

Romance

At the end of his career Shakespeare experimented with a new dramatic mode that we call romance. His efforts in this form include *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*, as well as the two collaborations written at the very end of his career with John Fletcher, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* and probably *Cardenio*. Never one to be bound by the Roman models to which some of his contemporaries were faithful, Shakespeare was by this time uncommonly adventurous in combining kinds and adapting into drama the various tales and narratives that appealed to him. Many of his contemporaries were adventurous too, for by about 1608 the London stages offered audiences a range of choice: historical tragedy, domestic tragedy, imitations of classical tragedy, romantic comedy, city comedy, satire, prodigal-son plays, apprentice-makes-good stories, chronicle plays, and tragicomedy. Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, writing under the influence of Continental models, were gaining attention for their development of English tragicomedy in plays such as *Philaster* and *A King and No King*. Shakespeare's last plays most resemble this kind of tragicomedy, which, as Fletcher's description makes clear (see p.178), threatens its audience with disaster or death and abruptly changes gears so that the action comes to a happy ending.

The romance form is difficult to define, particularly because it has appeared and reappeared repeatedly in the history of literature. I do not wish to suggest that romance - or any of the modes I have discussed - is a transhistorical category that works the same across all cultures and all periods. But there is something familiar about romance, as Howard Felperin points out: "To the extent that all literary experience involves a journey into another world inherently removed from present time and place, all literature is fundamentally romantic" (*Shakespearean Romance* 7). Romance seems to exhibit many of the same properties in its various manifestations, whether in the mode of Greek romance, from which much Renaissance literature derives; or in medieval quest romance, such as Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*; in Edmund Spenser's epic poem *The Faerie Queene*; in its later appearance among the

nineteenth-century poets we know as the Romantics; and in modern cinematic versions, such as the Western or the space epic. A touchstone for the formal and tonal properties we are concerned with is George Lucas's *Star Wars*, with its otherworldly locations, youthful hero, displaced princess, battles between the agents of good and evil, and supernatural Force. The most productive approach to Shakespearean romance is to offer a series of descriptions, none comprehensive but each contributing a partial explanation of the effect or shape of the form.

As a distinctive kind of comedy, romance arrives at a happy ending by an unusually perilous route. As our sense of the term implies, the action usually involves amorous desire and fulfillment, but the essential characteristic of fictional romance is an adventure story. Etymologically the word derives from the same root that gives us both the French and German words for "novel," *roman*. The main characters must endure a series of hazards and trials that lead ultimately to success and reward. The form is given to extremes, for the ending is not only happy but joyous, even revelatory, and the progression to that ending is much more arduous than in traditional comedy. In other words, the fundamentally comic shape of the action is darkly colored by tragic concerns and perceptions: the marriage or reunion that ends the play is preceded in the middle by some form of catastrophe, either death or some similarly grave loss.

These tonal oppositions of inexpressible despair and joy are matched by other extremes. *Pericles*, for example, opens with a riddle that the hero must solve for King Antiochus; the answer reveals the king's incest with his daughter. A wide geographical range is employed as well. *Pericles* travels throughout the Mediterranean; *Cymbeline* takes place in ancient Britain, ancient Rome, and the wilds of Wales; and *The Tempest* is set on a magical island. Often temporal limits are ignored: *The Winter's Tale* covers a period of sixteen years. At the conclusion of the hero's trials, magic or the supernatural contributes to the ending, often creating a sense of miracle. The vaguely providential force that, in the earlier comedies, seems to safeguard the characters and bring about a happy resolution is here specifically identified with divine protection, and in several of the plays this immortal force is theatrically incarnated, as in Jupiter's appearance in a dream at the end of *Cymbeline* or Diana's in *Pericles*. Such instances of theophany, or the appearance of a god or goddess, attest to the religious affinities of Shakespearean romance.

The cardinal feature of the form, the key to its emotional power, is the gap between the desperate middle and the joyful ending. Characters in these plays are able to recover what seemed irretrievably lost, what they themselves have foolishly attempted to destroy: penitent husbands find themselves reunited with wives they wished dead; lost children are restored to their parents; impossible wishes are granted. It has often been pointed out that the *Odyssey* is the first romance, an adventure story that is also a love story, and one that delays the pleasure of Ulysses' homecoming for twenty years by taking him all over the known world (not to mention a visit to the underworld). And it is this wandering that makes the poem; that's what it's about. So with Shakespeare's romances. Although we look forward to the endings, the playwright spends

most of his time not ending the play and then, when he finally does so, surprising us. So crucial is this incongruity that we might say that Shakespeare makes his romances *about* endings, playing self-consciously on the audience's desire for a happy outcome. These are fantasy plays that stimulate, frustrate, and fulfill our fantasies of resolution, but above all they force us to examine and evaluate our need for satisfactory closure. At the end of *Cymbeline*, the sleeping hero dreams that Jupiter descends from above and explains to his family why their son has had to endure such misery: "Whom best I love, I cross; to make my gift, / The more delay'd, delighted" (S.4.IOI-o2). The god insists that waiting for fulfillment intensifies the emotion, that the more difficult the trial, the more satisfying the victory.

But Jupiter appears in a character's dream, distanced from the audience and even from the reality of the play-world. In other words, the deity's appearance is a form of illusion occurring within a play that is itself an illusion. This dramatic tactic confirms the principle that the choice of a mode implies particular meanings about the world and the human experience of it. By turning at the end of his career to stories of fantasy and magic, Shakespeare has committed himself not only to the power of the imaginary, but also to the value of fiction in general. This turn to romance is especially revealing because the tragedies seem obsessed with the perils and deceptions of illusion. The apparitions of the deceptive witches in *Macbeth*, the fatal trickery of Iago's performance in *Othello*, or the lies of the elder daughters in *King Lear* - all these betray Shakespeare's mistrust of theatricality and perhaps even doubt about his own profession. As Anne Richter puts it in discussing the "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech, "The final attitude of Macbeth, the passionate reduction of all human endeavour to the meaningless posturing of a player on a darkening stage, is scarcely flattering to the theatre. Such an image expresses not only the hollowness of life, but also the degradation and stupidity of the actor's profession" (169). Shakespeare's late interest in romance suggests a reversal in his thinking; his professional doubts, if not dismissed, appear to have been at least allayed.

Thus in the last plays the instances of spectacle tend to be affirmative rather than threatening, a point best demonstrated in the powerful last scene of *The Winter's Tale*. Hermione, dead, or apparently dead, for sixteen years, has been memorialized in a statue, and as her penitent husband, the one responsible for her death, stands before it, the statue comes to life. This spectacular moment could be terrifying: as Paulina puts it, ". . . you'll think / (Which I protest against) I am assisted / By wicked powers" (5.3.89-91). But instead of a demonic show, Paulina presents her audiences, both onstage and in the theater, with what amounts to a miracle. The appropriate response is spiritual wonder at an act of grace. As Paulina also says, "It is requir'd / You do awake your faith" (5.3.94-95). A statue, a work of art, an imitation of life, suddenly becomes "real," a miracle that occurs in a play that is itself an imitation of life, a fiction in which imaginary persons come to life for the pleasure of a credulous audience. Shakespeare prizes the indistinguishability of the illusory and the actual. The artificiality of all experience, with Providence as the artist, the di-

vine playwright, is the great theme of Shakespeare's last phase. Here it would be fitting to cite Prospero's famous "Revels" speech from the fourth act of *The Tempest* about the unreality of the whole world; instead, I shall quote a much more contemporary instance of the same perception, from Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Crossing* (1994): "For this world also which seems to us to sing of stone and flower and blood is not a thing at all but is a tale. And all in it is a tale and each tale the sum of all lesser tales and yet these also are the selfsame tale and contain as well all else within them" (143).