

Richmond Shakespeare

Play Guide

THE WINTER'S TALE

By William Shakespeare

Prepared by
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Educational Outreach

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Pre-performance

Shakespeare's language

The Winter's Tale exemplifies Shakespeare's masterful use of the English language. He uses a variety of linguistic and poetic techniques, and he uses them in ways that amplify themes in the play, or help us to understand the thoughts and motives of characters.

In Shakespeare, characters who speak in prose are generally more pragmatic, and often represent lower social classes. Characters from the upper classes tend to speak in verse, though Shakespeare also uses verse to indicate heightened emotions and elevated ideas.

Sometimes a character will change how he or she speaks. A pragmatic character that suddenly switches to verse (poetry) might be experiencing a mood change. Characters that are in disguise will also change speaking patterns to reflect the "part" they are playing at any given moment.

The Elizabethan Playhouse

The Globe, the theater most commonly associated with Shakespeare, was not the only theater in London, but it is the most famous. Others include the Rose and the Curtain (both mentioned in *Shakespeare in Love*) and the Swan. The Blackfriars was an indoor "private" theater used by Shakespeare's company (known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, then later as the King's Men) that was generally frequented by playgoers of higher social ranks. The public theaters were all open to the sky in order to take advantage of the natural lighting.

All of the open theaters had arena-style stages (with the audience on three sides), with the poorer audience members (the groundlings) standing on the ground right next to the stage, and the more wealthy audience members sitting in galleries in a circular fashion all around the yard (the open area where the groundlings stood). The atmosphere was fairly raucous (more like NASCAR or WWE wrestling), with people constantly moving around, throwing hazelnut shells on the ground and talking--UNLESS they were intrigued by what was going on onstage. We think that with Shakespeare's plays the audience would have been pretty attentive.

Because the plays took place in the early afternoon and the players (actors) could see the audience and vice versa, it is thought by many scholars that Shakespeare intended for the audience to be involved in the play itself. An actor might refer to an audience member to make some reference to a character not on stage, and this interaction with the audience contributes to

the performance's humor and excitement.

People often ask how long Elizabethan performances of Shakespeare's plays were. The plays certainly seem long when we read them. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Prologue alludes to "the two hours traffic of our stage." If the actors really meant that, there would be a very fast pace-- no long pauses or slow exits and entrances. This makes sense if you consider that the normal groundling had the attention span of today's average five-year-old child and liked to throw things.

Synopsis

Act I Two courtiers, Archidamus of Bohemia and Camillo of Sicilia speak of the lifelong friendship of their countries' rulers and the noble qualities of Sicilia' young prince Mamilius. Bohemia's King Polixenes prepares to leave Sicilia after a long visit. His host, King Leontes cannot persuade him to stay and asks his wife, Hermione, to try. When she succeeds, Leontes becomes suspicious that she may be having an affair with his old friend. Leontes tells his suspicions to Camillo and tries to enlist him to poison Polixenes. Instead, Camillo warns Polixenes of the plot against him, and they resolve to leave Sicilia together in secret.

Act II. Hermione is playing with Mamilius when Leontes enters to accuse her publicly of infidelity and claim that the unborn child she carries is Polixenes'. She denies the charges and is defended by the old lord Antigonus. Leontes sends messengers to the Oracle at Delphi to obtain a verdict. Antigonus' wife Paulina visits the prison where Hermione is being held. Though she does not see her friend, she learns that Hermione has given birth to a baby girl. As Leontes broods on revenge against Polixenes and the failing health of young Mamilius, Paulina enters with the newborn baby and fiercely asserts Hermione's innocence and the baby's legitimacy. Furious at being challenged by a woman, Leontes blames Antigonus for not restraining her. He orders Antigonus to abandon the baby in a "remote and desert place." The messengers return with the Oracle's verdict, which Leontes decrees will be unsealed at Hermione's trial.

Act III. At the trial, Hermione refutes the charges but resigns herself to a death sentence. The Oracle's verdict is unsealed and Hermione is cleared. However, news arrives that Mamilius has died of grief. Hermione collapses and Leontes is overwhelmed by his guilt. Paulina enters and announces the queen is dead. Leontes vows to mourn her at her tomb forever. The setting shifts to a deserted spot on the Bohemian coast. Antigonus leaves the baby, named Perdita, to its fate and meets his own end. A shepherd finds the baby and a box containing gold. He and his son, the Clown, take the baby home to raise as their own.

Act IV Sixteen years later, Leontes is a recluse in Sicilia and Perdita a shepherdess in Bohemia. King Polixenes and Camillo prepare to disguise themselves as shepherds in order to spy on Polixenes' son Florizel, who is romantically involved with a wealthy shepherd's daughter. The pedlar Autolycus appears and cons the Clown. Florizel woos Perdita, who is worried that as a commoner she will not be acceptable to his father. Polixenes and Camillo arrive and are entertained by the shepherd and Perdita. Autolycus enters selling ballads. The shepherd tells his guests of the upcoming wedding of Perdita and "Doricles" (Florizel). Polixenes throws off his disguise and separates the lovers. Florizel confides to Camillo that he plans to escape by sea with his betrothed. Camillo, who is homesick, suggests they flee

to Sicilia. Autolycus enters again and Camillo instructs him to swap clothes with Florizel. In the hope of avoiding punishment, the shepherd and his son decide to show the king the box that would prove Perdita is adopted. Autolycus, pretending to be a powerful lord, frightens them into taking him along as their advocate.

Act V. Back in Sicily, Paulina makes Leontes swear he will not remarry until his lost daughter is found. If that should happen, she will provide him with a wife who looks exactly like his lost Hermione. Florizel arrives and introduces Perdita as a Libyan princess he is betrothed to. A Bohemian lord enters and orders Florizel arrested on King Polixenes' orders. Leontes offers to intercede for the couple. Several gentlemen describe how the shepherd's box proved Perdita's identity as Leontes' daughter. The fathers agree to let their children marry. Paulina invites the wedding party to her house to view a miraculously lifelike statue of Hermione. [xxxxxx xxxxx xxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxx] [For the audience's protection, the rest of this synopsis is redacted.]

About the play

The primary source for *The Winter's Tale* is Robert Greene's novel, *Pandosto, the Triumph of Time*. Although the storyline of *The Winter's Tale* closely follows that of *Pandosto*, Shakespeare made some significant alterations. In *Pandosto*, Leontes's has been presented with a number of events which lead to his explosion of jealousy. In Shakespeare's version, the jealousy seems to come on quite suddenly and have no ground in reality. Additions to the plot include the characters of Paulina and Autolycus, the sheep-shearing scene, the statue scene at the end, and the restoration of the family to Leontes at the end. Also the locations of Sicilia and Bohemia are reversed- the court was located in Bohemia while the pastoral scene was placed in Sicilia.

Written in 1610-1611 (**note this production is almost exactly 400 years later**), the first recorded performance of *The Winter's Tale* was May 15, 1611, as noted in an account by the astrologer, Simon Forman. There was also a performance recorded in the Revels Account (The Office of the Revels oversaw the royal festivities and later became responsible for stage censorship) for November 5 that same year for the Court of King James I. The play was also acted at Whitehall Palace for the wedding of Princess Elizabeth (daughter of James I) to Frederick V, the Elector Palatine on February 14, 1613.

The play was very popular in the Jacobean era (time period of James I) but was basically abandoned by the 1660's. As it was called a comedy, it was felt to be not funny enough, and as a tragedy, it didn't provoke enough concern. David Garrick, in the latter half of the 1700's, took the Sicilia part of the play and condensed it into a prologue and concentrated on the comedy of the second half, calling it, *Florizel and Perdita, a Dramatic Pastoral*. The entire play was not restored until the 19th century.

The first printing of *The Winter's Tale* was in the Folio of 1623 (Folio was a large printing of all the plays into one bound book. Individual play printings were called Quartos because a single page was folded twice to make 4 sides.) It is listed as a comedy here. In later printings, it was called a romance.

Type or genre of play-*The Winter's Tale*, as many of Shakespeare's later plays, is difficult to categorize. The first half of the play, set in the court of Sicilia, plays as a tragedy, ie the action of

the main characters, in this case King Leontes, ends in death (not necessarily their own) Leontes loses (or apparently loses) his son, his wife, his newborn child, and Antigonus, who had the unfortunate task of abandoning the newborn child to die. The second half of the play, in the beginning, is pastoral, or set out in the natural world- in this case, the countryside of Bohemia. There is a sheep-shearing festival, a trickster named Autolycus and the people and circumstances are very different than those in Sicilia. Since it is also humorous and has a love story, it is classified as a comedy.

A common theme in Shakespeare's plays is that people are "better" when they live in or move to the natural world. Characters are often reformed by going to these places- in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the the lovers and the tradesmen (mechanicals) all go into the woods, and returned changed- their problems solved. In *As You Like It*, the Duke and his followers banished to the woods by usurpation, lead a more "natural life" Duke Senior even remarks upon it:

*Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,
Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court?
Here feel we but the penalty of Adam,
The seasons' difference, as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
Which, when it bites and blows upon my body,
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say
'This is no flattery: these are counsellors
That feelingly persuade me what I am.'
Sweet are the uses of adversity,
Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
And this our life exempt from public haunt
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones and good in every thing.
I would not change it.*

In *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare, instead of having the court characters reform by going to the natural world, brings it (in the form of some of its inhabitants) back to a changed Sicilian court. Leontes has repented and reformed, and is now ready to have what was lost, given back to him. Because this play, like other comedies from Shakespeare's late life, has so many differing elements and an increased complexity from his previous comedies, some people have designated them romances or even "problem" plays

Gender roles in Shakespeare's time- In Shakespeare's time, according to The Chain of Being, all things in heaven and earth were put in their place by God, and should not move from their place. A woman was expected to obey her husband in all things, to never contradict, to speak in mild tone, and in all things to be pleasing. Even a queen was expected to marry and subjugate herself to a higher authority, the king, because everyone knew that a woman could not rule a country on her own. (one of the reasons that Queen Elizabeth I did not want to marry). As in previous Shakespeare plays, the women in *The Winter's Tale* seem to defy the norm. Paulina, a noblewoman, challenges Leontes' decisions openly under no small danger to herself.

She acts as his conscience and by setting up the circumstances of the final scene, helps him to find himself again. Even Hermione, Leonte's queen, by quietly maintaining her dignity and moral center, redefines the expectations of women at that time.

Fun -or odd- things:

Perdita, the name of Hermione's child, means "loss"

Paulina's first husband, Antigonus, on orders from Leontes, agrees to take Herminone's baby and leave her to perish. Instead he dies. He is "replaced" at the end of the play, by Camillo who brings Perdita back and marries Paulina.

Interesting coincidence-in real life, Prince Elizabeth's husband, Protestant Frederick V, briefly became King of Bohemia when the people deposed their Catholic King and chose Frederick to succeed him. The Pope did not like this and declared war, to which the Jesuits made a prediction that Frederick's reign would only last the winter and "melt away like the snow". When Frederick lost the crown, both he and Elizabeth were forced to go into exile. Elizabeth was thereafter referred to as the Winter Queen.

Bohemia, which in *The Winter's Tale* has a seacoast, is actually landlocked.

Challenges in production

The challenge in putting on *The Winter's Tale*, is balancing all the disparate elements equally. Like life, there is tragedy in comedy and laughter in sadness. The play should be funny, thrilling, scary and heart breaking and yet it needs to feel like a connected whole. The first half needs to feel as serious as the occasion warrants, even though the second half will be much lighter. If the tragedy is glossed over, the balance will not be obtained and the play will be "out of joint."

Another challenge is what to do with characters who age. Many of Shakespeare's previous plays take place within the span of a few days. Sixteen years have passed between the first half and the second in *The Winter's Tale*, so the characters need to look and act older, especially Leontes who has gone through a particularly sad and stressful time.

The final challenge is how to deal with the magical elements:

- 1) How to make a human being look and stand like a statue?
- 2) How to carry out one of the most famous stage directions ever written: "Exit, pursued by a bear.?" Do you have a real bear? A man in a bear suit or bear skin? A silhouette?
Arguments abound on how Shakespeare's troupe would have handled this. Bears were available – and nearby. Bearbaiting, a sport in which a tethered bear fights to the death with an attacking pack of dogs, was popular in the same part of town in which Shakespeare's major theatre, The Globe, was located.

Things to watch for during the play

- 1) What happens to the Queen after the news that her son is dead? What do other people say or do in reference to it? What are we told of her condition?
- 2) Note reaction to the statue at the end of the play and what is said about Paulina at that point.

- 3) When does Leontes first exhibit jealousy and how fast does it grow?
- 4) How is the bear done? Is it funny or scary?

Post-performance

Thought questions for *The Winter's Tale*

1. Why does Shakespeare leave us thinking Hermione is dead? How is her story like that of the legend Persephone/Proserpina?
2. Who was your favorite character and why? Who would you want to play if you were in the show?
3. Women today have a very different position than those of today. What differences did you see Do you think things are better now? Why?
4. Some of the characters did bad things to others. Did you see them get punished for what they did? Do you think the punishments fit the crimes?
5. *The Winter's Tale* was based on the stories Shakespeare grew up hearing. Does this play remind you of any stories you know? How about the characters in the play? Do they remind you of any characters from other stories you know?
6. How do the countries of Sicily and Bohemia differ? How did the director and designers bring this to life?
7. Did you like the way the play ended? Why or why not?
8. This play is famous for the bear. Did you like the way the director showed us the bear? How would you do it if you had the chance?
9. Do you think Hermione is innocent? Why or why not?
10. Why is this play called *The Winter's Tale*? Do you hear the title mentioned in the show? What does the title mean?