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The Disappearance of 'Narration' in *The Winter's Tale*¹

Yoshika Miura

What characterizes *The Winter's Tale* written by William Shakespeare is that the act of storytelling can be seen remarkably frequently. In the middle of the play, the audience is informed of the passage of time by the narration of the Chorus (Time). The characters repeat Time's act of narration at the different level by telling other characters past events. In the play, some of the events which should be climactic are not staged but are just reported by characters who have witnessed them. Leontes the King of Sicilia, who is obsessed with the idea that the baby whom Queen Hermione has given birth to should be an illegitimate child, orders Antigonus to abandon the baby in a remote place. Though Antigonus reaches Bohemia to perform his mission, he is attacked and killed by a bear and the stormy sea devours his ship. The audience can know these incidents only by the clown's report. The reunion of Leontes and his daughter Perdita and the reconciliation of Leontes and his best friend Polixenes should be called a climactic scene. However, again, this scene is never performed before the audience. The audience can imagine the scene only with the help of the account given by the gentlemen who happened to be there. The gentlemen, talking about the reunion, repeatedly say it is "like an old tale" (5. 2. 28, 62). They emphasize not the event's theatricality but the one as a narrative. In this way, in *The Winter's Tale*, there are many scenes in which events do not develop as what are happening now and here

but are told as the past story by characters except the ones concerned. The play foregrounds the function of narration and imposes on it an important role to advance the action. However, at the same time, the play questions the value of narration and makes it disappear. It can be seen in the final act. Though the gentlemen report the moving reunion of Leontes and Perdita, they emphasize the defectiveness of their account:

FIRST GENTLEMAN. I make a broken delivery of the
business. ... (5.2.9)

THIRD GENTLEMAN. Then have you lost a sight which
was to be seen, cannot be spoken of. (5.2.43-44)

THIRD GENTLEMAN. I never heard of such another en-
counter, which lames report to follow it, and undoes
description to do it. (5.2.57-59)

They describe the climactic event and question the value of 'narrating' simultaneously. They exit to see the statue of Hermione:

FIRST GENTLEMAN. [O]ur absence makes us unthrifty
to our knowledge. (5.2.111-12)

The gentleman himself, the reporter, admits that telling is less persuasive than seeing an event which is happening now and stops 'narrating'.

We can see the decisive moment of disappearance of 'narration' in Act 5 Scene 3. Hermione who has 'metamorphosed' from the statue into a living body requests her daughter Perdita:

HERMIONE. Tell me, mine own,
Where hast thou been preserv'd? where liv'd? how
found

Bohemia. Also the evidence to show that Perdita is Leontes' daughter comes to the King's attention partly because of his tact. Moreover, his songs can be associated with the first half of the play. Leontes' delusion is parodied in Autolycus' ballads. In Act 4 Scene 4, Autolycus introduces a ballad that a usurer's wife gave birth to twenty money-bags. This story burlesques the childbirth held grotesque by Leontes who suspects that Hermione's baby might be an illegitimate child (Cavell 215, Felperin 202). Also Autolycus and the shepherdesses sing a ballad of a love triangle among a man and two women. It comically reverses the one among Leontes, Hermione, and Polixenes (Neely 203). Thus Autolycus gets involved in the act to tell a story by singing the ballads as many as six times. However, Autolycus stops singing a ballad – telling a story – as if it were a covert reference to the disappearance of 'narration' in the final scene. A gentleman says:

SECOND GENTLEMAN. [T]he king's daughter is found:
 such a deal of wonder is broken out within this hour,
 that ballad-makers cannot be able to express it.
 (5. 2. 23-25)

He denies the expressiveness, the power of conveying meanings, of the ballads of which Autolycus' identity consists. His achievement of helping the proof of Perdita's identity to be brought to Sicily is rewarded by neither Florizel nor Leontes. He never speaks in the final and climactic scene in which Hermione 'resurrects.' Thus his power of telling a story is rejected and disappears. That is to say, at the different level, he reproduces the play's process of using and abandoning the act of narrating. Therefore, by analyzing Autolycus' act of telling a story, we can see how *The Winter's Tale* treats narration.

In Act 4 Scene 3, Autolycus lies on the ground pretending

to have been assaulted and robbed. When the clown helps him to sit up, Autolycus picks up his pocket. Then, asked about the mugger, he answers:

AUTOLYCUS. . . . I know this man well; he hath been since an ape-bearer, then a process-server (a bailiff), then he compassed a motion of the Prodigal Son, and married a tinker's wife within a mile where my land and living lies; and, having flown over many knavish professions, he settled only in rogue. Some call him Autolycus.

(4. 3. 91-97)

Pretending to be a different man and giving his own name to a nonexistent mugger, he tells a story about his own past life. He adopts the same strategy again in Act 4 Scene 4. The shepherd's daughter (Perdita) falls into disgrace with Polixenes because she loves Florizel the prince regardless of her low status. As the shepherd is afraid of being caught up in her trouble, he and his son decide to show Polixenes the goods to prove that Perdita is not related to him by blood. Since Autolycus thinks that their report to the king would obstruct the elopement of Florizel, his ex-master, and Perdita, he attempts to cheat them into not going to the king but getting aboard the ship with which the couple flee. He approaches them in the disguise of a courtier and interrogates them:

CLOWN. We are but plain fellows, sir.

AUTOLYCUS. A lie; you are rough and hairy. Let me have no lying: it becomes none but tradesmen, and they often give us soldiers the lie; but we pay them for it with stamped coin, not stabbing steel; therefore they do not give us the lie. (4. 4. 721-26)

Pretending to be a courtier, Autolycus refers to a trademan,

the word which is linked to his own job. What these two scenes have in common is that he needs to assume others' point of view whenever he tells a story about himself. Hiroko Maezawa indicates:

自らの経験をその瞬間に言語化するという演劇的自意識を与えられていない登場人物たちは、反復される物語に主体を委ねている。(18)

The characters not rendered dramatic self-consciousness to represent their own experience at the moment when it happens leave their subject to repeated stories.

Her analysis is limited to the case in which the past event is reported by not the person concerned but others. I would like to propose that Autolycus' way of storytelling shows that it happens even when a character tells about his/her own story. He can tell his own story only when he assumes another subject and leaves his own subject of Autolycus to the story. However, the very feigned abandonment of his own subject enables him to retreat into a safe position in which he can escape from censures on his evil deed.

Autolycus' strategy to retreat into a safe position by leaving his subject to stories indicates how narration is in *The Winter's Tale*. The past world in the stories not staged but reported as what has already happened is a place where the characters told about in the stories can secure their safety from others' attack. We can read it from what Paulina associates the past world with. A gentleman's praise for the beauty of Perdita displeases Paulina:

PAULINA.

O Hermione,

As every present time doth boast itself

Above a better gone, so must thy grave

Give way to what's seen now! (5. 1. 95-98)

For Paulina, the past, “a better gone,” is Hermione who is dead in the tomb. Paulina laments that the beauty of Hermione in the past is threatened by that of a woman in the present. However, let us come back to Act 3 Scene 2. As soon as Paulina says that Hermione is dead, Leontes stops assailing Hermione and deeply regrets his irrational deed. Carol Thomas Neely considers this scene:

Through their [mothers'] deaths ... and the cherishing of their memory, the desexualization and sanctification of good mothers is achieved. (Neely 174)

Neely argues that mothers regarded as evil in Shakespeare's romance plays, once they have died, become sanctified as ideal mothers in their family's memory. Paulina, by telling about Hermione as the past, can protect her from Leontes' blame. Namely, the characters in *The Winter's Tale* can avoid collisions and secure their safety by being absent from the stage and taking refuge into the past stories like Hermione's tomb which shields her from the outside.

Then why does 'the narration' as a refuge for the reported characters disappear in the final act? It is collisions among the subjects that have caused the family crisis because of the jealousy, the breakdown between the best friends, the quarrel between the father and the son. The characters avoid conflicts of living bodies and seek reconciliation by temporarily leaving their subject to the story told by others. Therefore, the reunion scene needs to be told as a past story. However, now that the difficulties have been resolved, just as Hermione has 'metamorphosed' into the living body, the characters have to restore their subject to tell themselves. Nevertheless, the play ends leaving Perdita's own story untold which should be a sign of the recovery of the subject to tell one's own story. The reason

would be explained by the storytelling of Autolycus which parodies the interrupted Perdita's story. Just as Autolycus can tell about himself only by abandoning his subject, Perdita might have a danger that she cannot secure her subject to tell her own story in the control of the code of the play that a subject is left to stories told by others. Therefore, before recovering the subject, they need to discard the act of narrating for the time being.

However, there is another reason for the disappearance of 'narration.' It can be seen in the technique of singing which Autolycus chooses to convey ballads. Here let us review the attitude toward music from the latter half of the sixteenth century to the seventeenth century. It was thought that there should be an analogy between music and the harmony of the universe at that time. On the other hand, practical music was reproached mainly in the religious world as what would divert the mind from the lofty thoughts. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy* published in 1621, Robert Burton said that music is:

so powerful a thing, that it ravisheth the soul ... the Queene of the senses, by sweete pleasure. ... (qtd. in Dunn 56)

Also in the Elizabethan era, Roger Ascham, a tutor of Elizabeth I, cited Galen's words and warned, "Much music marreth man's manners ..." (qtd. in Boyd 16). Richard Mulcaster said that in his book published in 1581:

to some [music] seems offensive, bycause it ... bewitcheth the mind with a syrens sound, pulling it from that delite, wherein of duetie it ought to dwell, unto harmonickall fantasies, and withdrawing it, from the best meditations. ...
(qtd. in Dunn 56)

I would like to suggest that the very world of “fantasies” might be homogeneous to the “fancy” Leontes was indulged in. It is Roland Barthes who analyzes this characteristic of music:

[The “grain”] forms a signifying play having nothing to do with communication, representation (of feelings), expression; it is that apex (or depth) of production where the melody really works at the language – not at what it says, but the voluptuousness of its sounds-signifiers, of its letters. ... (Barthes 182)

The “grain” refers to the singing voice. “[T]he melody” is, as Terry Eagleton says, music which consist only of signifiers (Eagleton 26). The singing voice is a site where this music works on the lyrics, the language, severs the yoke between the signifiers and signified, and signifiers begin to play. It is too similar to how Leontes gets lost in wild fancies. Let us look at Paulina’s lines:

PAULINA. But this most cruel usage of your queen—
 Not able to produce more accusation
 Than your own weak-hing’d fancy—something savours
 Of tyranny. ... (2.3.116-19)

As the lines show, Leontes’ fancy has nothing to do with external evidence:

LEONTES. Affection! thy intention stabs the centre:
 Thou dost make possible things not so held,
 Communicat’st with dreams ...
 With what’s unreal thou coactive art,
 And fellow’st nothing: then ’tis very credent
 Thou may’st co-join with something. ... (1.2.138-43)

Howard Felperin, examining these lines, points out that

Leontes experiences the unstableness of meanings and the state in which words cannot refer to things (Felperin 197). Just as "Affection" is linked to "nothing," his words lose referents, and floating signifiers increase by themselves. Then they stick to and part from the signified one after another. The similarity between the signifiers of Leontes' fancy and those of Autolycus' songs shows that the act of storytelling itself which should offer a refuge for the characters told in the story has a danger of being linked to the world of the very fancy of Leontes which the characters should protect themselves from. Therefore, the play needs to make 'narration' disappear after using it.

In the end, let us see the last lines of Leontes:

LEONTES. . . . we may leisurely
 Each one demand, and answer to his part
 Perform'd in this wide gap of time. . . . (5.3.152-54)

Though 'narration' disappears on the stage, his lines make us feel that the act of storytelling will go on in the world of *The Winter's Tale* even after the ending. *The Winter's Tale* makes 'narration' disappear on the stage for the moment and seeks the act of storytelling by recovered subjects outside the stage.

NOTES

- 1 This is the revised version of the paper first delivered at the 72nd annual meeting of the English Literary Society of Japan at Rikkyo University on May 21, 2000.

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