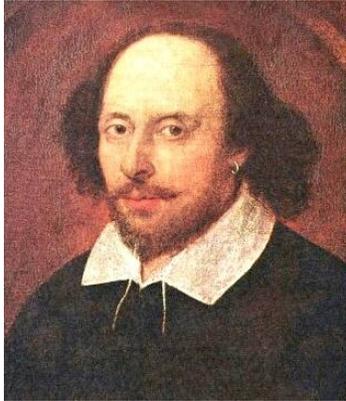


# THE WINTER'S TALE

by William Shakespeare



## THE AUTHOR

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was born into the family of a prosperous tradesman in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. While in his mid-teens, he was forced to leave school because his family fell into a period of poverty, so that he had only a rudimentary education. In 1582, he married Anne Hathaway, eight years his senior and already three months pregnant. The marriage produced three children in three years, but in 1585, Shakespeare left Stratford to go to London to seek his fortune in the big city.

In London, he embarked upon a career on the stage, becoming a popular actor by the early fifteen nineties. In 1591, he penned his first play, *Love's Labour's Lost*. His early plays were comedies, and show nothing of the depth that characterized his later works. His plots were borrowed from a variety of sources, both ancient and contemporary. During his career, he wrote 37 plays, three narrative poems, and 154 sonnets.

His writing brought him fame and popularity, but he continued to act as well as write (critics love to speculate about which of the characters in his plays would have been played by the author). He eventually became a shareholder in the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men when James I ascended the throne). Most of his plays were performed at local theaters like the Rose, the Globe, and the indoor Blackfriars. When the Globe burned to the ground in 1613 (a cannon misfired during a performance of *Henry VIII*), Shakespeare retired, and died in Stratford three years later on his fifty-second birthday.

*The Winter's Tale* (1611) is one of Shakespeare's later plays and, like *The Tempest*, is hard to characterize. It is often called a Romance or Tragicomedy because, despite its happy ending, evil and death are central to the story, including the deaths of several innocents. The basic plot line was borrowed from earlier Elizabethan writer Richard Greene's *Pandosto* (1588), who was ironically one of Shakespeare's severest critics. The symbolism of the seasons harks back to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, especially the tale of Proserpine's return from the underworld, while the statue coming to life at the end is an allusion to the story of Pygmalion and Galatea.

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Leontes - King of Sicilia and lifelong friend of Polixenes, he suspects that his wife is unfaithful with his best friend, and therefore arranges to have Polixenes poisoned, though the plot is foiled by Camillo, and his wife imprisoned. He also orders his newborn daughter, whom he suspects is not his, to be abandoned in the wilderness. He later repents and is reunited with wife and daughter.
- Hermione - Queen of Sicilia, Leontes' wife, she is accused by her husband of infidelity, but is acquitted by the oracle at Delphos. She is reported dead after hearing of the death of her son, then appears in ghostly form to Antigonus with instructions to leave her daughter in the Bohemian wilderness. She is protected for sixteen years by Paulina, and reappears to be reunited with her husband at the end.
- Mamillius - The young Prince of Sicilia, he dies during his mother's trial.
- Perdita - Daughter of Leontes and Hermione born during her mother's imprisonment, she is left to die in the wilderness, found and raised by a shepherd, and ultimately falls in love with and marries Florizel.
- Camillo - A Sicilian nobleman who is asked by Leontes to poison Polixenes, but who warns Polixenes instead and joins his service. He plays a key role in reconciling the two old friends, and at the end marries Paulina.
- Antigonus - A Sicilian nobleman who offers to geld his daughters if Hermione is unfaithful, he is ordered to take Leontes' infant daughter into the wilderness and abandon her there. He does so, then is eaten by a bear.
- Paulina - Wife of Antigonus, she takes the infant Perdita to Leontes in order to beg the king's mercy, protects Hermione after her supposed death, and at the end marries Camillo.
- Cleomenes, Dion - Sicilian noblemen who are sent by Leontes to the oracle at Delphos to seek counsel.
- Polixenes - King of Bohemia and lifelong friend of Leontes, he is nearly murdered by his best friend out of false jealousy, and later becomes infuriated when his son falls in love with a shepherdess who is really the Sicilian princess.
- Florizel - Prince of Bohemia, he meets Perdita in the forest, unaware of her origin, falls in love with her, elopes with her against his father's wishes, and eventually marries her.
- Autolycus - A former courtier of Prince Florizel, he is dismissed and lives as a traveling peddler and pickpocket. He is instrumental in revealing the truth of Perdita's origins.

- Shepherd - He finds Perdita abandoned in the forest and raises her as his own daughter, becoming unaccountably wealthy in the process.
- Clown - The Shepherd's son, he witnesses the deaths of Antigonus and the mariners and is the butt of Autolycus' trickery.

## NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"We were as twinned lambs that did frisk I' the' sun,  
And bleat the one at the other." (Polixenes, Iii, 67-68)

"A sad tale's best for winter. I have one  
Of sprites and goblins." (Mamillius, Iii, 25-26)

"There may be in the cup  
A spider steeped, and one may drink, depart,  
And yet partake no venom, for his knowledge  
Is not infected: but if one present  
Th' abhorred ingredient to his eye, make known  
How he hath drunk, he cracks his gorge, his sides,  
With violent hefts. I have drunk, and seen the spider. (Leontes, Iii, 39-45)

"You smell this business with a sense as cold  
As is a dead man's nose." (Leontes, Iii, 150-151)

"Sir, spare your threats.  
The bug which you would fright me with I seek." (Hermione, IIIii, 90-91)

"Hermione is chaste, Polixenes blameless, Camillo a true subject, Leontes a jealous tyrant, his innocent babe truly begotten; and the king shall live without an heir if that which is lost be not found." (Message from the Oracle, IIIii, 131-134)

"I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients, stealing, fighting." (Shepherd, IIIiii, 58-61)

"Thou meetest with things dying, I with things newborn." (Shepherd, IIIiii, 106-107)

## NOTES

**Act I, scene 1** - Archidamus of Bohemia and Camillo of Sicilia compare their respective realms, speak of the friendship between their monarchs, and praise the worth of the Sicilian nobleman Mamillius.

**Act I, scene 2** - Polixenes is preparing to return to his kingdom in Bohemia after a nine-month stay with Leontes and his family, but Hermione persuades him to stay a week longer. Leontes, noting that his wife is able to persuade Polixenes where he was not, becomes jealous of the relationship between the two. As Hermione and Polixenes walk in the garden, Leontes questions Camillo about his impressions of his wife, but the nobleman sees nothing amiss and warns his sovereign against an overactive imagination. Leontes scorns him for a liar, and the faithful Camillo then agrees to poison Polixenes at dinner on the condition that no word is ever spoken against the Queen. As soon as the king departs, however, Camillo realizes that he cannot obey his order, and therefore must flee from Sicilia. He meets Polixenes, warns him of the plot, and advises him to leave for Bohemia that very night. The grateful Polixenes then offers to take Camillo into his service.

**Act II, scene 1** - Hermione and her ladies in waiting are playing with Mamillius. The queen is pregnant, and the ladies tease Mamillius about the arrival of a new prince. As Mamillius begins to tell the women a story of sprites and goblins, Leontes enters with Antigonus, who tells him that Polixenes has fled with his entourage, taking Camillo with him. Leontes is now convinced of his old friend's villainy, and believes that Camillo was involved with him in a plot against his throne. Not doubting that the child in Hermione's womb was fathered by Polixenes, he seizes Mamillius and orders him to stay away from his mother, then commands his nobles to put Hermione in prison. The lords beg Leontes to reconsider and swear that he is mistaken; Antigonus even goes so far as to offer to geld his three daughters if Hermione is unchaste. Leontes, meanwhile, has sent two nobles, Cleomenes and Dion, to the oracle at Delphos to seek counsel.

**Act II, scene 2** - Paulina, the wife of Antigonus, tries to visit Hermione in prison but is forbidden to do so. She instead speaks to Emilia, her lady in waiting, and finds that Hermione has delivered her baby prematurely - a little girl. Paulina asks permission to take the baby to Leontes, hoping to use the child to soften the king's resolve.

**Act II, scene 3** - Leontes has been unable to sleep, and Mamillius is sick. Though Polixenes and Camillo are beyond his reach, he vows to take out his wrath on Hermione. At that point Paulina enters with the baby. Leontes refuses her an audience, but she insists, hoping to soften him with the sight of his infant daughter. Instead, Leontes orders that mother and daughter be burned, and that Paulina suffer the same fate if she does not leave his presence instantly. After Paulina's departure, Leontes softens somewhat under the pleading of his lords. Instead of having mother and baby burned, he orders Antigonus to take the child and abandon her in a desolate place, insisting that, should he fail to do so, both he and his wife will be executed. He then receives word that Cleomenes and Dion have returned from Delphos, and orders that preparations be made to try Hermione for adultery.

**Act III, scene 1** - Cleomenes and Dion, having visited the oracle, return to Sicilia with their sealed message, hoping it bodes well for Hermione.

**Act III, scene 2** - The trial of Hermione begins, with the queen accused of high treason for adultery with Polixenes and for conspiring with him against the life and kingdom of Leontes. Hermione insists upon her innocence, but Leontes says she is worthy of death. Hermione then

appeals to the oracle. When the sealed oracle is read, it proclaims the innocence of Hermione, Polixenes, and Camillo, calls Leontes a jealous tyrant, says the infant is legitimate, and warns that, unless she is found, Leontes will die without an heir. All in the court gives thanks, but Leontes refuses to believe the message. At this point a servant enters to announce that Prince Mamillius has died. At this point, Hermione passes out and Leontes finally recognizes the error of his ways and repents, insisting that he will make amends with Polixenes and Camillo and woo his wife anew. Pauline, however, enters at this point and announces that Hermione has died of grief.

**Act III, scene 3** - Antigonus, meanwhile, is carrying out the king's command to abandon the baby girl [Note that Bohemia is landlocked and cannot be reached by sea]. During the voyage he sees a vision of Hermione, whom he therefore believes to have died. The ghost tells him to abandon the baby in Bohemia and to name her Perdita. Hermione also tells him that he will never see his wife Paulina again. After Antigonus abandons the child, he is chased by a bear. Soon a shepherd comes along seeking lost sheep. He finds the infant and takes it for his own. His son arrives to announce that a storm has sunk the ship in which Antigonus had been sailing, and that Antigonus himself had been devoured by the bear.

**Act IV, scene 1** - A chorus speaks in the person of Time, announcing that sixteen years have passed. Leontes has retired into seclusion in his grief, and the scene now shifts to Bohemia, where Florizel and Perdita are now ripe youths, the latter having grown up as a shepherd's daughter.

**Act IV, scene 2** - Camillo, after an absence of fifteen years, asks Polixenes for permission to return to Sicilia and comfort his penitent master. Polixenes begs him not to go because of the value of his faithful service. They talk of the young Prince Florizel, who is often absent from court lately. The reason for his absence is that he frequents the house of a shepherd, who for some unaccountable reason has become wealthy and has a beautiful daughter. Polixenes and Camillo decide to visit the shepherd in disguise to find out what is going on.

**Act IV, scene 3** - Autolycus, a former servant of Florizel but now reduced to living by his wits, encounters the shepherd's son and pretends to have been robbed by that notorious rogue Autolycus. The young man offers him money, but Autolycus declines, having already stolen his purse.

**Act IV, scene 4** - Florizel, disguised in peasant garb and going by the name of Doricles, is talking to Perdita, to whom he has given a lovely dress. He had first met her when one of his falcons had gone astray, and has since come to see her regularly. She fears lest they be discovered dressed in this way by his father the king. They have invited friends to a feast at sheep-shearing to announce their engagement. Unknown to them, however, Polixenes and Camillo are among the guests in disguise. When the king and his retainer meet Perdita, they marvel at such beauty in one who is lowborn, and quickly observe that she and a peasant lad named Doricles are in love with one another. Soon Autolycus enters as a singing peddler, and songs and dances ensue. Polixenes and Camillo, after hearing the two young lovers profess their undying affection, ask Florizel if his father knows of his intention. Florizel says he does not, and for good reason. When, after much coaxing, Florizel still refuses to tell his father of his engagement, Polixenes reveals his identity and in his fury says that he will hang the shepherd, have Perdita whipped with briars to disfigure

her beauty, and disinherit and banish his son. When he calms down a little, he commutes the shepherd's sentence of death and warns Perdita never to see Florizel again. After Polixenes storms away, Florizel tells Camillo he intends to run off to sea with Perdita and marry her abroad. Camillo encourages them to go to Sicilia and present themselves to Leontes, certain of a joyful reception from the penitent. He forces Florizel to change clothes with Autolycus and tells Perdita to disguise herself as a man. He then intends to tell Polixenes of their flight with the hope that he will take Camillo with him in pursuit, and thus effect a grand reconciliation. Meanwhile, the shepherd's son convinces him to tell Polixenes the truth about Perdita's origins and show him the box containing the effects with which she was abandoned. Autolycus interrupts them in the guise of a courtier, however, and convinces them to pay him for his assistance before the king.

**Act V, scene 1** - Back in Sicilia, Cleomenes and Dion are trying to talk Leontes into coming out of seclusion and remarrying for the good of his kingdom. Paulina reminds them that the oracle had said he would have no heir until his lost daughter be found. He knows she is right, and determines never to marry again in memory of his poor persecuted Hermione. Paulina makes him swear an oath never to remarry without her permission, which she will never give unless one like Hermione should appear. At this point Florizel and Perdita arrive; she, introduced as his princess from Libya, is sworn by all to be the fairest they have ever seen. Even as Florizel brings greetings from his father and weaves his tale of an embassy to Libya, a messenger enters announcing the arrival of Polixenes himself. He is accompanied by Camillo, but also by the shepherd and his son and some unknown nobleman (Autolycus), and is furious that his son has eloped with a shepherdess. Leontes asks if the two are married, and Florizel admits they are not, but asks Leontes to be their advocate before Polixenes.

**Act V, scene 2** - In a conversation between Autolycus and several gentlemen, we hear that the shepherd's box, containing Hermione's mantle and necklace and letters from Antigonus, has been opened, the identity of Perdita confirmed, Leontes and Polixenes reconciled, and all overwhelmed with joy. Paulina hears the details of her husband's death and Perdita learns of her mother for the first time. Paulina then invites Perdita and the others to her home to see a statue of her mother made by a famous sculptor. The gentlemen affirm that she is so fond of this sculpture that she visits in at least three times a day. The shepherd and his son, now in favor in both courts, promise to put in a good word for Autolycus, who has done a good deed in spite of himself.

**Act V, scene 3** - All go to the home of Paulina to see her statue of Hermione. Leontes is amazed at the likeness, though he complains that the statue is a bit more wrinkled than Hermione had been, and when Perdita goes to embrace the likeness of her mother, Paulina warns her that the paint is not yet dry. The men marvel that the statue appears so lifelike, appearing even to breathe before them. It is, of course, Hermione herself, said to be dead but hidden and protected by Paulina for sixteen years. Paulina is left to mourn her dead husband until Leontes, in a surfeit of joy, gives her Camillo to be her new husband.

## ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, why does the playwright choose to relate the great reconciliation scene in Act V, scene 2 secondhand in a conversation among noblemen rather than showing it on stage? Would your conclusion have been different had the scene been the closing one in the play? What difference does the true ending in Act V, scene 3 make to your assessment of the scene that precedes it? In your speculation, be sure to include what you know of the conventions and restrictions of the theater in Shakespeare's day.
2. Jealousy is an important theme in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello*. Compare and contrast the treatment of the subject in the two plays. Which more clearly shows the consequences of jealousy in ruining the lives of those involved? Which is more powerful, and which more realistic? Why do you think so?
3. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello*, the central characters, Leontes and Othello, are consumed with unjustified jealousy, fearing their mates have been unfaithful. Analyze the psychological consequences of jealousy in the lives of those consumed by it, citing incidents and quotations from both plays in your analysis. What biblical principles are illustrated in the two treatments?
4. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* we find a story of sin, repentance, and redemption and reconciliation. To what extent does the Bard's treatment of these themes correspond with what Scripture tells us about them? Support your analysis with details from the play and specific Scripture references.
5. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Leontes and Polixenes are described as "brothers" in childhood and youth. In what ways do they act as brothers in the play? Consider both their similarities of character and the nature of their interactions with one another.
6. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, the theme of the seasons of the year is a prominent one. The first three acts take place in winter and the last two in the spring. How do the contents of the sections of the play match the seasons during which they occur? Be sure to cite specifics in your analysis.
7. William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello* have many thematic similarities, and these may be seen in the roles played by similar characters. Compare and contrast the roles played by Hermione and Desdemona, respectively, as the innocent victims of their husbands' insane jealousy. Pay particular attention to the interactions between Hermione and Polixenes on the one hand and Desdemona and Cassio on the other.

8. William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello* have many thematic similarities, and these may be seen in the roles played by similar characters. Compare and contrast the roles played by Paulina and Emilia, respectively, as the voices of reason in the midst of insane jealousy.
9. William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* and *Othello* have many thematic similarities, but one key difference is that the former play lacks any character corresponding to the villain Iago. Why is this difference important? How does the fact that Leontes' jealousy is driven entirely by his own fancy rather than by the machinations of an enemy contribute to the eventual resolution of the conflict? Why could *Othello* never have had such a happy ending?
10. A *deus ex machina* is a plot device that brings about a satisfactory denouement in a totally unexpected way (the phrase itself refers to divine intervention). While such endings can bring happiness out of sorrow and disaster, the fact that nothing in the story has prepared the audience for the surprise ending often is less than satisfactory as a cathartic experience. Evaluate the ending of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in the light of this issue. Do you find it emotionally satisfying or stretched beyond the point of credibility? Defend your answer with specifics from the play.
11. Act III, scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* contains the most famous of all of the playwright's stage directions - "Exit, pursued by a bear." Why does Shakespeare kill off Antigonus? Is it poetic justice for abandoning poor little Perdita, a symbol of the viciousness of Leontes, or a plot device to keep news of Perdita's survival from reaching Sicilia?
12. Act III, scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* contains the most famous of all of the playwright's stage directions - "Exit, pursued by a bear." Consider the difficulty of carrying out this stage direction. Why must the bear be *shown*, especially when some other key events in the play occur offstage? Why must the director and actors handle the staging in just the right way in order to avoid ruining the scene? Consider especially the tone required in order to elicit the appropriate response from the audience.
13. Many fairy tales involve a young prince or princess abandoned in the forest who grows up unaware of his or her identity. Such a story line is central to William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Choose a well-known fairy tale that includes this plot device and compare it to Shakespeare's treatment of the story.
14. Discuss the contributions of Autolycus to William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Consider his impact on both the plot and the emotional tone of the play in your analysis.
15. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, all of the female characters are admirable. Not so, however, with the men. Which male character in the play do you consider the most admirable, and why? Be sure to evaluate such traits as moral steadfastness, loyalty, and consistency of behavior in your analysis.

16. Critics have differed in their interpretations of the final scene of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. In your opinion, was Hermione truly resurrected, as some of the characters believe, or had she been hidden away by Paulina for sixteen years? What textual evidence can you cite to support your conclusion? How is the impact of the ending affected by the interpretation the viewer chooses?
17. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, we first meet Perdita as the lovely shepherdess distributing flowers to all she meets. Compare this scene with the one in *Hamlet* where the mad Ophelia passes out flowers to the members of Claudius' court. In your analysis, consider the symbolic significance of the flowers, noting that in both cases they are intended to communicate certain meanings to the recipients.
18. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, the faithful Sicilian nobleman Camillo is the rock against whom the mad follies of Leontes may be measured. Compare his role to that of Kent in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Consider not only the characters of the two men, but also their roles in the plots of the plays and the ways in which they serve to bring out the characters of the monarchs they serve.
19. William Shakespeare often incorporates ghosts into his plays. Compare the appearance of the ghostly Hermione in *The Winter's Tale* with that of Hamlet's father in *Hamlet*. How are the two similar and how are they different, especially with regard to the nature of the communication and its impact on the characters to whom they speak?
20. In William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the protagonist says, "The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." After the performance of the players, we find Claudius indeed struggling mightily with his conscience, though to no avail. Consider what events and characters "catch the conscience of the king" in *The Winter's Tale*. To what extent do these events represent the climax or turning point of the play? How is Shakespeare's use of this device different here than it is in *Hamlet*? What might account for the differences?
21. Compare and contrast the character of Mamillius in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* with that of the son of Macduff in *Macbeth*. Consider the impact of the few lines given to the two boys as well as the significance of their deaths to the themes of the two plays.
22. In order for an audience to be drawn into the action of a play, the motives, words, and actions of the characters require a certain level of credibility. When the audience becomes unable to suspend disbelief, the play suffers. Evaluate William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* in this respect, giving attention in particular to the jealousy of Leontes and the reconciliation between him and Hermione at the end of the play.

23. In Act III, scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, the Shepherd says, "I would there were no age between ten and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancientry, stealing, fighting." Such sentiments have often been expressed by adults exasperated with the behavior of the young. To what extent do the young people in the play support or contradict the Shepherd's assessment? Use specific examples to support your analysis.
24. Drama in Elizabethan times was supposed to maintain the three unities of time, place, and action, but William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* clearly violates all three. How are these unities violated, and what benefits are gained by ignoring them?
25. In Act II, scene 2 of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Polonius describes the versatility of the Players by saying that they are skilled at presenting all types of plays, including "tragical-comical-historical-pastoral." To what extent is this an appropriate description of the playwright's *The Winter's Tale*? How does Shakespeare blend various genres in this unclassifiable play? Be sure to give specific support for your analysis.
26. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, is Time a force of healing or a force of decay and destruction? Defend your conclusion with specifics from the play.
27. Foils are contrasting characters who bring out one another's qualities by the power of the differences between them. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, perhaps the most powerful foils are not people, but places. How do Sicilia and Bohemia serve as foils in the play? Support your analysis with specifics from the script.
28. In William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, Florizel's disobedience of his father is justified by the power of his love for Perdita. Was his disobedience justifiable? Does the unreasonable behavior of Polixenes affect your answer? Be sure to bring biblical teaching on the subject into your discussion.
29. Discuss the interaction of illusion and reality in William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Consider in your analysis the basis for Leontes' jealousy, the disguises often effected by central characters, and the "death" and "resurrection" of Hermione. What distinguishes illusion from reality according to Shakespeare? Does his treatment of the subject correspond to the teachings of Scripture? Why or why not?
30. In speaking of William Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, critic Baldwin Maxwell argues that it is a highly moral play because of "its insistence that sin be paid for before it be forgiven." Is this an accurate assessment of one of the play's central themes? Is it biblical? Why or why not?