

The Winter's Tale: Or How The Perfect Tragedy Turned Into A Comedy

In *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles details the investigation of a king trying to cure a sickness within his city. The play gave us many gifts, from the idea of an “Oedipus complex” to one of the greatest plot twists in theatrical history. The greatest gift of all, however, was its perfect structure. Scholars like Freytag and Aristotle use it as a base when explaining the theories of tragedy and theatre. It gave us definable terms to understand how plays work, and why theatre makes us feel certain ways. Aristotle examines our addictive nature to tragedy in *Poetics*, creating guidelines on how playwrights can create catharsis for their audience. When the Renaissance occurred, many of these principles were brought back to theatre, creating richer stories for the public to enjoy. Then, Shakespeare stepped onto the scene and created some of the most well-known, artful tragedies to mankind. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth* all sit in the collective social consciousness of some of the greatest tragedies of all time.

Then, towards the end of his life, Shakespeare begins to break the rules set forth by Aristotle with the late Romances.

The late Romances are not definitely tragic or comedic. These five plays were written towards the end of his life, and they bend the rules of what defines comedy and tragedy. In *The Winter's Tale*, three major characters die within the first three acts, yet the play ends with engagement and reconciliation. This is Shakespeare messing with the traditional form of tragedy. Even though the overall story is a happy one, many characters die along the way. The disconnect between the first three and last two acts is so strong, they read as two separate plays. That is because the first three acts are a perfect tragedy. They fulfill all of the rules set forth by Aristotle

and Freytag so audiences reach a catharsis while watching them. There is a sense of completeness, and the rules set forth by Aristotle aid to that feeling. The first three acts are considered a tragedy because they fulfill the prerequisites set by Aristotle in *Poetics*.

In Shakespearean terms, a tragedy means that the play ends with a death. However, Aristotle calls for a more thorough definition. In *Poetics*, he says it is, “an imitation of an action that is admirable, complete and possesses magnitude;” (Aristotle, 1996: 10). So, in Aristotle’s view, the plot is what makes a tragedy. Without the stakes or the formulaic rise and fall of the characters, there is no audience catharsis. In 1863, Gustav Freytag created a model to formulate the tragedy, by placing plot points on a triangle. On the triangle, it is clear how the rising action slowly builds to the climax. It does not happen quickly, it is a slow process. After the climax, the catastrophe happens, where characters face the consequences of their own actions. This part of the triangle is a straight line, dropping immediately to the resolution of the story. It shows how quickly the consequences come for the tragic hero. For example, in *Oedipus Rex*, the catastrophe happens immediately after Oedipus discovers that his wife is his mother. Iocasta hangs herself and Oedipus plucks out his eyes. It is the consequence of everything he’s done to discover who is causing the plague in his town. *The Winter’s Tale* fits this pyramid perfectly, and has the rising action, peripeteia, climax, catastrophe and resolution needed to create a perfect tragedy (according to Freytag and Aristotle). The inciting incident of the play occurs when Leontes begins to suspect Hermione of cheating on him with his best friend. He says, “Is whispering nothing? Is leaning cheek to cheek? is meeting noses?” (1.1.284-285), forcing his advisor Camillo to listen to his rants. The rising action occurs when Camillo and Polixenes flees to

Bohemia (1.1.412), Hermione is thrown in jail (2.1.103), and when Hermione is put on trial (3.2.10). The peripeteia and climax occur when the oracle says Hermione is innocent (3.2.133), the catastrophe when Hermione, Manimallus, and Antigonus die (3.2.194 and 203, 3.3.58) and the resolution when Perdita is found in the forest (3.3.68). It is possible to look at Freytag's triangle and easily see where plot points from the first three acts of *The Winter's Tale* fit. It also "excites pity and fear" (Aristotle, 1996: 8) as *Poetics* requires. The audience watches Leontes fall from power, and they feel for him due to the structure of the plot. It's a dramatic story that keeps us engaged with its twists and turns.

Even though the plot is an important aspect of *The Winter's Tale*, another aspect of the tragedy is the tragic hero and the thought. According to Aristotle, the tragic hero must be, "good...have proprietary...true to life....consistent" (Aristotle, 1996: 24). This, in turn, creates a three dimensional character the audience can root for. Leontes is a good person who lets his emotions overcome him, leading him to distrust his wife and best friend. The audience feels sympathy as he descends into a jealous spiral, much like Othello. Unlike Othello, Leontes is his own worst enemy, which is the worst antagonist of all. The tragic hero must battle with their flaws throughout the play, imitating the struggles of real life. They "paint people as who they are" (Aristotle, 1996:25). It is easy to view the tragic hero as the character who is receiving the tragedy; in this case, it may be confusing whether Hermione or Leontes is the tragic hero of *The Winter's Tale*. Hermione, though a tragic figure, is not the hero of the story. She does not have a hamartia as Leontes has, and is a woman. It sounds sexist, but in *Poetics*, Aristotle emphasises the importance of "manly valour" (Aristotle 1996: 24), and saying that "the woman may be said

to be an inferior being”, pushing away any possibility of a woman becoming a tragic hero. This is why Medea, from the play of the same name, is not in the ranks with Oedipus and Ajax. By Aristotle’s definition, women cannot be tragic heroes. That makes Leontes the tragic hero of *The Winter’s Tale*. He is a figure of high ranking who falls from grace due to his fatal flaw, or hamartia. In the first act of the play, the audience sees that his is jealousy. It eats him alive throughout the show, causing him to ruin the lives of those around him, as well as his own. The jealousy first rears its head in Act 1, Scene 2, when he remarks, “Too hot, too hot! To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods” (1.2.108) after witnessing Hermione and Polixenes interact with each other. He even refuses to believe the oracle, saying “this is mere falsehood” (3.2.141). He is so consumed by his hamartia, that he cannot believe the divine truth sent to him. This makes the catastrophe so much much more devastating when it actually happens. The audience knows that Leontes is a good person, but it is too late for him to change his actions. He goes from respected king, to dejected widower, losing the two things that matter most to him. He falls completely apart, serving as a warning to the audience, to not let jealousy consume them. He’s a richly written character, another one of Shakespeare’s strengths as a writer.

When Aristotle discusses thought, also called reasoning in *Poetics*, he lists it as the third most important aspect of a tragedy. It tend to fall right after character, due to the importance it has between the interpersonal lives of the characters within the play. He says,

“Character is the kind of thing which discloses the nature of a choice;... Reasoning refers to the means by which people argue that something is or is not the case, or put forward some universal proposition” (Aristotle, 1996, 12-13).

The characters must engage in debate for the story to be a compelling one; these roles are fulfilled primarily by Leontes, Hermione, and Paulina. The debate of the first three acts of *The Winter's Tale* is if Hermione actually had an affair. The audience knows this not be true, but they watch as others debate with Leontes and reason with him. During her trial, Hermione constantly challenges Leontes, saying,

“You, my lord, best know (who least will seem to do so) my past life hath been as continent, as chaste, as true, as I am now unhappy...I appeal to your conscience, sir” (3.2.33-46).

She utilizes ethos against him, trying to appeal to her husband in a moment of love. She can't break down and show weakness, as this might cause Leontes to be even more sure that she had an affair with Polixenes. Even in this moment, the reasoning reveals that she still loves her husband, and wants him to stop this madness. It's a cry for help. The majority of the reasoning takes place, unsurprisingly, during the courtroom scene. Hermione is defending herself against Leontes, and they constantly engage in verbal battles:

Leon. I ne'er heard yet
That any of these bolder vices wanted
Less impudence to gainsay what they did
Than perform it first.

Her. That's true enough,
Though 'tis a saying sir, not due to me.

Leon. You will not own it
(3.2.52-58)

They argue as husband and wife, as well as judge and defendant. They continue this debate until Cleomenes and Dion return with the Oracle's response. Then, Paulina steps up when Hermione dies, to act as a voice of reason to Leontes. She tells him, "But, O, thou tyrant! Do not repent these things, for they are heavier than all thy woes can stir" (3.2.207-209). Her words are speaking not just for Hermione, but for Leontes' conscience as well. Up until now, he refuses any good words about his wife. He is so trapped in his spiral of jealousy, that it isn't until his wife dies that he sees his error. Paulina's reasoning is one that is otherworldly, one that could be coming from God. She brings up how Leontes' actions are unforgivable. He'll live with this guilt forever, and no one will look at him the same way. Her reasoning even comes after the Oracle's announcement, giving it more cosmic weight. Her reasoning makes her an intermediary between God, Hermione, and Leontes. And, since Hermione is now dead, Paulina is the only person who can forgive Leontes for his wrongdoings, as she was Hermione's closest friend. Her rejection of Leontes' plea (3.2.203) finalizes his fall from grace; he is beyond forgiveness at the end of Act 3.

The most exciting part about Leontes' downfall is to watch his speech fall apart. He goes from speaking smooth, strong sentences, "False as dice to be wish'd by one that fixes no bourn 'twixt his and mine" (1.2.132-135), to having choppy, discordant ones broken by punctuation: "Let us be clear'd of being tyrannous, since we openly proceed in justice, which shall have due course, even to the guilt or purgation" (3.2.4-7). This detail of speech is one of the reasons Shakespeare is an amazing poet. While describing the language of *The Winter's Tale*, Antony

Sher described him as, “a master violinist”. He was an author who found the musicality in words and the rhythms of language. With the use of verse and prose, Shakespeare gave each of his characters a unique voice. Combining their rich language with complex psyches, this fulfills two other needs Aristotle requires for a tragedy, diction and song. He uses the broad term, “language made pleasurable”, before specifying to, “that which possesses rhythm and melody” (Aristotle, 1996, 10). So, there does not need to be a musical number in order to qualify as a tragedy, but the language itself has to be musical in some way. This is where Shakespeare’s use of prose and verse come into play. His nobles speak in verse, in iambic pentameter. The use of stressing and unstressing certain syllables allows the words to flow out of the mouth. Looking at Hermione’s court speech in 3.2, the use of unrhymed iambic pentameter (also known as blank verse) gives the emotional speech a driving rhythm. She says, “Now, my liege, tell me what blessings I have here alive, that I should fear to die? Therefore, proceed” (3.2.105-108). She speaks directly at the man who has the power to send her to death, yet she is not afraid. She has more to lose, and this comparison of speech highlights how diction gives a deeper insight to the characters.

Shakespeare creates a strange orchestra, where the thought and song of each character not only gives the audience a look into their psyche, but into their personal lives as well. The meter and verse of each character gives away who they truly are, adding to the “pleasurable nature” of the poetry itself. The song of the play lies in its spoken word, and it mingles with thought to create deeper, richer characters to further the plot.

A crucial aspect of the tragedy is spectacle, and “the management of the spectacle must be a component part of tragedy” (Aristotle 1996: 10). Spectacle is loosely defined, and can be

anything from the costumes the actors wear, to the set. When the spectacle is used properly, it immerses us in the world of the show. Spectacle can also refer to exciting mechanisms that make the show engaging to watch (a la the barricade in *Les Miserables*). The spectacle from *The Winter's Tale* comes from its most famous line, "Exit pursued by a bear" (3.3. 58). To anyone who did not witness the original production, it creates many questions. In the 1623 folio, Shakespeare's directions are minimal, letting the poetry of the plays set the scene. When stage directions are used, they indicate exits, entrances, and deaths. There are no other stage directions as specific as "Exit, pursued by a Beare". I believe that in the original production of *The Winter's Tale*, a live bear crossed the stage. Along with plays, there were other events at the Globe such as bearbaiting (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2006). During a bearbait, dogs would be set loose on a bear chained to a stake in the middle of an arena. People would place bets and watch the animals battle until the bear killed the dogs, or the dogs bit the bear into submission. Even though it ended in the early 19th century, it was a piece of beloved entertainment. The bears even had names, from "Blind Bess" to "Sackerson". (History Channel, 2018) The latter, a reference to a bear in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, shows that there was an awareness between Shakespeare and the other events going on at The Globe. An exhausted bear onstage, fresh from a bearbait, would drive the audience crazy. It becomes a visual spectacle. On the website for the Encyclopedia Britannica, the subject of bearbaiting has the subheading of "spectacle". Even if modern performances of *The Winter's Tale* do not include a live bear, the effect of Antigonus' death is still a spectacle itself due to how people interpret, "Exit, pursued by bear" (Royal Opera House, 2018) For instance, in the 1999 Royal Shakespeare Company's production of the show,

the bear was an animalistic figure hidden in a canopy of the palace. The entire sheet engulfed the actor, while lights flashed around him. Regardless of how the text is interpreted today, the mere idea of a live bear on the Globe stage is spectacle enough, and fulfills Aristotle's need for "spectacle" in productions.

The Winter's Tale is a strange story, because the first three acts give a sense of closure to Leontes' story. He lets his jealousy get the better of him, and it ruins his life. It serves as a cautionary tale to all those who watch the show, to not let jealousy devour them as it did Leontes. The story is whole and doesn't need the next two acts in order to be a complete play. They are additions that don't do much but try to redeem a character who loses everything, and it isn't necessary. Freytag's Triangle and *Poetics* are so ingrained into the consciousness of storytellers, whether they like it or not. It's the way tragedies functioned for thousands of years, even when the form is toyed around with by different playwrights. It's comforting to know how a tragedy will turn out, someone will (most likely) die and the audience will learn a lesson from the fall of the tragic hero.

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