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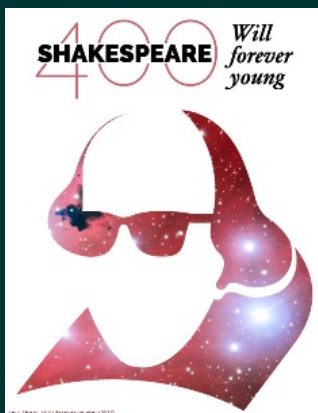
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NUMERO SPECIALE: Will forever young! Shakespeare & Contemporary Culture

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NUMERO SPECIALE: Will forever young! Shakespeare & Contemporary Culture

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“Existences holding hands”: Winterson retelling Shakespeare

by Elisa Bolchi

Virginia Woolf considered Shakespeare’s fame so intimidating that she wondered why “should anyone else attempt to write” when he “surpasses literature altogether” (Woolf 1981: 301). Yet Shakespeare remains the most retold author in English literature and, to celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare’s death, The Hogarth Press, the publishing house founded by Virginia and Leonard Woolf in 1917 and re-launched in London and New York in 2012, inaugurated The Hogarth Shakespeare project, which “sees Shakespeare’s works retold by acclaimed and bestselling novelists of today” (<hogarthshakespeare.com>). In 2013 the publishing company commissioned some of the best contemporary writers, including Margaret Atwood, Tracy Chevalier, Anne Tyler and Howard Jacobson, to “reimagine Shakespeare’s plays for a 21-century audience” (Crown 2015). Jeanette Winterson had the honour, and onus, to open the series with her cover version, as she calls it, of *The Winter’s Tale*.

“My work is full of Cover Versions”, she writes in the introduction to her 2005 novel *Weight*,¹

I like to take stories we think we know and record them differently. In the re-telling comes a new emphasis or bias, and the new arrangement of the key

¹The book, which she was asked to write for the Canongate *Myths series*, is the rewriting of the myth of Atlas.



elements demands that fresh material be injected into the existing text.
(Winterson 2006: xviii)

I believe what she says in these lines to be a useful starting point to analyse her novel *The Gap of Time*, published in 2015.

As Sonya Andermahr explains: “Winterson’s postmodern credentials have never been in doubt and since her 1985 debut she has been widely appropriated in academe as part of a group – which includes Salman Rushdie and Martin Amis – of British postmodern stylist” (2007: 5). This means that she “constructs her narrative by exploiting the techniques of postmodern historiographic metafiction (such as intertextuality, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, the rewriting of history and frame breaks)” (Andermahr 2007: 5-6). Traces of such narrative devices can be found even in her most recent works, such as *The Gap of Time*, even though, since the beginning, “she has always placed her work in the *modernist* rather than *post-modernist* tradition” (Andermahr 2007: 6), for instance, by always being concerned with literary tradition. “Despite her determination to forge a new relationship between novelist and the novel, Winterson has always paid tribute in her novel to the past”, explains Lucie Armitt (2007: 23), a tribute that became increasingly present in what Winterson calls the second cycle of her works, that starts in 2004 with the novel *Lighthouse keeping*. The common denominator of all her books from 2004 onwards is actually her reuse of the classics: *Treasure Island* and *The Strange Case of Doctor Jackyll and Mr Hyde* in *Lighthouse keeping*; *Robinson Crusoe* in *The Stone Gods*; the myth of Atlas in *Weight*; until *The Gap of Time*, which is – as the subtitle says – *The Winter’s Tale* retold. Winterson also likes playing with her own words, often indulging in self-quotations. I thus aim to show how she works with this ‘reuse’ in her retelling of Shakespeare, to see how she manages to use both the Bard and herself as sources for her novel. To present the main themes of my essay I would like to focus on, I will start my analysis from the final pages of the novel, where the author intrudes into the narration for a private and metafictional reflection on her work – a device that Shakespeare would have much appreciated – revealing her motives for retelling, among all Shakespeare’s play, *The Winter’s Tale*:

I wrote this cover version because the play has been a private text for me for more than thirty years. By that I mean part of the written wor(l)d I can’t live without; without, not in the sense of lack, but in the old sense of living outside of something.

It’s a play about a foundling. And I am. It’s a play about forgiveness and a world of possible futures – and how forgiveness and the future are tied together in both directions. Time is reversible. (2015a: 284-285)

From this quotation three major aspects of Winterson’s work come to light. First, the autobiographical dimension, so intriguing in most of her works.² Second, she

²It is enough to think of how she worked on autobiographical elements in *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit* and in *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?*, to mention only the most striking examples.



mentions the “possible futures”, a theme dear to her that we find treated in novels like *The Stone Gods*, warning against history’s tendency to repeat itself and humanity’s inability to learn from past mistakes. Third is the importance of time for Winterson, and how time is not a straight arrow pointing to the future but something reversible, that can be modelled and interpreted differently: “In *The Winter’s Tale* the past depends on the future. Time’s arrow shoots both ways until that which is lost is found” (Winterson 2015b). Winterson’s novel in which the theme of time is most significant is probably *Sexing the Cherry*, published in 1989 and contemporary to a number of novels dealing with issues of time and how it works. It is enough to mention Ian McEwan’s *The Child in Time* (1987), deeply concerned with quantum physics and theories about the relativity and fluidity of time, or the later *Time Arrow* (1991) by Martin Amis, in which a conscience recounts his own life in reverse chronology, thus subverting reality and overturning morality. By quoting from T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, however, in *Sexing the Cherry* Winterson was deliberately inserting herself in the literary scene as a modernist more than a postmodernist, although “in the European tradition of Borges and Calvino” (Winterson 2002), and in her novel she always deals with time experimentation mainly by setting an historical time against a present ‘now’, so that the past catches up with the present.

I will examine here two of the above-mentioned aspects, namely time and the autobiographical element, directly linked to the theme of forgiveness, with a focus on the theme of jealousy – in the play and in the novel – through a comparison with Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

1. THE COVER VERSION

The novel is presented as a rewriting from its very title, *The Gap of Time: The Winter’s Tale Retold*, and from a clear editorial break that presents, in the chapter titled *The Original*, a synopsis of Shakespeare’s play, followed by a longer ‘chapter’, *The Cover Version*, which is the real novel. As noted by Sarah Crown, Winterson’s decision to call it a Cover is particularly focused, because both in *The Gap of Time* and in *The Winter’s Tale*, which according to Agostino Lombardo is built on a method “che molto si avvicina a quell[o] propri[o] della musica” (2004: VII), music itself “is a presence throughout: as metaphor, mood-setter and even, on occasion catalyst” (Crown 2015). Shakespeare’s play is full of songs, and, as a nod to this, Hermione is transformed by Winterson into MiMi, a French singer. Music is just one of the many connections woven into her retelling, which she presented a *Guardian* article, where she explains that that she was not “interested in copying Shakespeare” but wanted to “track Shakespeare in the same way that he tracked other people’s ideas, innovations, solutions, follies, even failures, and use[d] them to his advantage” (2015b). It is in this sense that we must read her cover version: not just as a retelling, but as a brand-new work, exactly like *The Winter’s Tale* is not just a retelling of Robert Green’s *Pandosto*.

The first thing Winterson did was to keep the structure of the play, maintaining “the device of the interval, levering the reader out of the action for a short time”



(2015b). The novel is divided into three parts, with two intervals in which Winterson metafictionally reflects on the nature of stories, and of time. The first interval is worth analysis, because it closes with a short poem about time. Just as in *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare inserts a chorus who perform in iambic pentameters about the relativity of time, in order to warn us that in the few minutes of the interval sixteen years have passed, in *The Gap of Time* Winterson closes her first interval with five verses suggesting that time is relative, because it can be measured differently:

There are thirteen moons every calendar year.
They measure time differently on the moon.
The moon orbits the earth once every 28 days
As though she's looking for something she lost.
A long time ago. (2015a: 124)

These verses, recalling Shakespeare's rhythm, are just one of the many devices employed by Winterson to make the reader feel the presence of the Bard throughout the pages of the novel, because, she says, "to write a cover version of a Shakespeare play is to stay true to the spirit of Shakespeare" (Winterson 2015b). Of course the references to the original are many and are not just hints. Although the story is set in a contemporary London, instead of ancient Sicily, Leo (King Leontes in the original) is a banker who runs a hedge fund called Sicilia. As Crown notes, in so doing Winterson replaces Leontes' court "with today's money markets – the real seat of contemporary power" (Crown 2015). Winterson explains that Leo "had to be an alpha male, who does what he wants and is reckless with the lives of others" (2015b); and what could be better for this role than a reckless hedge fund guy?

The writer enjoyed creating inventive parallels with the original; the most brilliant is arguably that of Autolycus; the garrulous rogue, ballad-seller, con-man and thief is here made into a used-car dealer, who runs a garage called "Autos Like Us" and makes his appearance in a DeLorean, the car made famous by the film *Back to the Future* as the first time machine. Bohemia becomes New Bohemia, a city probably set in the southern part of North America, while Perdita is found and raised by Shep – obviously short for Shepherd – and his son Clo, who clearly recalls the Clown of the original. If these hints to the pastoral setting of the original were not enough, they run a bar called The Fleece. Both couples, the one in the play and the one in the novel, "instinctively do the right thing at the right time" (Winterson 2015b): they find a foundling and raise her with parental love.

The foundling introduces another important aspect of the play with which Winterson had to deal, the fact that *The Winter's Tale* is an example of Renaissance pastoral, a mode "in which tragedy and comedy became inseparable" (Orgel 2008: 37), and is thus a comedy presenting highly dramatic events, such as the death of a son. Yet, as noted by Stephen Orgel, in Shakespeare "the death of the treasured child, the only son, the heir to the throne" is no more "than a 'plaintive little motif'" (Orgel 2008: 33) in a play full of losses. It is worth nothing that in Shakespeare's time the loss of a child for sixteen years was "not quite the sort of tragic loss it appears to us" (Orgel



2008: 78), because it was not unusual for aristocratic families to send their children away to be raised by surrogate parents. However, for people of today, this would sound deeply dramatic and the subject could not be treated with the same detachment that sounded plausible in Shakespeare, where

the tragic loss that Perdita represents is not the loss of her company, or of the opportunity to watch her grow, or of the role we believe her parents should have had in the formation of her character, but the loss of an heir [...]. Once the crucial loss is restored, everything returns to its proper place. (Orgel 1996: 79)

Winterson manages such a dramatic plot thanks to her interpretation of *The Winter's Tale* as a "story about a lost child restored" more than a "lost lover restored" (Williams 2015); in fact, in her novel it is Perdita, and not Leontes, who has the last word:

I altered the ending because I wanted the last word to be Perdita's. If the future exists, the new generation will have to discover it, like a territory not subject to the violent destructiveness of the past. (Winterson2015b)

In so doing, Winterson stresses the relevance of second chances and forgiveness in the play and makes the abandoned baby the "shining centre" (Winterson 2015b) of the story.

2. LOST AND FOUND(LING)

Both *The Winter's Tale* and *The Gap of Time* are works in which "That which is lost is found" (Winterson 2015a: 260), a sentence working as a refrain in Winterson's novel. It is for this reason she professed *The Winter's Tale* to be a "talismanic text" for her, admitting to having "worked with it in many disguises for many years" (2015a: 4). The foundling *topos* can be found in several of her novels, some mock-autobiographical, like *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), or intimately autobiographical, like *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?* (2011), others much more fantastic, like *Sexing the Cherry* (1989). It is therefore no surprise if, to re-tell Shakespeare, Winterson used herself as a secondary source, drawing mainly from her fourth novel *Sexing the Cherry*. The elements in common are many: *Sexing the Cherry* opens around 1630, roughly the same historical period in which *The Winter's Tale* was first performed, even though Winterson's novel then develops throughout the Civil War. It is the story of a foundling, Jordan, raised by a giantess, the Dog Woman, who then decides to travel the world; like Perdita, Jordan is a lost child who leaves his home only to come back after many years. Jordan travels the seas and it is not by chance, water being a pivotal element in the novel. The sea has a prominent role in Shakespeare's play, and in the same way water has a crucial role in Winterson's *Sexing the Cherry* – in which both the river Thames and the sea play their part in the narration – and in *The Gap of Time*, where



again a central role is given to the Thames (and to the Seine, when the setting moves to Paris). In all these works, water is the element of life, of birth. In the same way that babies come into the world by breaking their mother's waters, in Winterson's novels children arrive at their adoptive parents via water. In *Sexing the Cherry*, Jordan is brought to the Dog Woman by the river Thames. In *The Gap of Time*, Perdita is found by Shep in heavy rain, mirroring how she was found during a storm in *The Winter's Tale*. Water thus represents the connecting element between the moment when the child comes to life and the moment in which he/she starts his/her new life.

Another aspect worth mentioning is the role parents play in all these narrations. Orgel notes how Leontes and Hermione's family is one of the very few "normative families" in Shakespeare: "families consisting of father, mother and children. Most families in Shakespeare have only one parent" (Orgel 2008: 25) – suffice it to think of Prospero and Miranda, Brabantio and Desdemona, Shylock and Portia, to name just a few. "The very few that include both parents", Orgel goes on, "generally have only one child, and when that configuration appears, it tends to be presented [...] as exceedingly dangerous to the child" (2008: 25); for an example, it is enough to think about Romeo's and Juliet's parents. Something similar happens in Winterson's novels as well, in which children are often brought up only by their mothers, either because there is no father – as is the case with Silver in *Lighthouse keeping* – or because they are foundlings reared by a single woman – as is true for Jordan and the Dog Woman in *Sexing the Cherry*. When both parents are present, they are "exceedingly dangerous for the child" – as is the case for Jeanette in *Oranges Are not the Only Fruit*. Winterson thus found in *The Winter's Tale* the opportunity to overcome her filial resentments, to speak about her "other life" and admit: "There's nothing to be sorry about. I'm adopted. So what?" (2015a: 165).

Winterson actually points out that what is peculiar in *The Winter's Tale* is the fact that it is a story of forgiveness: "The late plays of Shakespeare depend on forgiveness", she comments in the final chapter of the novel,

there are only three possible endings to a story – if you put aside And They All Lived Happily Ever After, which isn't an ending, but a coda.

The three possible endings are:

Revenge. Tragedy. Forgiveness. (2015a: 260-261)

In his later years Shakespeare wanted to underline that "the past must not mortgage the future" (Winterson 2015a: 261). So Hermione forgives, Perdita and Florizel secure the future because they "won't behave like their fathers" (260), and Miranda and Ferdinand in *The Tempest* become the reason why the families reunite.

Winterson was, however, mainly interested in the inner struggle that is to be found in the play. "*The Winter's Tale* is *Othello* post-Freud, even though Freud is 300 years in the future", she wrote in the pages of *The Guardian* (2015b). And in the novel she explains this idea more explicitly:



This is an 'old tale', a fairy tale. But in a fairy tale the threat usually comes from the outside – a dragon or an army or an evil sorcerer. Shakespeare, anticipating Freud, puts the threat where it really is: on the inside.

The Winter's Tale was first performed in 1611. It took another three hundred years before the nascent science of psychoanalysis began to understand how the past mortgages the future, or that the past can be redeemed. (2015a: 263-264)

Before analysing the relevance of time in the novel, I thus wish to focus on Winterson's reference to Freud and to *Othello*, to see how she decided to render Leontes' jealousy.

3. OTHELLO 2.0: THE CRAFTSMANSHIP OF REALITY

It is well known that Samuel Taylor Coleridge compared Leontes' jealousy to that of Othello, which he considered the direct opposite to Leontes' in every particular:

For jealousy is a vice of the mind, a culpable tendency of the temper, having certain well known and well defined effects and concomitants, all of which are visible in Leontes, and I boldly say, not one of which marks its presence in *Othello*. (Coleridge 1914: 166)

Coleridge then lists the effects of jealousy:

An excitability by the most inadequate causes, and an eagerness to snatch at proofs; secondly, a grossness of conception, and a disposition to degrade the object of the passion by sensual fancies and images; thirdly, a sense of shame of his own feelings exhibited in a solitary moodiness of humour, and yet from the violence of the passion forced to utter itself, and therefore catching occasions to ease the mind by ambiguities, equivoques, by talking to those who cannot, and who are known not to be able to, understand what is said to them, – in short, by soliloquy in the form of dialogue, and hence a confused, broken and fragmentary manner; fourthly, a dread of vulgar ridicule, as distinct from a high sense of honour, or a mistaken sense of duty; and lastly, and immediately consequent on this, a spirit of selfish vindictiveness. (Coleridge 1914: 166-167).

Yet, Orgel rightly underlines how such characteristics are not distinctive of Othello but fitly describe both Othello and Leontes. The problem with Othello, Orgel claims, is that he "inhabits a dramatic world of deliberate, malicious misrepresentation, of the fabrication of evidence and misinformation" (Orgel 2008: 19), whereas Leontes' jealousy is completely self-generated and, because of this, "far more true to human experience than Othello's" (Orgel 2008: 19). This is evident in Emilia's words to console Desdemona, who complains that she never gave Othello cause to be jealous:



But jealous souls will not be answered so.
They are not ever jealous for the cause,
But jealous for they're jealous. It is a monster
Begot upon itself, born on itself. (3.4.155-9)

This verse actually seems to better describe Leontes' passion than Othello's, because it is actually Leontes who needs no cause to be jealous. As Orgel explains:

the lack of any external motivation is [...] a defining feature of the passion, and Leontes' psychology in the opening acts consequently seems, in contrast with Othello's, strikingly modern in its dramatic recognition of the compulsiveness of paranoid behaviour, and more generally, of self-generating and autonomous nature of consciousness itself (Orgel 2008: 19).

It is in this sense, thus, that Jeanette Winterson affirms that *The Winter's Tale* is "Othello post-Freud", because all evidences of Leontes' jealousy are from within Leontes himself: they are the products of Leontes' rhetorical construction that shows evidence of innocence and guilt at the same time. Although Freud could not possibly be counted among Shakespeare's reads, Thomas Wright's treaty *The Passion of the Mind*, in which he speculates on the nature and function of the emotions and how to use them "in the service of virtue" could have been known by the Bard.³In his influential moral treaty, first published in 1601, "Wright develops two centers of interest, the promotion of virtue and rhetorical persuasion, which are distinct yet related through the important role that passions play in each" (Newbold 1986, 27), and he presents "Rhetoric in an ill cause" as a "two-edged sword in the hand of a furious man" (Wright 1986, 162).

King Leontes' soliloquy showing the onset of his jealousy is a perfect example of a rhetorical construction turned into a "two-edged sword". Everything starts with Hermione giving her hand to Polixenes as a sign of friendship; Leontes suddenly reacts to that action with an aside: "Too hot, too hot!" From this comment, the escalation of his jealousy is incredibly quick, so much so that a smile of brotherly friendship between Polixenes and Hermione leads Leontes to doubt that his firstborn Mamillius is his own son:

—O, that is entertainment
My bosom likes not, nor my brows. Mamillius,
Art thou my boy? (1.2.117-119)

Leontes' words also show how his feeling is born from within – "my bosom likes not" – and only secondly seeks evidence outside – "not my brows". Othello's jealousy on the contrary is born differently, as it is incited by Iago, and it thus comes from the

³For the influence of the origin and spread of the theory about emotions in Renaissance writers and Shakespeare see Soellner (1958).



outside. Yet, both for Othello and Leontes, once the “green-eyed monster”⁴ (*Othello*, III.3, 165) of jealousy is in their mind, it starts devouring them from the inside, and they are both doomed: “to be once in doubt / Is once to be resolved”, says Othello (III.3, 177-178), and his words actually are the best explanation of what happens in Leontes’ mind. The more he reasons, the more he is resolved to believe in his doubts and fears, and again a reference to *The Passion of the Mind* can be hypothesized, since in his treaty Wright discussed how “reason, once being entered into league with passions and sense, becometh a better friend to sensuality than the passions were before. For reason straightaways inventeth ten thousand sorts of new delights, which the passions never could have imagined” (Wright 1986, 96). However, while Leontes tries as hard as he can to convince himself of his wife’s infidelity, Othello initially tries to be reasonable:

[...] No, Iago,
I’ll see before I doubt; when I doubt, prove;
And on the proof, there is no more but this:
Away at once with love or jealousy! (3.3.187-190)

On the contrary, Leontes contests all proof, using the absurdity of his own accusation as the very evidence of its truthfulness:

Dost think I am so muddy, so unsettled,
to appoint myself in this vexation? Sully
The purity and whiteness of my sheets—
Which to preserve is sleep, which being spotted
Is goads, thorns, nettles, tails of wasps—
Give scandal to the blood o’th’ prince, my son,
Who I do think is mine and love as mine,
Without ripe moving to’t? Would I do this?
Could man so blench? (1.2.322-330)

Moreover, while Othello would have preferred not to know – “I swear ‘tis better to be much abused / Than but to know’t a little” (III.3, 333-334) – Leontes wallows in his own fantasies, passing from misreading friendly acts to inventing actions that never occurred. For instance, when Camillo tries to defend Queen Hermione from Leontes’ offences, the king famously replies:

⁴According to Brid Phillips (2016) “this association between green-eyed and jealousy begins with Shakespeare as until this time yellow was associated with the ‘covetous wighte’”. In her contextualisation of such association, Phillips suggests a possible derivation from Wright who, as a matter of fact, compared passions to “green spectacles, which make all things resemble the colour of green” (Wright 1986, 126) and further explained that “imagination putteth green spectacles before the eyes of our wit to make it see nothing but green, that is, serving for the consideration of the Passion” (Wright 1986, 128).



Is whispering nothing?
Is leaning cheek to cheek? Is meeting noses?
Kissing with inside lip? Stopping the career
Of laughter with a sigh?—a note infallible
Of breaking honesty! Horsing foot on foot?
Skulking in corners? Wishing clocks more swift?
Hours minutes? Noon midnight? And all eyes
Blind with the pin and web but theirs, theirs only,
That would unseen be wicked? Is this nothing? (1.2.282-287)

Camillo introduces another interesting difference between Othello's and Leontes' jealousy: the right-hand man's role, a character who is relevant in *The Gap of Time* as well. Both Othello and Leontes are incapable of good judgement: Othello thinks Iago a "fellow's of exceeding honesty" (3.3.255) while Leontes "despotically over-rules Camillo in his courtly dialogical role of truthful counsellor" (Del Sapio Garbero 2010, 134) and calls him "not honest" (1.2.239). Once Othello is blind with jealousy and loses his reason, he is no longer able to discern true from false: "I think my wife be honest, and think she is not; / I think thou art just, and think thou art not" (III.3, 381-382), he says to Iago. On the contrary, when Camillo invites Leontes to calm and "be cured / of this diseased opinion" (1.2.292), the king accuses him: "you lie, you lie! / I say thou liest, Camillo" (1.2.297-298). If *Othello* is the supreme example of the "retorica della costruzione del personaggio", as suggested by Giorgio Melchiori (2005: 480), in *The Winter's Tale* we find a supreme example of the rhetoric of the construction of reality. Leontes actually creates his own fictitious reality through his own rhetoric, in a play where a relevant part of the facts is told and not acted on stage.

The deception of visual evidence is central in Shakespeare, where Leontes does not even sort out his wife from a statue at the end of the play⁵, but it is even more so in Winterson, who plays with the devices offered by modernity to emphasize the contrast between what seems and what is. In fact, in *The Gap of Time*, Leo also uses his assistant to collect evidence of the betrayal, and he does so by asking him to install a webcam to spy on his wife. In so doing, Winterson can explore a territory she has always treasured in her works: the ephemeral perception of reality.⁶

Jeanette Winterson's prominence as a contemporary British writer who self-consciously explores the equivocal status of an objective reality is largely due to her persistent metafictional interrogation of the assumptions about narratorial identity, fictional artifice and objective reality. (Grice and Woods 2007: 29)

The possibility to spy on his wife, secretly watching her on his computer on mute, because the "stupid, incompetent bastard" of his assistant forgot the sound when he installed it, allows Leo to develop all kinds of self-made erotic fantasies. The

⁵For a detailed analysis of Shakespeare's mention of Giulio Romano in terms of 'truth' and deception see M. Del Sapio Garbero, "'Be stone no more': Maternity and Heretical Visual Art in Shakespeare's Late Plays" (2015) and "Shakespeare's Maternal Transfigurations" (2015b).

⁶It is, in fact, the famous leitmotiv of her novel *The Passion*: "I'm telling you stories, trust me."



'mute' detail is of course relevant as it concentrates the focus on the acts of seeing – which take “center stage in Shakespeare’s last plays” (Del Sapio Garbero 2015b, 94) – more than of listening, and so, like Leontes in *The Winter’s Tale*, Leo can narrate to himself a fictitious version of reality which becomes his objective reality. In the novel Winterson manages to play on the difference between what happens in the video, in Leo’s mind, and in the room on which he is spying by using italics for Leo’s thoughts and capitals for his madness. As in *The Winter’s Tale*, Leo’s jealousy starts when he perceives an intimacy between Xeno and his wife which he considers excessive:

They were both laughing. They were intimate, private. Leo, ghost-faced, his beating heart invisible, wondered if he was in the room. (Winterson 2015a: 40)

The webcam he has installed then allows the complete misinterpretation of reality, because although it shows him that MiMi and Xeno are just life-long friends, it offers Leo the opportunity to fantasize as if he were in front of an erotic video: “Xeno was actually lying on the actual bed. MiMi was not actually lying on the actual bed with him but they had probably had sex already in the oversized bathtub.” (49). As Orgel affirms in reference to *The Winter’s Tale*: “truth has been made independent of evidence” (2008: 21).

The whole scene is based on misunderstandings caused by Leo’s imagination, so that when he cannot see the couple actually having sex on the screen he goes mad and starts shouting: “FUCKING FAGGOT WHY DON’T YOU MOUNT HER FROM BEHIND WHERE I CAN SEE YOU?” (50). His fantasies keep increasing to the point in which he can no longer distinguish what is the product of his mind from what he sees on the screen, so that when his secretary Pauline joins the couple in MiMi’s bedroom, Leo expects an orgy to happen; he imagines Pauline taking off her clothes and, eventually, mistakes the pencil case Pauline has taken out of her bag to do the *Guardian* crosswords for a “VIBRATOR THE SIZE OF A SUBMARINE” (51). Winterson thus manages to reproduce King Leontes’ mystification of reality and self-generated jealousy thanks to modern devices. These pages also contain a variety of hints regarding Othello’s jealousy. First of all, Leo’s elocution, as shown above, grows more and more disarticulated and obscene as his jealousy rises, like Othello’s in the tragedy;⁷ second, Leo tries to suffocate MiMi in her bed, but his action, instead of killing MiMi, leads her into labour. The scene thus closes here with a birth instead of a death. As Winterson explains:

The Winter’s Tale revisits *Othello*. A man who would rather murder the world than change himself. But this time the heroine doesn’t have to die in the service of the hero’s delusions. It is really himself that Othello can’t love of trust – not Desdemona – but when Shakespeare returns to this theme, he brings with him a second chance. (2015a: 285)

⁷ For a thorough analysis of Othello’s rhetoric in the play, see G. Melchiori, “Othello One and Two: the Importance of Swearing”.



Nonetheless the episode marks the end of their relationship, followed by MiMi's breakdown and her leaving their house. And, as in Shakespeare's original, once Leo has given Perdita away and Milo has died, time stands still for eighteen years. It is only when all the surviving characters are reunited at the end of the novel, as they were in the last act of the play, that the past can act on the present to produce a possible future, because "The past is a grenade that explodes when thrown" (Winterson 2015a: 260). It is thanks to forgiveness if, both in *The Winter's Tale* and in *The Gap of Time*, all these years, all this time, is not lost and can take new life: "time that runs so steady and sure runs wild outside of the clocks" (270).

4. TIME UNLOST

Time is indeed "the insistent theme" (Orgel 2008: 17) in Shakespeare's play as well as in Winterson's work. Her interest in such a theme dates back once again to her novel *Sexing the Cherry*, which "repeatedly dislocates our conventional understanding of time, questioning the metaphysical conceptions of time erected by language" and where an entire chapter is dedicated to "The Nature of Time" (Grice and Woods 2007: 34).

"Shakespeare's recognition of time as a player is central to so much of his work" (Winterson 2015b) and in *The Winter's Tale* it is mainly displayed in its personification as the Chorus, a device seldom used by Shakespeare that here appears at the opening of the fourth act, right in the middle of the play. In order to find a way to personify Time, Winterson turns Polixenes into a video-games designer who creates a game in which:

At Level 4 Time becomes a player. Time can stand still, move faster, slow down.
But you are playing against Time too. That's what it's called – "The Gap of Time".
(50)

In his essay *Il trionfo del tempo, la vittoria sul tempo*, Agostino Lombardo analyses Time's monologue in *The Winter's Tale*, commenting that it displays another fundamental theme of the play: the role of the artist. Time actually proclaims that it is in his power "To o'erthrow law" and to "o'erwhelm custom" (*The Winter's Tale*, IV.1 – l. 8-9), Lombardo further suggests that behind the character of Time hides the playwright, thus explaining Time's power over matter and form, his ability to modify time and space, to model life accordingly to the needs of the show (Lombardo 2004: VIII). Such a reading of the monologue offers a further link to Winterson's poetics, since she has always been fascinated by the possibility of transforming and modelling matter. In *The Gap of Time* the adult characters would like to make the past "unhappen", and when Zel – Florizel's parallel – ponders on destiny and on how Perdita and he were destined to be together, he says: "in either life, the one they ruined, or this one, the one they couldn't ruin, because they couldn't find it – we were going to be together" (Winterson 2015a: 251). More than in the possibility of going back in time,



re-living one's own life, as the protagonist of Amis's *Time Arrow* does, for instance, Winterson has always been interested in analysing the unexplored possibilities of the choices not made. What Zel seems to mean is that the chances we miss in the past go on living the existence they were supposed to live, which is another idea Winterson had already dealt with in *Sexing the Cherry*, where she wrote: "Every journey conceals another journey within its lines: the path not taken and the forgotten angle" (Winterson 1996: 9). This vision of time is related to that of a relative existence always offering a possibility for redemption:

The inward life tells us that we are multiple not single, and that our one existence is really countless existences holding hands like those cut-out paper dolls, but unlike the dolls never coming to an end. (Winterson 1996: 90)

If, in *The Gap of Time*, characters are not able to rewind time and erase their mistakes, it is nonetheless possible for them to redeem the past and to reconnect to their alternative life; in other words, they are able to hold the hand of their alternative existence. Shakespeare tells us, in his play, that Time is "both joy and terror / Of good and bad, that makes and unfolds error" (IV.1, 1-2), and Winterson comments, in her novel, that "Time can't unhappen but it can be unlost" (2015a: 240), which is what *The Winter's Tale* and its Cover version are about.

The Winter's Tale is thus a play about wrong actions done in the past, about regret and remorse, but it is a play where time has a redeeming power, which makes Perdita say: "You can't change what you did. You can change what you do" (Winterson 2015: 203). This idea was also present in *Sexing the Cherry*, in which, quoting from T.S. Eliot, Winterson claimed: "If all time is eternally present,⁸ there is no reason why we should not step out of one present into another" (Winterson 1996: 90). The present can thus change the past, and the dead can be brought back to life, as is true with Hermione in Shakespeare's play. Once again: "Time can't unhappen but it can be unlost" (Winterson 2015a: 240).

It is, however, a prerogative of the young to live in the present, while the "old" continually "walk slam" into their past "like a door that locks the future on the other side" (Winterson 2015a: 214). "You're young," says Leo to Perdita in *The Gap of Time*, "You have a present because you don't have a past" (223). The two adolescents of the story, Zel and Perdita, are the only ones that, living in the present, can change the past, as Romeo and Juliet did – albeit with a fatal ending – or as Miranda and Ferdinand do in Shakespeare's last play. It is thanks to them if, in the end, their parents understand what happened and feel "like time was being demolished brick by brick" (Winterson 2015a: 236).

Lombardo eventually underlines how, in *The Winter's Tale*, time is not only memory but also knowledge, because it is the instrument allowing the audience to "apprendere una verità" (Lombardo 2004: VIII). By the end of the play – and of the novel – characters actually understand that "il tempo è cammino verso la morte,

⁸ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Burt Norton, l. 4.



decadimento della carne, ma anche che il tempo è riflessione, maturazione, pentimento” (Lombardo 2004: VIII). According to Lombardo, *The Winter’s Tale* may be defined as “una meditazione sul tempo” because time “trionfa in tutti i sensi” (Lombardo 2004: VII-VIII). Time triumphs first of all as the cycle of seasons that is identified with the rhythm of life (VIII), but it also triumphs in the form of memory: memory of events that happened in a far past, corresponding to a happy and innocent childhood, and memory of recently happened events that become memory through storytelling.⁹ “And what is memory but a rope slung across time?” (Winterson 2015a: 259) asks Winterson in *The Gap of Time*.

5. CONCLUSION

As Douglas Lanier wrote in his *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*: “Shakespeare’s special status in the literary canon springs from a complex history of appropriation and reappropriation, through which his image and works have been repeatedly recast to speak to the purposes, fantasies, and anxieties of various historical moments” (Lanier 2006: 21). Is Shakespeare going to be our contemporary forever, then? When asked, during a conference aimed at re-discussing Jan Kott’s famous work, Andrzej Zurowski answered that “Shakespeare has sometimes been our contemporary and could be so in the future, but only on the condition that he is translated into the questions of our time and takes on the colour of our historical personality” (Elsom 2003: 169). This is the goal of The Hogarth Shakespeare project, and I believe Winterson’s novel fulfils this goal, above all thanks to the poetics which have been intrinsic to the writer’s work since the beginning and that she explained in her essay *Art Objects*: “The true artist is connected” (1996: 12). The artist is connected ifs/he knows the past and creates a connection to the future, always looking at art objects as art processes and always making of her/himself an “instrument of transformation” (25).

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⁹Storytelling is another key element in Winterson’s works, from *The Passion* up to *Lighthousekeeping*, in which we find characters whose “subjectivities and identities are produced through the process of storytelling” (Palmer 2001: 188).



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Elisa Bolchi is temporary fellow researcher in English Literature at Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milan, where she has been teaching English Literature. She studied the reception of Virginia Woolf in Italy, publishing the books *Il paese della bellezza* (Milan, EDUCatt 2007) and *L'indimenticabile artista* (Milan, Vita e Pensiero, 2015).

She has been working on Jeanette Winterson's novels as well, investigating such themes as identity, autobiography and ecocritical writing.

elisa.bolchi@unicatt.it