spirit of tragedy in plays
of high seriousness but without the note of extreme finality which
death to the protagonist does offer. In summary, then, this
paper accepts the analysis of Mr. G. Wilson Knight when he says
of the first part of *The Winter's Tale*:

No full-length Shakespearean tragedy reaches the
intensity of these three acts: they move with
a whirling, sickening speed. Leontes is more
complex than Othello as a study of jealousy
and more realistically convincing than Macbeth as
a study of evil possession.  

Again, what is proposed here is that the first part of *The
Winter's Tale*, from acts one to three, carries a dramatic action
which might be called tragic and which parallels the action of
the great Shakespearean tragedies in depicting a great person who
falls into an "exceptional calamity." 


17Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 16.
The second part of The Winter's Tale—from act four to act five—adds a new element to the tragic action of the first part of the play. This new element is the restoration theme of the Christian ethico-religious motif of the play. This restoration theme provides a unique dramatic action of changing what would have been an ordinary tragic play into something which is not contrary to but beyond tragedy. In other words, it is the contention of this study that upon examining the theme idea of The Winter's Tale, and on seeing how this theme idea is carried out in the play's over-all make-up (i.e. the play's structure, which carries the various sections of the Christian ethico-religious cycle) one cannot but see that Shakespeare, as it were, broke through the ordinary tragic play structure in order to represent in dramatic form the entire Christian ethico-religious cycle. Generally, a tragedy will end with the hero, now aware of his error and deepened by his new self-knowledge, dying before he has a real opportunity to live his life in this new awareness of himself. However, in The Winter's Tale, Leontes is not merely to be a repentant sinner who comes to self-knowledge and then dies; he is to present the picture of a repentant sinner who not only comes to self-knowledge but who has an opportunity to live in this new-found wisdom; he is, in other words, to present the picture of the restored sinner.

18This, of course, was done in the first chapter, pp. 5-10 above.
who through his contrition and acts of penance regains what he has lost through sin.

Moreover, though The Winter's Tale ends happily, on a note of restoration, it does not, for all that, become a gay play. The sorrow of the first part of the play is never forgotten19 and what happiness the characters achieve is achieved as a result of penance and suffering.20

The conclusion of this analysis of the structure of The Winter's Tale is that the play is unique, possessing a dramatic action that is of high tragic significance and closely allied to traditional Shakespearean tragedy but adding to that tragic action the Christian elements of hope, pardon, and a chance to try again. Consequently, the play carries out the Christian ethico-religious theme by working on two levels, the natural and the supernatural, by representing sin and its effects in the soul, forgiveness, and restoration.

19W.T. V.iii.135-155.

20Ibid., i, 1-6; 131-138; 170-78; ii, 89-100.
CONCLUSION

The preceding pages have offered a new interpretation of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Unfortunately, any interpretation suffers somewhat from the unavoidable limitations and unintentional prejudices of the interpreter. While the good interpreter will attempt to keep these to a minimum, he cannot avoid all of them; for thought and the expression of thought are such extremely personal things. Since this is the case, the foregoing study probably has not escaped this common misfortune; however, it may be hoped that these weaknesses will be mitigated, to a degree, by a cheerful and ready admission of their existence. For example, this study has clearly espoused the Christian ethico-religious approach to the problem of interpreting *The Winter's Tale*. Still, right from the beginning of this thesis, an effort was made to show the legitimacy of this approach. Nonetheless, there dwells in this use of the Christian ethico-religious approach a deep sympathy for and keen appreciation of Christian ideals and attitudes toward life. Actually, this should be no more peculiar than the fact that Rousseau, Hume, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and I.A. Richards—all of whom have had something to say about tragedy—have tended to approach similar problems with their own peculiar
philosophical and literary ideals. The only thing the astute reader has a right to demand is that he be given some objective evidence and some indication of the author's reasoning in reaching his conclusions. If this is done, the reader, in evaluating what he is reading, can go about the business of intellectual criticism with a certain degree of sympathy for what the author is trying to say. This thesis has been written with such "author-reader relationships" in mind.

Knowing and appreciating this, the reader of these pages ought to reach this conclusion: The theme idea, the characters, the imagery, and the structure of The Winter's Tale parallel the Christian ethico-religious cycle of Sin-Repentance-Forgiveness-Restoration in depicting the sin and the eventual restoration of a repentant sinner. Moreover, these various parts of the play are so united that what they form might best be described as a "Christian tragedy." This term, Christian tragedy, is thought to be much more descriptive of the dramatic action and the dramatic power of The Winter's Tale than such terms as "romance," "comedy," "pastoral," or even "tragi-comedy." Terms like romance, comedy, pastoral are too misleading, seeming to indicate as they do a predominant note of gaiety in the play. The Winter's Tale, however, is not a gay play, at least not primarily. It possesses a definite tragic action which is the tragic action of sin. However, because the play also ends on a note of reconciliation and hope for the
future, it cannot be classified as merely a tragedy. The problem, then, is this: What are critics to call such a play which has a serious theme idea, portrayed in a serious way (as are tragedies) but which ends on a note of happiness and hope so that the tragic action, while not forgotten, is somewhat mitigated and sweetened? Moreover, from beginning to end, this play carries a definite Christian interpretation of life; that is, it shares in the peculiar trait of the Christian life: Cross and Crown. What will such a play be called? Christian tragedy catches, at one and the same time, the Christian character of the play and the human tragedy which is involved. It is a term which seems to be the most adequate to describe The Winter’s Tale which is like the play outlined above.

Secondarily, The Winter’s Tale, in combining genuine tragic action with definite Christian sentiments of hope, humility, and final pardon (with the implication of a future life) is a concrete argument against those who would claim that there exists an incompatibility between true tragic action and Christian ethics and religion.

Perhaps one final observation is in order. Tragedy—in its broadest significance—includes all the forms of literature in which the tears and sufferings of men are narrated or dramatized. In one sense, such tragic literature, at least for Western men, began with the Greeks who wrestled with the problems of human misery
and death. With the advent of Christianity and the "good news" of the Gospel, human suffering and death ceased to be problems—at least unanswerable problems. The literature of the Middle Ages, especially as this is manifested in its foremost English writer, Chaucer, reflects a new attitude towards suffering and death. It is an attitude which is both sympathetic and ironical. For while the medieval writer could and did view life's heartaches with a compassionate soul, he also lived with one eye focused on reality, the reality of heaven where all wrongs would be righted and God would "wipe away every tear from their eyes."2

Unfortunately, modern man has lost the Christian view of life. His concept of tragedy is, more often than not, bitter. Some, having rejected the hope of Christianity, have sunk into a world which

Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;

and consequently, their interpretation of life is that

... we are here as on a darkening plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.3

2St. John, The Apocalypse, IV,iv.
Today there is a need for a rebirth of tragedy as an imitation of the whole man—man who is capable of greatness as well as of smallness, man who is that strange mixture of big ambitions and puny strength, of sacrificing nobility and petty selfishness. Any tragic picture must represent that true picture, the whole picture of the whole man. It is impossible to go back to the tragedy of the Greeks, for now man knows better. The answer seems to lie in accepting the truth of Christianity and building upon this a new kind of tragedy—the Christian tragedy. In writers like T.S. Eliot, Graham Greene, Alan Paton, Leon Bloy, Charles Peguy, Georges Bernanos, Paul Claudel, Francois Mauriac, and Sigrid Undset, one finds the echoes of what William Shakespeare accomplished in The Winter's Tale—the Christian tragedy. Modern literature needs this "fourth dimension," the relation of human choice to the supra-human world, which was Shakespeare's. If this vision which was Shakespeare's and is so evident in The Winter's Tale can be caught by the modern writer, his literature will become richer, more beautiful, and more satisfying.

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C. UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL
APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by Mr. Howard J. Gray, S.J., has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

September 4, 1958
Date

Signature of Adviser