

“Nature’s Bastards” and Painted Maids: Artifice in Shakespeare’s Romances

William Babula
Sonoma State University

In *The Winter’s Tale*, Perdita debates with Polixenes the role of art and nature in reference to gillyflowers or multicolored carnations, believed to be the result of cross-breeding with other flowers. Perdita declares that such cross-bred flowers are “nature’s bastards” and that

. . . Of that kind
Our rustic garden’s barren, and I care not
To get slips of them. (4.4.83-85)¹

When Polixenes asks why not, Perdita explains:

. . . For I have heard it said
There is an art which in their piedness shares
With great creating nature. (4.4.86-88)

If we apply these comments to Shakespeare’s Romances, the artificiality of the plays can be connected to the art that created the piedness or multicolored petals of the carnations. Critics have often pointed out the artificiality of Shakespeare’s late Romances and some have argued that their art is too unreal. Such fables as D. G. James notes can project a “sense of the silly.”² Kenneth Muir found the Romances “too good to be true.”³ This attitude mirrors Perdita’s, who finds the multicolored carnations to be unnatural, unreal, and ultimately undesirable.

But Polixenes has a defense for the grafting of art onto reality. Polixenes answers Perdita’s charge with the following:

. . . Say there be,
Yet nature is made better by no mean
But nature makes that mean. So over that art
Which you say adds to nature is an art
That nature makes. . . . (4.4.788-92)

The argument is that the process that creates the multicolored petals is itself a natural process. The next argument is that nature itself

is wild and chaotic and only through grafting art upon it can a carefully cultivated flower be raised.

... You see, sweet maid, we marry
 a gentler scion to the wildest stock,
 And make conceive a bark of baser kind
 By bud of nobler race. (4.4.92-95)

Shakespeare's Romances have essentially taken the potential tragic plots and married them through art to an alternative vision of providential order and mercy to create the noble cultivated flower: the Romance genre itself. As Frank Kermode writes, the fables of the last plays "were chosen because they lent themselves to the formulation of poetic propositions concerning . . . the mercy of providence."⁴ The promise of the tragicomic resolution is the promise of the Christian order: justice and mercy are possible in life and inevitable in eternity. A consoling pattern for Shakespeare's audience with roots in the Medieval drama which "sought to pattern human experience, to give to the history of men an order that would reveal its meaning . . . its reflection of the eternal, unchanging plan of God for the salvation of man."⁵ The key word here is *salvation* as it is transformed in dramatic terms from its religious connotation into the comic resolution after characters have been put in life-threatening situations. As Frank Ristine noted much earlier, this Medieval pattern suggests later tragicomedy:

In its serious theme and triumphant ending, as well as in its mixture of pure comedy, the [morality play] carries on the preparation for tragicomedy that the miracle play began.⁶

Polixenes concludes his argument that this process is an improvement—or rather a change—over reality and nature, but at the same time a part of nature in that it reveals a pattern not obvious on the surface of reality:

... This is an art
 Which does mend nature—change it rather; but
 The art itself is nature. (4.4.795-97)

And wonderfully Perdita comes to apparently agree when she says: "So it is" (4.4.97).

And Polixenes seems to sum up the logical conclusion for this kind of art: let it flourish—let the Romance genre flourish with its tragicomic artifice.

Then make your garden rich in gillyvors,
 And do not call them bastards. (4.4.98-99)

But as F. R. Leavis comments, Shakespeare has the ability to join "the unironical vision . . . with his power to contemplate the

irony at the same time.”⁷ J. P. Brockbank notes of the Romances in general, “But in each an element of self-confessed artifice qualifies the auspicious outcome to remind us that the ultimate reassuring moral order . . . is indeed theatre.”⁸ So it is no surprise that Shakespeare temporarily deconstructs the Romance and gives us an uncertain and indeterminate text by having Perdita say, “. . . I'll not put/ the dibble in earth to set one slip of them (4.4.99-100).

What to Polixenes is the revelation of the order beneath the seeming chaos is to Perdita an unnatural painting over of reality. Shifting away from the no longer useful to her gardening and grafting analogy, she now compares the creating of multicolored petals to the putting of makeup on a woman.

No more than, were I painted, I would wish
This youth should say 'twere well, and only therefore
Desire to breed by me. . . (4.4.101-103)

The irony is that both Perdita and Polixenes are right. The Romance paints over reality with a providential and artistic brush at the same time that Shakespeare is fully aware of the artificiality of the genre in which he was working. And these conflicts that lead to an indeterminate reading apply to all of the Romances. Are they “nature's bastards” and painted maids or “buds of nobler race”?

The first of the bastards or nobler buds is the early Romance *Pericles*. In the opening chorus of *Pericles*, Gower informs the audience that he has returned from the ashes “to glad your ear and please your eyes.” There is no hint of tragedy. Though *Pericles* suffers the buffets of fortune in Act I, Gower reassures the audience that everything will turn out well. We have seen

. . . a benign lord,
That will prove awful both in deed and word
Be quiet then, as men should be
Till he hath passed necessity.
I'll show you those in troubles reign,
Losing a mite, a mountain gain. (2. Chorus. 3-8)

After a first round of difficulties, *Pericles* prospers, but in Act 3.1, his queen Thaisa is dead. As Bertrand Evans comments,

Evidently dead, locked in a caulked and bitumed chest, cast into a raging sea by sailors to appease the elements, the Queen would not seem to have a much of a chance.⁹

But Gower has assured the audience that all will be well, and the next scene introduces Cerimon, heir to the magicians of sixteenth century romances, and Thaisa, unlike any other character

in Shakespeare's Romances, "is literally recovered from death" in language that Traversi terms "a poetry of resurrection."¹⁰ It is either the most unbelievable scene in Shakespeare or the one requiring the most faith on the part of the audience. In the context of the Romance it is an integral part of the world that Gower controls.

In a world of misfortune, Gower stands as the artist in control who will bring the right deserving characters to good fortune. He reminds us that he has come to tell the audience a story: "To sing a song that old was sung" (1. Chorus. 1). His presence continues to dominate the Romance in a rather crude way. He appears at the beginning of each of the other four acts, in 4.4, in 5.3, and at the end of the play. His main function is as a device to overcome the difficulties in time and place that are involved in the Romance plot while simultaneously reassuring the audience that all will turn out well. He moves Pericles from Tarsus by shipwreck to Pentapolis between Acts 1 and 2, and from Pentapolis to a ship between Acts 2 and 3. At the same time he reminds the audience that it is all only happening on a stage, that large blocks of time must pass, and that real time must be ignored in the following acts and scenes.

The device of the presenter is crude, but Shakespeare makes no attempt to cover the artifice that Gower brings to the drama. In fact, Shakespeare increases the audience's sense of the artificiality of the Romance by continual references to the need for the audience to use its imagination to overcome the physical limitations of the stage. As Norman Rabkin suggests, Shakespeare provokes "our awareness of his art by seeming to mismanage it . . ."¹¹

Thus Shakespeare in *Pericles* gives us an uncertain text. The play promises a providential order, like the cycle plays of the Middle Ages, where human life is ordered to just ends. Perhaps the controlling phrase from *Pericles* is "Wishes fall out as they're willed" (5.2.16). There is no better description of the effect of conscious artificiality on the audience. At the same time the artificial and crude device of Gower suggests that this perfect moral order can only exist in such an unreal artful context. Going one step further, it is possible to see a further criticism of the simplistic moral system in the often noted multiple burlesque aspects of the play.¹² As Lee Bliss writes in "Pastiche, Burlesque, Tragicomedy," "The emphasis on artificiality . . . enables [the dramatist] to present a double critique—both the genre he has placed before us and of his own play . . ."¹³

With *Cymbeline* lacking a crude Gower figure, while still possibly considering the outlandish elements in the play, there is less potential for burlesque, particularly when the Posthumus-Giacomo-Imogen

plot parallels the tragic story of Othello, Desdemona, and Iago. But the same Romance pattern of suffering transformed to joy structures this play as well, breaking the parallel to *Othello* in its conclusion. And like *Pericles*, there is artificiality, but artificiality of a different kind. There are improbabilities galore and a reckless treatment of times and places. The play abounds with disguise, fantasy, and crude dramaturgy which provide burlesque elements. There is a headless body mistaken for another character and the descent of Jupiter on the back of an eagle in Act 5 to add to the strange mixture. While set in Roman Britain at the time of the birth of Christ and in classical Rome, it leaps forward in time to contemporary seventeenth-century Italy.

It is in this seventeenth-century context that Giacomo is able to convince Posthumus that his wife Imogen has been unfaithful to him through his plot to enter her chamber hidden in a trunk, to emerge when she is asleep, and then to survey the details of the bedroom and write them down like an early modern explorer or mapmaker for his evidence. But all of that work is rendered unnecessary when he notes Imogen's secret cinque-spotted mole on her left breast, "a voucher/ Stronger than ever law could make" (2.2.39-40) that he had cuckolded Posthumus. From that moment on everything in the chamber was screwed into his memory with no need to write it down. This play, of course, recapitulates the tragic characters and situation of *Othello*. But unlike the tragedy, in *Cymbeline* the Iago character Giacomo, although he brings Posthumus to as complete a rejection of his wife as Othello's rejection of Desdemona, ultimately is not successful in his plot. As is typical of the Romance form, after long suffering there is reconciliation and joy, not murder and suicide as in *Othello*. Like the pattern of medieval drama, the divine pattern of providence has been revealed. Or in the language of art, the wild reality of the potential tragedy has been married to the bud of nobler race of providential order to create the final product: a painted lady or a nobler flower in the tragicomic resolution. Again both responses to this fusion are possible. One can find the pattern in the dance or as Samuel Johnson found in the play, "the impossibility of the events in any system of life."¹⁴ As in *Pericles*, there is a consciousness of artifice on the part of Shakespeare that allows for both irony and recognition of a divine pattern of providence that avoids what would be logical: an Iago-Othello-Desdemona tragic conclusion. In *Cymbeline* that artifice is far less crude and explicit than in *Pericles* and much more implicit in the improbabilities and anachronisms of the action which work together to deliver the consoling conclusion of the play.

Even less vulnerable to burlesque is *The Winter's Tale*. While Shakespeare introduces the idea of conscious artificiality in typical comments by the Second Gentleman to Autolycus in Act 5 on the events of the play, that they create a story that is "so like an old tale that the verity of it is in strong suspicion" (5.2.30-31), the play itself has moved to another level beyond the crude device of Gower and the improbabilities of *Cymbeline*. Michael Baird Saenger points out in his essay, "Pericles and the Burlesque of Romance," the numerous similarities between *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*.¹⁵ Wives and daughters are thought dead and the kings are redeemed by reunions with their daughters, and then with their wives. The daughters then are able to marry. These major similarities between *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles* are striking but their differences are even greater. As Saenger points out, there are six kingdoms in *Pericles*, an astounding number compared to two in *The Winter's Tale*.¹⁶

Pericles is innocent and Leontes is guilty. The sympathetic characters Mamillius and Antigonus die in *The Winter's Tale*. Nothing like that occurs in *Pericles*. In contrast to the crude Chorus of Gower, who has eight scenes, in *The Winter's Tale* the figure of Time appears in one central scene. While both plays strain credibility, in *The Winter's Tale* burlesque has been systematically removed.¹⁷

While aware of the artificiality of the Romance, Shakespeare has moved away from the extreme burlesque of *Pericles* and the anachronistic improbabilities of *Cymbeline* to create a tragicomedy of serious dimensions. While it mirrors the providential order and paints over reality with art, this bud of nobler race is also showing the real flaws of human beings. Unlike Posthumus, who is deceived by Giacomo's penetration of Imogen's chamber and his vivid and compelling mapmaker's detailed description of the room and the secret of Imogen's body, Leontes is mad with jealousy with no evidence at all and the result is the death of his son¹⁸ a character who is not returned to life. The Romance genre has moved beyond burlesque to painful reality covered by a veneer of art that provides the consoling conclusion to the play.

In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare, who has moved from burlesque through the artificiality of *Cymbeline* to the serious tragicomedy of *The Winter's Tale*, now begins some ironic deconstructing of the Romance genre in his last play in the form. While the surface pattern of reconciliation and restoration dominates *The Tempest*, there is also the underlying sense at the end of the play of loss and uncertainty. Claribel, in her marriage to the African Tunis, has been sacrificed against her will and the will of the court in Naples for some dynastic, mercantile, or military concern of her father

the King.¹⁹ Miranda and Ferdinand will marry and live in Naples and be lost to Prospero. In Naples there is the envious Sebastian, though weak, a threat for treason now that he has recognized his own murderous ambition. Unlike the other Romance endings where families are reunited, Miranda does not find a mother nor does Prospero recover a resurrected wife, but instead promises to think only on his grave. The play presents an expansion of the serious losses of *The Winter's Tale* by concentrating them at the end of the play. The ultimate irony is that as Prospero moves towards his grave, the despicable and unrepentant Antonio is in a position to rule in Milan once again, the worst outcome possible in an imagined Milan after Prospero's death. Or will a surviving Prospero, a character possibly based on Francesco Medici who was known for elaborate pageants, obscure scientific experiments, and a lack of interest in governing Florence, return to his old ways and ignore Milan? Or is it possible, as Rabkin suggests, that in a real Milan ruled by a Prospero who has learned how to rule, Antonio might not get the forgiveness he received on the island but end up on the gallows along with the Boatswain for whom hanging was predicted by Gonzalo?²⁰

As for Caliban, is he left alone to rule the island again as most commentators believe, though Shakespeare is silent on the subject. Or after his physical and psychological tortures, his loss of his own language, and his conversion from his god Setabos to Christianity, suggested by his promise to seek for "grace" at the end of the play, has Caliban been so thoroughly colonized it makes no difference if he stays or goes? His European colonization is now internalized. It is even possible to imagine him brought back to Italy as a curiosity to be displayed, as Trinculo suggests early in the play, or to continue in his role as valued slave to Prospero in Milan. The Romance genre itself, after three very different ventures into the form by Shakespeare, has been to an extent deconstructed through irony, including the uncertainty of how to respond to the indigenous native victim or vicious savage Caliban, fitting well into our post-modern era, with its emphasis on the indeterminable nature and inherent complexity of the text.

Ultimately, are the Romances "nature's bastards" and "painted maids" or "buds of nobler race"? With Shakespeare transforming the harsh real world through a conscious art that mirrors a providential order with roots in the miracle and mystery plays of the Medieval period, the answer has to be a complementary both.

Notes

1. All references to Shakespeare's plays are to *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, (New York, 1997).
2. D.G. James, *Skepticism and Poetry* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 231.
3. Kenneth Muir, *Last Periods of Shakespeare, Racine, Ibsen* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1961), 37.
4. Frank Kermode. "Introduction," in the New Arden *The Tempest* (New York: Random House, 1954), lxi.
5. V.A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 20, 108.
6. Frank K. Ristine, *English Tragicomedy* (New York: Russell, 1910), 15.
7. F.R. Leavis, "The Criticism of Shakespeare's Late Plays: A Caveat," in *The Common Pursuit* (New York: G.W. Stewart, 1952), 180.
8. J.P. Broackbank, "Pericles and the Dream of Immortality," *Shakespeare Survey* 24 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 109.
9. Bertrand Evans, *Shakespeare's Comedies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), 230.
10. Derek Traversi, *Shakespeare: The Last Phase* (London: Hollis and Carter, 1954), 31.
11. Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 104.
12. F. D. Hoeniger, "Gower and Shakespeare in *Pericles*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 33 (1982), 461-479. He writes that in parts of the play "the effect may be intentionally burlesque . . ." 474.
13. Lee Bliss, "Pastiche, Burlesque, Tragicomedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama*, ed. A.R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 242.
14. Samuel Johnson, "Notes to Shakespeare," in *Prose and Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 609.
15. Saenger, in *Pericles Critical Essays*, ed. David Skeele (New York and London: Garland, 2000), 196-197.
16. Saenger, 197.
17. Saenger, 197.
18. Rhonda Lemke Sanford, "Maps, Figures, and Figurative Maps: Feminine Geography," *Maps and Memory in Early Modern England*, (New York: Palgrave, 2002), pp. 53-74, for a discussion of Posthumus' and Giacomo's mapmaking competition over Innogen's body.
19. William Babula, "Claribel, Tunis, and Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*" in *Proceedings of the Wooden O Symposium*, 1(2001): 19-25.
20. Rabkin, 228.