



# Metaphor, Empowerment, Enslavement, and Transformation: The Thing-Narrative in *The Winter's Tale*

Haoshen Ma

School of Foreign Studies, Guangdong University of Finance and Economics, Guangzhou 510320, Guangdong, China

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**Abstract:** Previous studies on Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* tend to lay emphasis on an anthropocentric perspective, with little attention to different "things" that come through in the play. This essay discussed the agency of objects through the lens of thing-narrative so as to glimpse into their hidden features. This essay constellates four functions of things, namely metaphor, empowerment, enslavement, and transformation to elucidates how things construct human identity, advance the story, and change the tone. It also reveals how things are uniquely placed to enhance their subjectivity, create an organic unity in which humans and non-humans interact with each other, and further give the play a deeper vitality.

**Keywords:** *The Winter's Tale*; thing-narrative; metaphor; empowerment; enslavement; transformation

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## 1. Introduction

In literary works, the ups and downs moments in the plots are closely knit with human beings while they also cannot be done without things. In recent years, due to the influence of "post-humanism" and "de-anthropocentrism," things have been back in the academic spotlight. The evolution and expansion of the discourse connotation on things in the current context make up the core thrust behind the "Material Turn" in many fields of discipline.[5]

Things are integral elements of the plays, as they constitute part of the prescribed context, with close relation to the fate of the characters and the events.[12] Not only do they visualize the mental activity of the performers, but they also breathe vitality into the story. However, unlike other literary works, the presence of things in plays does not receive sufficient narrative pauses to describe their agency. Instead, they often silently appear on the stage as props or are briefly mentioned in the conversations, with a gradual reduction to a mere tool between human interactions that have a less and less presence in daily life. Arguably, their inconspicuous presentation often makes people overlook their importance, coupled with the fact that we human beings tend to judge things from the perspective of subject-object and regard them as the "other", which further put them in an awkward position. In response to this, it is advisable for us to eliminate human's centrality by placing human beings and things in the same ontological status whereby we can return to interpreting the text from the angle of object-as-subject.

*The Winter's Tale* is a play by William Shakespeare originally published in 1623, known for its compelling plot twists and intriguing wordplay in dialogues. This is principally so for the reason of the hidden characters — things. The play tells a story about jealous and tyrannical king Leontes, who suspects his daughter, Perdita, of illegitimacy and orders the Antigonus to abandon her when she is still an infant. As a result, Hermione is presumed dead due to her breakdown. And Leontes lives in misery and sorrow from then on. Fortunately, a shepherd adopts the abandoned baby. After sixteen years, Shepherd Perdita and Prince Florizel both fall in love with each other, and her true identity is finally revealed through all the trials and tribulations. At the end of the play, she is reunited with her father thanks to her inheritance and his wife also returns to life from a statue, which leads to a joyful family reunion. The story seems to focus exclusively on the humans. Upon closer examination, however, we may find that the text is peppered with the features and processes of things in shaping characters. In a sense, things extend the self of people, and the depiction of things is more effective in achieving the portrayal of people. [4] In addition, the metaphoric, empowering, enslaving, and transformative functions of things all contribute to the intricate and twisting plot. Therefore, this essay explores the things in *The Winter's Tale*, with the revelation of how they influence the characters and develop a story.

## 2. Metaphorizing Human Through Things: Construction of Identity

Things may become symbols in the narrative and are used as metaphors for culture, history, and society.[13] Both at home and abroad, it is a common practice to use things to metaphorize people, as it enhances the vividness and symbolism of the characters' images with its function to link the characteristics of objects with those of characters. Also, things in the narrative, as a concrete symbol that carries meaning, are often used by the storyteller to insinuate the identity of the charac-

ters.[11] This characteristics helps to better supplement the background and build a well-rounded image.

From time immemorial, flowers, like other things, have long been imbued with affluent cultural implications. In *The Winter's Tale*, the floral imagery in the entire play is not an arbitrary setting. When Antigonus abandons the infant, he addresses her as "Blossom"[10]50 (3.3.45). Perdita is thus compared to a flower, an image, or an object that runs through her growing process and foreshadows her potential noble identity. She lives with the shepherd's family before being discovered and returned to the court. Though as a lowly shepherdess, under the blessing of the floral image, her noble demeanor and innate beauty were never obscured by her humble surroundings. In the sheep-shearing festival, she dresses as Flora "in a flowery gown and with a garland on her head"[10]59 (4.4). Like a flower in its first blossom, she pieces together her identity that was once fragmented by putting on the flowery gown and the garland on her head to lead the readers to unmask the original glamour that comes from her noble lineage. In her conversations with Camillo and Polixenes, her keen understanding and love for flowers likewise give prominence to her grace and elegance and betoken the mysteries of her unique and noble identity that are about to be unveiled. Her bonding with flowers suggests that the image of the flower is a reflection of her doppelganger and an extension of her positive feminine image. Intrinsically, Perdita's noblesse oblige and feminine energy are the result of the unseen power from the flowers. It follows then that the attributes of flowers are not meant to be perceived as something bestowed by people but rather implanted at the moment of birth. Humans, just in their pursuit to eulogize their admirable traits, happen to notice all the fine features flowers naturally possess and thus borrow them as symbols of self-expression. In other words, flowers provide a channel through which people can articulate their identities. All the abstract concepts like beauty, elegance, and dignity that humans aspire to are presented in Perdita, while her act of adorning herself with flowers serves as a figurative alternative to these qualities. In this way, flowers have equal status with Perdita in the play and the boundary between their identities fades with each being a symbol for the other in order to easily bring out the charm in their respective characteristics.

In another case, Leontes having a conversation with his son, is as informative as it is intriguing: "We must be neat; not neat, but cleanly, captain: / And yet the steer, the heifer, and the calf, / Are all called 'neat'... Still virginalling / Upon his palm... How now, you wanton calf? / Art thou my calf?"[10]9 (1.2.123-26). The term "neat", as mentioned by Leontes, can be explained as cleanliness and tidiness, but according to its archaism, it also means "cattle". That is because, in ancient times, men with unfaithful wives would have horns on their foreheads[8]. In this way, his comparison of himself and his son to a calf suggests his suspicion of his wife's fidelity as well as the pain of betrayal in his identity. He then compares himself and his son to eggs, "To be full like me: yet they say we are / Almost as like as egg"[10]9(1.2.129-130), to emphasize the close relationship between father and son on the one hand, and to show the vulnerability and helplessness of the identity on the other. For this reason, he remarks on the female identity, "But were they false as o'er-dyed blacks, / As wind, as waters; false / As dice are to be wished, by one that fixes / No bourn 'twixt his and mine;"[10]9 (1.2.131-34). It is not hard to see that a series of things to metaphorize and contrast different identities attest to the fact that his delusions and distrust make him fabricate the so-called definition of women's fickle identities. Briefly speaking, Leontes tries to seek evidence of his own identity by availing "thing" of other forms of expression with metaphorical meaning. With this facilitation, he is able to materialize his internal conflict and strengthen his judgments about others' identities. Hence, the expressive and metaphorical power of "things" not only conveys his inner entanglement with identity but also constructs an image torn by contradiction with a view to laying a solid foundation for the later emotional outburst of the character.

### 3. The Empowering and Enslaving Role of Thing: Developer of the Plot and Characters

Apart from the role of things in the construction of Perdita's identity as a flower, as discussed above, the presence of things paves the way for the development of the plot and characters in a way that cannot be ignored. But we, more often than not, see things from a human perspective as simply tools or clues, without any reference to their subjectivity. In fact, things have their own power, as Latour observed, "objects too have agency." [6]63

In *The Winter's Tale*, the agency of things can be reflected in its capacity to empower individuals. That is to say, they cease to fulfill its affordance and instead transfer its inherent value to humans. Perdita's reunion with her father is made possible by the contribution of things to her. And it is when things provide their value for them that their subjectivity comes to the fore. The first thing is that Antigonus settles Perdita down with "things", including a box, and papers. Note too one more thing that Antigonus puts beside her — the text does not specify what those things are and refers to as "these"[10]50 (3.3.47) — as important as the things mentioned above in changing the trajectory of her life. By following the text, one may ascertain that "these" refer to gold, as evidenced by the fact that, after the shepherd and the clown find Perdita, the clown opens the box and exclaims excitedly: "You're a made old man; if the sins of your youth are forgiven you, you're well to

live. / Gold! all gold!”[10]52 (3.3.114-15) As opposed to taking on a transactional role, the gold here gives value, which can be regarded as a sort of power, to the clown and the shepherd, enabling them to raise Perdita and improve their status. It is discernible that things are more than just passive entities, but agents with the potential to advance the plot. There is another justification for this, as we can learn from the Gentlemen’s conversation in Act 5, Scene 2, wherein the Perdita Inheritance takes on a similarly significant role. It is through these three objects, namely “The mantle of Queen Hermione’s: her jewel about the neck of it: the letters of Antigonus found with it”[10]98 (5.2.32-34), that allows the plot to move in an unexpected direction. To put it another way, these three things provide the information and resources, whereby they bring into their initiative into full play. Without them, Perdita’s identity would have remained undiscovered, and she and Florizel might have been reduced to outlaws. The later account of Antigonus’ whereabouts can also be corroborated through several things, “a handkerchief and rings of his that Paulina knows”[10]99 (5.2.63-64). These findings reveal that the agential things facilitate people both reclaiming their power and retrieving the information, shedding light on the trajectory of characters’ lives on a deeper level. In other words, thing-power[it] draws attention to an efficacy of objects in excess of the human meanings, designs, or purposes they express or serve.[1]20

Autolycus, an obnoxious thief, not only sells counterfeit goods to people, but also steals money from them. In the hands of Autolycus, the things are subject to the process of being stolen and exchanged. However, taking on the perspective of their own agency has allowed us to better figure out how they lure the people. The underlying logic of things’ influences on people lies in their intentional displacement that forms the temptation behaviour and the narrative continuity is thus achieved through the things’ movement. By circulating between people, things deliver value to them, but it simultaneously, as part of the exchange, deprives them of their subjectivity. For instance, Autolycus says in the play, “I have sold all my trumpery: not a counterfeit stone, not a ribbon, glass, pomander, brooch, table-book, ballad, knife, tape, glove, shoe-tie, bracelet, horn-ring, to keep my pack from fasting: they throng who should buy first, as if my trinkets had been hallowed, and brought a benediction to the buyer: by which means I saw whose purse was best in picture; and, what I saw, to my good use I remembered.”[10]80 (4.4.593-600) This can be seen as a way in which the worthless things are moving away from him, while the gold is getting closer to him. Ostensibly, he receives the endowment of the things, but in reality, the things also harness him through the transaction to realize their displacement. Marx has put his interpretation on the nature of a thing after it has become a commodity: as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness.[7]163 It is fair to say that in the process of exchange, things show their charms that humans cannot perceive or sense. Besides, Autolycus says, “I picked and cut most of their festival purses: and had not the old man come in with a hubbub against his daughter and the king’s son, and scared my choughs from the chaff, I had not left a purse alive in the whole army.”[10]81 (4.4.610-14) This indicates purses are gravitating to him all the time due to the things’ nature of temptation. One could say that Autolycus is just a vehicle for the things’ movement and things have enslaved him, dictating his next move. In my reading, the exchange of garments is another proof of things’ enslavement. Camillo says, “yet for the outside of thy poverty, we must make an exchange; therefore disease thee instantly (thou must think there’s a necessity in’t) and change garments with this gentleman: though the pennyworth, on his side, be the worst, yet hold thee, there’s some boot.”[10]81 (4.4.628-32) Through this unequal barter, Autolycus is once again bewitched and endowed with value by the things, and it is this empowerment that triggers the next enslavement. The royal disguise he obtains allows him to deceive the Shepherd and the Clown, from whom he acquires gold again. In the course of exchange and theft, he has been acquiring many valuable things. The reason why he has been able to add value to himself is that the things are the real motivator for him to satisfy his desire that has been engraved in things for a long time. In the process of things’ displacement, his actions and behavior are manipulated and he becomes a puppet controlled by the objective force that empowerment and enslavement are like a chain of dominoes, with each step interlinked to develop characters and bind them together for the climax of the story.

#### 4. Transformative Power: Burring of Boundaries and Shifts in Tone

“Transformation” or “Metamorphosis”, a recurring theme that appears in various literary works spanning from mythology to fiction, never fails to fascinate human-beings. These works share one common feature, that is, humans transform into animals or objects, with their subjectivity lost and objectivity taking the lead. Similarly, you can also find such processes in *The Winter’s Tale*.

Florizel, For instance, expresses his love for Perdita, “Apprehend nothing but jollity: the gods themselves / (Humbling their deities to love) have taken / The shapes of beasts upon them: Jupiter / Became a bull, and bellowed; the green Neptune / A ram, and bleated;”[10]60 (4.4.25-29). According to the conventions then, it is a regulation-violating behavior for the prince and shepherdess who fall in love with each other due to the asymmetry of their social class. He thus quotes the allusion of gods as animals in pursuit of love as a way to narrow the distance with Perdita. He would rather swallow his pride

for the sake of love, even to the point of “transforming” into a lowly animal to win her heart and display his determination to detach from mundane existence. On the one hand, to some extent, the act of metamorphosis into animal forms is based on the subconsciousness of the protagonist, an emblem of a desire to escape the pressures of reality.[14] On the other hand, it defies human-led norms to deconstruct and reframe the anthropocentric society. In Shakespeare’s writing, objectification is not a put-down process; rather, it is a sort of re-exploration of the relationship between humans and things and shapes the consciousness of building a community with a shared future for mankind and objects. When humans are transformed into things, or the things take on human characteristics, the boundaries of identities that were once considered to be either noble or lowly become fuzzy. That way, it sets the love tone for the conversation and the story.

As for the Hermione’s resurrection, or the transformation from a statue to a human being, it is very classic setting and totemic process for thing-narrative. The statue witness all the people gather together and through out the transformation, it collapses the distance between humans and things. To be more explicitly, the changing process is, in fact, a combination of human and thing. In Shakespeare’s writings, he actually blur the lines between things and humans and view them more as a hybrid. Leontes frequently remarks on the lifelike statue: “Still methinks, / There is an air comes from her. What fine chisel, / Could ever yet cut breath? Let no man mock me, / For I will kiss her.”[10]105 (5.3.76-79). Paulina immediately interrupts him and reminds him that it is nothing more than an unfinished “object”: “Good my lord, forbear: / The ruddiness upon her lip is wet; / You’ll mar it, if you kiss it.”[10]105 (5.3.80-82). According to Brown’s interpretation, he draws on the concept of the “hybrid object” to the in-between identity of a specific object. He characterizes it as “the hybrid object designates an imbrication or conflation of object and subject, the unhuman object assuming characteristics of human subjects”[2]372, an idea to construct an equal standing between humans and objects. Granted, some may argue that this is only a staged act of Hermione who pretends to be a statue. Be it true or not, however, Shakespeare’s melding of human and thing transcends the traditional one-way human-thing relationship and the transformation breaks their boundaries. We might say, further, that this can also be understood as shifts in tone from a tragic atmosphere represented by cold statues to a comedic ending by a warm being, human. Shakespeare’s description of the statue makes us realize that things do not exist alone and they always coexist with humans. Thus, the statue, as a founder of the narrative tone, a balancer for harmonious development, and a organizer for leading the story to its conclusion, challenge the conventional dichotomy between humans and objects and blazes a new path for reconsidering their relationship.

## 5. Conclusion

In *The Winter’s Tale*, things should not be seen as accessories or marginalized figures, but dynamic beings that are characterized by their agency to control characters and events, both on the narrative and discursive levels. Viewed this way, things, that are supposed to belong to passive entities, come to life and cooperate with people to act out the entire play. They thus get rid of human definition and regain their subjectivity. That said, deciphering the play from the thing-oriented perspective does not mean making no mention of human existence; on the contrary, it requires the establishment of equal status between humans and things to broaden our sensibility toward this world and widen the scope of narrative in the play. Their joint performance is the finishing touch that makes the whole play shine.

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