Kairos and Comedy in Shakespeare

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Seeking to identify the “mythical backbone of all literature,” Northrop Frye posits that it is “the cycle of nature, which rolls from birth to death and back again to rebirth.” The “first half of this cycle,” he notes, “the movement from birth to death, spring to winter, dawn to dark,” is the basis of the great alliance of nature and reason, the sense of nature as a rational order in which all movement is toward the increasingly predictable. . . . Comedy, however, is based on the second half of the great cycle, moving from death to rebirth, decadence to renewal, winter to spring, darkness to a new dawn (Frye, 119-121).

The late Shakespearean romances The Winter’s Tale and The Tempest explore the potential for a comic ending even after one has passed through the “dark night of the soul” that is tragedy. Both plays seem to convey different relationships to time in their very titles; yet I will argue that the plays work together to yield a more comprehensive vision of the proper human relationship to time. The Winter’s Tale, taking place over the course of sixteen years and focusing heavily on nature-driven seasonal rhythms, might seem at first to act in complete contrast to The Tempest, in which all the action of the play takes place in a chaotic—yet also kairotic—four hours. However, both plays work through to similarly comic endings, due in large part to their heroes, Leontes and
Prospero, who surrender their previous notions of time after a kairotic moment of change has come and gone. Shakespeare's many explorations of the natural, cyclical flows of human behavior over time, from dawn to dark and from darkness to dawn again, come to a climax in *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest.*

In Act 1, scene 1 of *The Winter's Tale,* a lord named Camillo creates a background to the play by establishing that Leontes, the King of Sicily, and Polixenes, the King of Bohemia, “were trained together in their childhoods; and there rooted betwixt them then such an affection” (*The Winter's Tale*, 1.1.23-24). Already emphasizing the significance of longevity in the relationships of the play, Camillo also recognizes that their affection for each other “cannot choose but branch now,/ [s]ince their more mature dignities and royal necessities/ made separation of their society, their encounters,/ though not personal, have been royally/ attorneyed with interchange of gifts, letters, loving/ embassies, that they have seemed to be together,/ though absent” (1.1.25-31). The closeness and depth of the relationship between the two kings is admired by the way the two have not let their relationship be defeated by time, space, or even movement into adulthood. Time up to this point has not yet destroyed the two, but before the Act’s end, the realization of the ever-moving nature of time will throw Leontes into hysteria. The audience first encounters Leontes and Polixenes in Sicily when Polixenes opens the heart of the play’s action by saying, “Nine changes of the wat’ry star hath been/ The shepherd's note since we have left our throne/ Without a burden: time as long again/ Would be filled up, my brother, with our thanks,/ And yet we should for perpetuity/ Go hence in debt” (1.2.1-6). Polixenes has stayed to visit Leontes in Sicily for nine months, yet Leontes desires for Polixenes to stay even longer because
nine months was not enough time in Leontes’ mind. Immediately, it is clear that Leontes possesses an immature and irrational understanding of time as something that should be unlimited and controllable, which is the complete opposite of the world’s natural rhythms.

The entire action of *The Winter’s Tale* unfolds from Leontes greedily trying to persuade Polixenes to stay a longer time in Sicily. It is almost as if Leontes, in the presence of his boyhood friend, has lost sight entirely of adult responsibility and even royal duty. For Leontes, time’s running out shakes him into an undesired realization of his adulthood, which provokes him to extreme vexation. When he cannot persuade Polixenes to stay longer and abandon his duties and family, he calls on his wife, Hermoine, whom he taunts by calling her “tongue-tied,” to persuade Polixenes to stay longer (*The Winter’s Tale*, 1.2.28). However, when she succeeds in her persuasion, “[a] lower depth of evil is reached by the jealous Leontes” (Frye, 110). In the conversation between Hermoine and Polixenes, Polixenes gives a speech that ties into one of the play’s leading motifs that is connected to his and Leontes’ relationship to time—the *puer eternis*:

We were, fair Queen,

Two lads that thought there was no more behind

But such a day tomorrow as today,

And to be boy eternal.

............... ...........

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i’ th’ sun,

And bleat the one at th’ other: what we changed
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed
That any did; had we pursued that life,
And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared
With stronger blood, we should have answered heaven
Boldly, “not guilty”; the imposition cleared
Hereditary ours (1.2.63-74).

Polixenes speaks in an enlightened way about how time seems to stand still in childhood, and the slow progression of time in childhood often gives the impression that youth and innocence will be eternal. It is not until after one has broken free from youthful purity that one realizes the ephemeral beauty of that phase of life. The “doctrine of ill-doing” Polixenes refers to is original sin, and by mentioning it in this context, he expresses to Hermoine, what is perhaps the obvious, that he and Leontes are no longer innocent due, at least in part, to the sexual temptations and experiences they have had since their boyhood.

It does not take much conversation about sex for Leontes, who still acts much like a boy, to become irrationally jealous in thinking that his wife and best friend are having an affair. In his juvenile worldview, Leontes is incapable of coping with the reality of a sinful world, and thus, he quickly and boyishly projects the imagination of such sinful behavior onto Hermoine and Polixenes. The reason for Leontes’ immaturity relates to his unnatural relationship to time. He never grew from his boyhood in understanding how naturally time proceeds and how adults have the capacity to sin:

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 for joy. This entertainment
May a free face put on, derive 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 practiced smiles
As in a looking glass; and then to sigh, as ’twere
The mort o’ th’ deer—oh, that is entertainment
My bosom likes not, nor my brows. Mamillius,
Art thou my boy? (1.2.108-118)

Leontes’ unreasonably strong reaction to such a brief conversation shows that Leontes has never considered himself as belonging to a world capable of hurting him, and once the idea plants itself in his mind, an unruly and unweeded garden proliferates, strangling every rational thought before it rises.

Leontes quickly takes his jealousy to a point of seemingly no return. He questions the validity of his son Mamillius while studying the boy’s face, and in the process, he retreats back in time and memory to the safe haven of his boyhood:

Looking at the lines
Of my boy’s face, methoughts I did recoil
Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched,
In my green velvet coat; my dagger muzzled,
Lest it should bite its master, and so prove,
As ornaments oft do, too dangerous.
How like, methought, I then was to this kernel,
This squash, this gentlemen. Mine honest friend,
Will you take eggs for money? (1.2.153-161)

Leontes so idealizes his boyhood that he can picture it vividly, despite the passage of time, in the details of his “green velvet coat.” The face of his son causes him to flashback readily to a time when his emotional maturity level matched his physical appearance. Polixenes reflects differently about his own son when Leontes asks him about his fondness for his son, who later is named Florizel:

If at home, sir,
He's all my exercise, my mirth, my matter;
Now my sworn friend and then mine enemy;
My parasite, my soldier, statesman, all.
He makes a July’s day short as December,
And with his varying childness cures in me
Thoughts that would thick my blood. (1.2.165-171)

Polixenes, similar to Leontes, sees his own son as an ever reminder of youth, and being a father “keeps him young,” so to speak. However, Polixenes does not live in the past to the extent that his son reminds him, in great detail, of his own youth, and he even notes his aging by saying, “He makes a July’s day short as December.” More so than Leontes, Polixenes has let time proceed naturally and respects his adulthood duties to return home to his kingdom and family in a way that Leontes cannot fully grasp.
Not unlike the way Leontes views responsibilities, Prospero in *The Tempest*, admits to his daughter, Miranda, that he was inattentive to his responsibilities as Duke of Milan, preferring to attend to “the liberal arts” and be “rapt in secret studies,” meaning magic (*The Tempest*, 1.2.73, 77). Prospero, also lost in thought like Leontes, finds an escape from his reality through his studies of magic, but in his preoccupation, his brother Antonio usurps his throne, resulting in Prospero’s long-term exile. Regardless of the nature of the escape, both Leontes and Prospero, as rulers of cities, have methods for retreating from the stresses of their royal responsibilities and hiding from time. In this negligence of their commitments as men of power, they both represent the desire to pursue the ideal of the *puer eternis*, though differently. The desire to escape from reality and hide from the power of time leads both men to their own downfalls and isolation. Leontes and Prospero undergo long periods of isolation, which act as purgatorial processes in their metamorphoses as tyrannous characters.

Leontes, unlike Prospero, brings about his isolation violently and ignorantly. By Act 3, scene 2 in *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes’ jealousy has already caused him to deem his unborn babe a bastard fated for abandonment, to imprison his wife only to be later tried for execution, to shun his best and longest friend, and finally to ignore the oracle at Delphi:

OFFICER. “Hermoine is chaste, Polixenes blameless, 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.”
LEONTES. There is no truth at all i' th' oracle.

The sessions shall proceed; this is mere falsehood (3.2.130-133, 136-137).

At this point, a servant informs Leontes that his beloved son and heir, Mamillus is dead. As quickly as Leontes picked up his jealous, tyrannous passion, he just as rapidly repents to Apollo for his “great profaneness ’gainst thine oracle” (3.2.151). Leontes realizes, with the help of Paulina, all “what death is doing,” meaning the tragedy created by his tyrannous passion (3.2.146). As Northrop Frye writes, “…the world of Leontes’ jealousy does not exist at all: only the consequences of believing it exist” (Frye, 115). Though Prospero may seem opposite to Leontes in that he is the victim to his brother’s tyrannous ambition, Prospero’s similar refusal to act maturely and to participate in the present ultimately costs him his kingdom and lands him in exile.

By his refusal to exist in the reality of the present, Leontes too brings about his own tragic downfall and cruelly destroys everything he has ever loved on the basis of a non-existent reality. Leontes’ refusal to act and think as a mature adult costs him much more than Prospero’s price—Leontes loses his family. Leontes readily admits, “I have too much believed mine own suspicion” (3.2.149).

The jealous Leontes is the idiots of the play, the focus of the anticomic mood, and the first part of the action is the anticomedy that his jealousy constructs… The horror of the world he creates is expressed mainly in the imagery of sacrifice: he wants to gain rest by burning Hermoine alive; his courtiers offer to be or provide sacrifices in her place, and eventually the sacrificial role settles on Mamillius (Frye, 114).
We might consider: why, of all the characters of the play to be sacrificed, Mamillius? Other than the fact that the oracle threatened Leontes’ losing his heir, why would Shakespeare choose to sacrifice Leontes’ only son in this way? Perhaps, for Leontes, the loss of the face that reminds him so much of his own boyhood is necessary, in the symbolic world of this play, to eradicate Leontes’ habit of dwelling on his boyhood and not living his life as a mature adult. With Mamillius also dies the idea of the *puer eternis* in the context of *The Winter’s Tale*. The death of the boy who looks so much like his father forcefully snaps Leontes out of his artificial reality and back into the real world, at least of the play.

Now a participant in his own reality, Leontes can begin to put the pieces of his destroyed life back together, though without his wife, son, and daughter. Paulina, who serves as a priestly figure, in many ways seizes the “kairotic” moment to begin Leontes’ extended moral metamorphosis. She makes clear that repentance for such grave sins is not something quickly forgiven, but rather penitence needs to be earned over time: “But, O thou tyrant,/ Do not repent these things, for they are heavier/ Than all thy woes can stir; therefore betake thee/ To nothing but despair” (*The Winter’s Tale*, 3.2.205-208). Leontes’ final speech before the audience is informed of the passage of sixteen years speaks to his relationship to time in a different way than he had acknowledged before this moment with the help of Paulina:

> 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. (3.2.232-241)

Leontes now recognizes repentance as an "exercise" that cannot be hurried but must be gradual and tedious. Unlike the way Leontes previously thought of time as a controllable element in life, the beginnings of his new relationship to time are seen in this vow of atonement. He sees his guilt as "shame perpetual," and he promises to atone for his sins daily "so long as nature will bear up with this exercise." The reference to nature here can be taken in a number of ways, but one interpretation is that Leontes now understands that nature, and by association time, is out of his control. The earthly patterns and forces of nature push the minute hand on the clock forward along with the human lives it controls. A man once quick to act on tyrannous impulse and disregard longevities of relationships in the heat of passionate anger, Leontes has quickly begun his transformation to one who respects the prolonged process of purgation and the inevitability of time running out.

While Leontes enacts his drawn-out purgation during the course of The Winter’s Tale, Prospero completes his lengthy isolation before The Tempest even opens. The Tempest begins with a chaotic storm, which ironically is kairotic. The storm, created by Prospero’s spirit Ariel, seeks to bring about a comic renewal that will occur over the four hours of the play. Prospero asserts at the beginning of The Tempest, “The hour’s now
come; The very minute bids thee ope thine ear. Obey, and be attentive. Canst thou remember a time before we came unto this cell?” (The Tempest, 1.2.36-39) The urgency of Prospero’s language permeates all five acts of the play. Prospero describes the kairotic moment of the storm and the following shipwreck:

Know thus far forth

By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune

(Now my dear lady) hath mine enemies

Brought to this shore; and by my prescience

I find my zenith doth depend upon

A most auspicious star, whose influence

If now I court not, but omit, my fortunes

Will ever after droop (1.2.177-184).

For Prospero, his personal “rebirth” entirely depends on seizing the right moment in time in which he can set things on track in order to be healed by “providence divine” (1.2.159). Similarly to Leontes, Prospero pays for his immaturity and negligence throughout his time in isolation from Milan, but he seizes the kairotic moment by creating a storm that brings the parties to his island of isolation.

Despite the violence of the storm, Ariel, Prospero’s spirit, reports, “Not a hair perished./ On their sustaining garments not a blemish,/ But fresher than before” (1.2.217-219). Prospero is not interested in vengeful violence after being in exile so long, but instead he says in the final act, “The rarer action is/ In virtue than in vengeance” (5.1.27-28). Once the right time comes, Prospero’s transformation happens quickly in the four hours in which the play takes place. In these climactic four hours,
Prospero transforms from a tyrannical ruler into one who makes himself vulnerable as "The wronged Duke of Milan" by laying down his magic, and thus his control (5.1.108). Prospero does not come to the conclusion to let go of his power alone, but Ariel, a figure who can be assimilated to Paulina, helps Prospero to let go of his any feelings of revenge.

PROSPERO. Say my spirit,
How fares the King and 's followers?

ARIEL. Your charm so strongly works 'em
That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.

PROSPERO. Dost thou think so, spirit?

ARIEL. Mine would sir, were I human.

PROSPERO. They being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further. Go, release them, Ariel.

My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,
And they shall be themselves. (5.1.6-7, 17-20, 28-32)

Prospero and Leontes, though very different characters and though at different places in their lives, both require an extensive period of time in isolation in order to become renewed. The difference between their isolation and a tragic hero's isolation is that once
the kairotic moment is acted upon, the two are eventually reintegrated into society and there is hope for complete renewal—both on a personal and societal level.

*The Winter's Tale* could have ended after Act 3 and would have made an excellent tragedy; however, the oracle of Apollo left a spark of hope for renewal if “that which is lost” can be found (3.2.133). Where *The Tempest* begins with a timely sea-tempest, *The Winter's Tale* cleanses with a storm to close Act 3 before shifting its tone in the following two acts. Time is as natural and inevitable as nature, itself, and what more fitting to embody the force of time than a natural disaster? Time, like a tempest in nature, is forceful and cyclic. It overpowers the human beings who try to control it and only makes those people more lost within its ambiguity and confusion. Time destroys, but it also creates anew “by providence divine,” which Prospero mentions as the all-powerful force in *The Tempest*. Placed immediately after the conclusion of the storm, Act 4, scene 1 of *The Winter's Tale* appropriately dedicates itself entirely to the voice of Time, personified:

I that please some, try all, both joy and terror
Of good and bad; that makes and unfolds error,
Now take upon me, in the name of Time,
To use my wings. Impute it not a crime
To me or my swift passage, that I slide
O'er sixteen years, and leave the growth untried
Of that wide gap, since it is in my pow'r
To o'erthrow law and in one self-born hour
To plant, and o'erwhelm custom. Let me pass;
The same I am, ere ancient'st order was

Or what is now received (The Winter’s Tale, 4.1.1-11).

In this first part of Time’s speech, the audience learns much more about time than its passage of sixteen years in the context of this play. Having the ability to “o’erthrow law” and “o’erwhelm custom,” Time is all-powerful in that it can willfully fast-forward to the “right time,” yet Time politely asks for the patience of the audience to do so.

The Winter’s Tale seeks to emphasize the gradual development of a person’s character over time, even though the audience does not watch this transformation, and simultaneously the suddenness of the kairotic moment to “accomplish one’s desires” (Frye, 153). Ironically, Time’s speech is brief in the grand scheme of The Winter’s Tale, taking up only one short scene of Act 4. This scene causes a shift not only in time but also in setting of the play from the city of Sicily to the natural landscape of Bohemia, as Time turns to “th’ freshest things now reigning”:

Your patience this allowing,

I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing

As you had slept between: Leontes leaving—

Th’ effects of his fond jealousies so grieving,

That he shuts up himself—imagine me,

Gentle spectators, that I now may be

In fair Bohemia; and remember well,

I mentioned a son o’ th’ King’s, which Florizel

I now name to you; and with speed so pace

To speak of Perdita, now grown in grace
Equal with wond'ring. What of her ensues

I list not prophecy; but let Time's news

Be known when 'tis brought forth. A shepherd's daughter,

And what to her adheres, which follows after,

Is th' argument of Time. Of this allow,

If ever you have spent time worse, ere now;

If never, yet that Time himself doth say,

He wishes earnestly you never may (The Tempest, 4.1.15-32).

Time “overthrows law” and “overwhelms custom” in its very speech as it shifts its voice inconsistently between the first and third person. Time reveals itself as not only a destroyer but also as a force of renewal, as seen in the way the storm acts in The Tempest.

Act 4, scene 1 of The Tempest also concerns time. In Prospero’s speech, he recognizes that human existence is transient like a play:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,

As I foretold you, were all spirits and

Are melted into air, into thin air;

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,

The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,

The solemn temples, the great globe itself,

Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,

And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,

Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. Sire, I am vexed.
Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled.
Be not disturbed with my infirmity.
If you be pleased, retire into my cell
And there repose. A turn or two I’ll walk

To still my beating mind (The Tempest, 4.1.148-163).

Although sadness pervades these lines of the play, Prospero is reaching the zenith of his metamorphosis during the course of this powerful speech about the impermanence of human lives in time. He predicts that all which humans establish in time will vanish as naturally as substances melt or dissolve. Human lives are fleeting, and most lives are “rounded with a sleep,” or state of unconsciousness and ambiguity. This passage foreshadows Prospero giving up his magic to return to reality very shortly. The life he has created on this island, therefore, will be lost, and he will inevitably move forward in time into a phase of necessary renewal. Despite the tragic potential in Prospero’s conclusions about time and human life, his attempt “to still [his] beating mind” through reflection and his self-awareness amidst these pressures creates hope that introspection can bring about a fuller knowledge of the human relationship to time.

Back in The Winter’s Tale, life in Bohemia has proceeded at full speed, and the kings’ once innocent babes, now in Act 4, straddle the age of broken innocence—adolescence. Act 4, scene 3 of The Winter’s Tale, opens with a sheep-shearing scene in Bohemia, and the pastoral setting during the alleged springtime promotes the sense of renewal in time. Sixteen years later, Leontes’ life has not visibly progressed much
since he still grieves and repents. Though he has progressed as a human being, time seems frozen in Sicily in stark contrast to Bohemia, almost as if the natural rhythms of the seasons have stopped turning since “[a] sad tale’s best for winter” (The Winter’s Tale, 2.1.25). Act 5, scene 1 shows the lingering of Leontes’ contrition:

CLEOMENES. Sir, you have done enough, and have performed
A saint-like 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.

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 heirless it hath made my kingdom, and
Destroyed the sweet’st companion that e’er man
Bred his hopes out of (5.1.1-12).

Leontes, in the beginning of The Winter’s Tale, lived in the past of his boyhood and now, sixteen years later, he lives in the past of his mistakes. However, Leontes’ tendency to dwell on the past differs from Act 1 since now the past is not an escape or denial of reality, but instead a reminder to repent for his sins. Just as Leontes’ thought his boyhood would be forever, he has accepted that his purgatorial “exercises” will be eternal and he will never marry again. Prospero, if ever he met Leontes in this time,
might agree with Cleomenes, not with Paulina, who encourages Leontes’ continued repentance. Believing in the potential healing powers of time, Prospero says in *The Tempest*, “Let us not burden our remembrance with / A heaviness that’s gone” (5.1.197-199).

In Act 5, scene 1 of *The Winter’s Tale*, Prince Florizel, pleading for Leontes to support his relationship with Perdita, Leontes’ long-lost daughter, calls for Leontes to remember a time when he was young and in love:

Beseech you, sir,

Remember since you owed no more to Time

Than I do now: with thought of such affections,

Step forth mine advocate; at your request

My father will grant precious things as trifles (5.1.218-222).

Florizel’s request to Leontes to remember his young love is haunting to the reader, who recalls Leontes wanting to burn his wife at the stake, just a few short acts ago. Yet, the “young, chaste lover” motif emerges at the end of both *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest* and replaces the *puer eternis* motif that dominated the beginning acts. Frye writes, “*The Winter’s Tale* is a diptych, in which the first part is the ‘winter’s tale’ proper, the story of the jealousy of Leontes, the slandering of Hermoine, and the perilous exposure of Perdita. The second part, the last two acts, is the story of Florizel’s love, Perdita’s recognition, and the revival of Hermoine” (Frye, 113). There is the chaste, young love of Florizel and Perdita and the eventual pairing of the righteous Paulina and Camillo, but order is entirely restored with the revival of Hermoine and subsequent renewal of love between Leontes and Hermoine in *The Winter’s Tale*. Paulina, a
character who represents her spirit through art, creates an intricately detailed statue of the deceased Hermoine, which she at yet another kairotic moment in the play, chooses to make come back to life:

PAULINA. Music, awake her: strike.
'Tis time; descend; be stone no more; approach;
Strike all that look upon with marvel; come;
I'll fill your grave up. Stir; nay, come away;
Bequeath to death your numbness, for from him
Dear life redeems you. You perceive she stirs.
Start not; her actions shall be holy as
You hear my spell is lawful. Do not shun her
Until you see her die again, for then
You kill her double.

LEONTES. Oh, she's warm!
If this be magic, let it be an art
Lawful as eating.

POLIXENES. She embraces him (5.3.100-109, 112-115).
The reunion of Leontes, Hermoine, and Perdita, certainly adds a dramatic element to the ending of the play. Leontes’ repentance and metamorphosis allowed for his dead wife to be brought back from the dead. Even more strangely, her life was preserved—frozen in time—over the sixteen years of Leontes’ growth.

“It is impossible that Hermoine can really have come to life,” Frye declares, calling this scene “a dramatic exhibition of death and revival” (112-113). Time, as a
creator or force of renewal—rather than as a destroyer—pervades this movingly mysterious and unrealistic scene. “The world we are looking at in the conclusion of The Winter's Tale is not an object of belief so much as an imaginative model of desire” (Frye, 117). Why does Shakespeare choose to end the play with such an improbable, fantastical reunion of lovers and family after an extended time of repentance and isolation? Northrop Frye posits a well-constructed hypothesis:

Comedy, like all forms of art that are presented in time, is primarily an impetus toward completing a certain kind of movement. We have been trying to characterize the nature of the comic drive, and have called it a drive toward identity. This is essentially a social identity, which emerges when the ascendant society of the earlier part of the play, with its irrational laws, lusts, and tyrannical whims, is dissolved and a new society crystallizes around the marriage of the central characters (Frye, 118).

The forces of nature and time push the actions of the play forward, overwhelmingly so, to bring about the happy ending that Shakespeare sees as the conclusion of the human journey despite tragic events along the way. The seeming impossibility of the play's conclusions only serve to emphasize again that time has the ability to “overthrow law,” “overwhelm custom,” and overcome death with life. Frye's argument is also quite convincing because the unlikely conclusion is also true of The Tempest in Prospero's surprising return to his title as the Duke of Milan. “In The Winter's Tale the central action is the mysterious return of Hermoine to Leontes, to which again the story of the young lovers is subordinated, and of course everything is subordinated to the return of Prospero in The Tempest” (Frye, 88).
In the epilogue unique to *The Tempest*, Prospero, now that "[his] charms are all o'erthrown," addresses the audience in a final speech that ends with a final request: 
"Now I want Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;/ And my ending is despair/ Unless I be relieved by prayer,/ Which pierces so that it assaults/ Mercy itself and frees all faults./ As you from crimes would pardoned be,/ Let your indulgence set me free" (5.1.13-20). 
The final speech exists in a perfect rhyming pattern and even tempo, which suggests that time has renewed the society of the play with the renunciation of Prospero's magic and the chaste marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand. Now that renewal is on the communal level, Prospero requests the audience to forgive him for his actions with their applause. *The Tempest* opens with the loud roar of a storm and closes with the loud roar of the audience's applause, and time has brought order both to the world of the play and the theater. 

As late romance plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* renew the possibility of achieving a comic ending after Shakespeare has already revealed the possibility of a tragic outcome for both Leontes and Prospero. Northrop Frye perceptively sums up the nature of such Shakespearean comedy:

[T]here is a residually irrational element in (such) comedy, which expresses itself in a great variety of unlikely incidents: unexpected turns in the plot, gratuitous coincidences, unforeseen changes of heart in certain characters. . . . 
Shakespeare deliberately chooses incredible plots and emphasizes the unlikelihood of his conclusions. The drive toward a comic conclusion is so powerful that it breaks all the chains of probability in the plot, of habit in the characters, even of expectation in the audience; and what emerges at the end is
not a logical consequence of the preceding action, as in tragedy, but something more like a metamorphosis (Frye, 123-124).

Time, as the ultimate creator and destroyer, mimics the force of nature, and thus, "providence divine" in the world of The Winter's Tale and The Tempest. In comedy, over time, characters develop and grow unlike in tragedy, and the action of the play drives forcefully and speedily toward the comic telos. The sense of hope that lies in such a metamorphosis and the renewal of a better outcome than with which the play began serves as the basis for Shakespeare's understanding of the ending to the human story as a happy one.
Works Cited

