

The Winter's Tale (1623)

By William Shakespeare
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Dramatis Personae (Characters)

Sicilia

- Leontes: King of Sicily; boyhood friend of Polixenes
- Hermione: Queen of Sicily
- Camillo: Sicilian nobleman
- Paulina: Sicilian noblewoman
- Antigonus: Husband of Paulina and friend to Hermione
- Dion: Sicilian lord
- Cleomenes: Sicilian lord
- Mamillius: Prince of Sicily and son to Leontes and Hermione
- Emilia: One of Hermione's ladies-in-waiting

Bohemia

- Polixenes: The King of Bohemia
- Florizel: Polixenes's only son and heir
- Perdita: The daughter of Leontes and Hermione
- Shepherd: An old and honourable sheep-tender.
- Clown: and Perdita's adopted brother who is a hepherd
- Autolycus: A whimsical but dishonest pedlar
- Mopsa and Dorcas: Shepherdesses

Other Characters

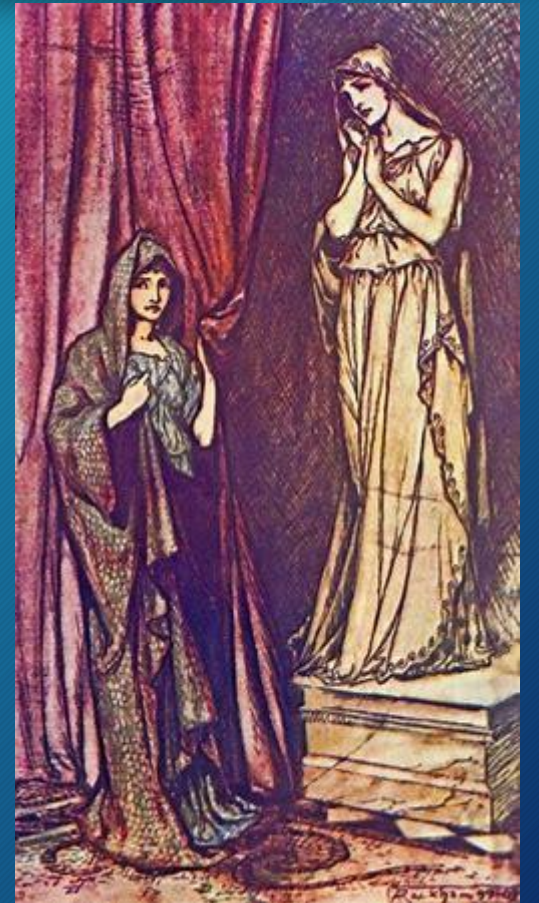
- Jailer, mariner, Archidamus (Bohemian lord); other lords, servants, gentlemen, ladies, shepherds and servants

The Winter's Tale Summary

‘The jealous King Leontes falsely accuses his wife Hermione of infidelity with his best friend, and she dies. Leontes exiles his new-born daughter Perdita, who is raised by shepherds for sixteen years and falls in love with the son of Leontes' friend. When Perdita returns home, a statue of Hermione “comes to life”, and everyone is reconciled.’

Source: <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-plays/winters-tale/#>

(Please don't reference like this in your essays; PowerPoint presentations follow different conventions to academic essays)



Act 1 summary

‘Polixenes, King of Bohemia, is anxious to return home after a nine-month trip to Sicily to visit his lifelong friend, King Leontes. Dismayed, Leontes begs his friend to delay his departure, but Polixenes refuses. When Leontes's pregnant wife, Hermione, succeeds in persuading Polixenes to stay, Leontes becomes suspicious that his wife has been unfaithful with his friend. His obsession grows until Leontes asks his cupbearer, Camillo, to poison Polixenes. Rather than do so, Camillo warns Polixenes. Together they flee the country, leaving Hermione and her beloved son, Mamillius, to face the King's wrath.’

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Critics generally regard Leontes's sudden jealousy as one of the main problems with this play because it happens so suddenly and without sufficient cause.

Act 1 memorable dialogue

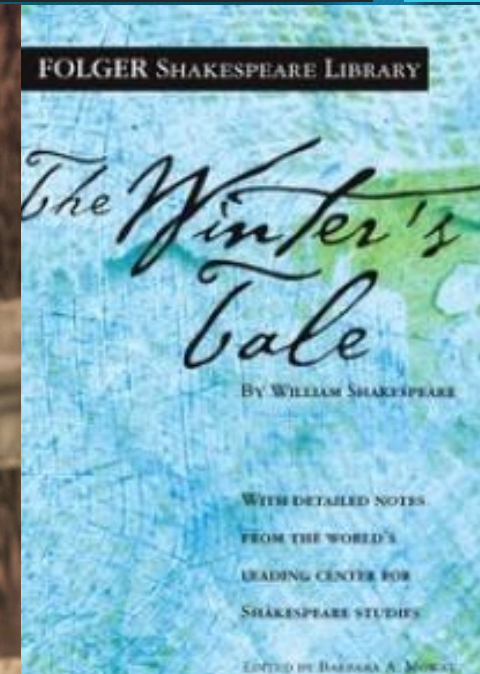
HERMIONE:
Nay, but you will (stay in Sicily)?

POLIXENES: I may not, verily.

HERMIONE:

Verily?
You put me off with limber vows. But I,
Though you would seek t' unsphere the stars with
oaths,
Should yet say "Sir, no going." Verily,
You shall not go. A lady's "verily" is
As potent as a lord's. Will you go yet?
Force me to keep you as a prisoner,
Not like a guest, so you shall pay your fees
When you depart and save your thanks. How say you?
My prisoner or my guest? By your dread "verily,"
One of them you shall be.
POLIXENES Your guest, then, madam.
To be your prisoner should import offending,
Which is for me less easy to commit
Than you to punish.

From the
start,
Hermione's
grace and
good manners
are apparent



*You've been sent a free e-version of the play that does not have line numbers. However, those students who have data are encouraged to read [this Folger edition](#) of the play, since line numbers make it easier to reference.

Act 2 summary

‘Leontes imprisons Hermione with no evidence against her other than his own suspicions. In captivity she gives birth to her baby girl. Leontes orders two messengers to inquire at the oracle at Delphi to prove his delusions correct. Paulina, Hermione’s friend, takes the infant child to try and persuade Leontes to free his wife and overcome his obsessions. Instead, it only infuriates him further. He threatens Paulina, the child, and Paulina’s husband, Antinogus. Leontes orders Antigonus to take the baby into exile.’

Source: <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-plays/winters-tale/#>



Act 2 memorable dialogue

CAMILLO (to POLIXENES)

I know not. But I am sure 'tis safer to
Avoid what's grown than question how 'tis born.
If therefore you dare trust my honesty,
That lies enclosed in this trunk which you
Shall bear along impawned, away tonight!
Your followers I will whisper to the business,
And will by twos and threes at several posterns
Clear them o' th' city. For myself, I'll put
My fortunes to your service, which are here
By this discovery lost. Be not uncertain,
For, by the honor of my parents, I
Have uttered truth—which if you seek to prove,
I dare not stand by; nor shall you be safer
Than one condemned by the King's own mouth,
thereon
His execution sworn.



By sparing Polixenes, Camillo is rebelling against a direct order from his King. In so doing, he is committing the crime of treason. Yet even as he rebels against Leontes's order, Camillo is actually serving his King's interests better and more wisely than the King is currently able to do himself.

Act 3 summary

'Weak from her childbearing, Hermione is brought to trial where her innocence is proven by a message from the oracle. News comes that Mamillius had died from distress at his mother's arrest. Hermione collapses and is taken away. Paulina soon returns with news of Hermione's death, and Leontes faces reality and remorse for his actions.

Antigonus has a dream wherein Hermione directs him to leave the baby on a beach in Bohemia. He does this, and is then killed by a bear before he can leave. A shepherd and his son find the child and take her home.'



A sad tale's best for winter. I
have one of sprites and goblins.

~ William Shakespeare

AZ QUOTES

Source: <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-plays/winters-tale/#>

Act 3 memorable dialogue

PAULINA (to Leontes)

What studied torments, tyrant, hast for me?
What wheels, racks, fires? What flaying?
Boiling
In leads or oils? What old or newer torture
Must I receive, whose every word deserves
To taste of thy most worst? Thy tyranny,
Together working with thy jealousies,
Fancies too weak for boys, too green and idle
For girls of nine, O, think what they have
done,
And then run mad indeed, stark mad, for all
Thy bygone fooleries were but spices of it.
That thou betrayedst Polixenes, 'twas nothing;
That did but show thee of a fool, inconstant
And damnable ingrateful. Nor was 't much
Thou wouldst have poisoned good Camillo's
honor,
To have him kill a king: poor trespasses,
More monstrous standing by, whereof I reckon
The casting forth to crows thy baby daughter

To be or none or little, though a devil
Would have shed water out of fire ere done 't.
Nor is 't directly laid to thee the death
Of the young prince, whose honorable
thoughts,
Thoughts high for one so tender, cleft the
heart
That could conceive a gross and foolish sire
Blemished his gracious dam. This is not, no,
Laid to thy answer. But the last—O lords,
When I have said, cry woe!—the Queen, the
Queen,
The sweet'st, dear'st creature's dead, and
vengeance
for 't
Not dropped down yet.

Dame Judi Dench in the role of Paulina,
a character who is brave and full of
righteous anger on her Queen's behalf



Act 4 summary

‘At the beginning of act 4, Time, personified as a character, explains that sixteen years have passed since the exile of the infant. He mentions that Leontes mourns the loss of his wife and children.

In Bohemia, Camillo, Leontes's old cupbearer, asks Polixenes if he can return home. Polixenes denies his request. He mentions how his son, Florizel, has met and fallen in love with a shepherd's daughter named Perdita. This relationship is far below the social station of the Prince, and Polixenes is not happy. Polixenes and Camillo, in disguise, attend the feast where dancers entertain them. When Florizel and Perdita are betrothed, Polixenes reveals himself. He denounces Florizel and threatens the shepherd and his son for allowing Perdita to befriend the Prince.’

Source: <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-plays/winters-tale/#>

Act 4 memorable song

AUTOLYCUS (sings)

*When daffodils begin to peer,
With heigh, the doxy over the dale,
Why, then comes in the sweet o' the
year,
For the red blood reigns in the winter's
pale.*

*The white sheet bleaching on the
hedge,
With heigh, the sweet birds, O how
they sing!
Doth set my pugging tooth an edge,
For a quart of ale is a dish for a king.*

*The lark, that tirrorra chants,
With heigh, with heigh, the thrush and
the jay,
Are summer songs for me and my aunts,
While we lie tumbling in the hay.*

(speaks)

I have served Prince Florizell and in my
time wore
three-pile, but now I am out of service.

(sings)

*But shall I go mourn for that, my dear?
The pale moon shines by night,
And when I wander here and there,
I then do most go right.*

*If tinkers may have leave to live,
And bear the sow-skin budget,
Then my account I well may give,
And in the stocks avouch it.*

This song signals
the plot's
transition from
Winter to Spring.



Act 5 summary

‘Camillo, still anxious to see his homeland, helps Florizel and Perdita escape and travel to Sicily. They are followed by the shepherds, who in turn are pursued by Polixenes and Camillo. At Leontes's court, Florizel introduces himself and his beloved as ambassadors on behalf of his father. Leontes, still in mourning over his actions, welcomes the son of his former friend and his new wife. Polixenes and Camillo soon arrive, explaining Florizel's escape.

Leontes discovers that Perdita is his long-lost banished daughter. With Perdita now a suitable companion for Florizel, everyone is reunited, and Leontes and Polixenes mend their past. As the play concludes, Paulina reveals a newly completed statue of Hermione. Everyone, especially Leontes, remarks at how beautiful and realistic the statue looks. Upon Paulina's direction, music sounds, and the statue comes to life.

Florizel and Perdita are betrothed, Leontes and his Queen are restored to one another and, as a reward for her care, Paulina is given Camillo to be her new husband.’

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Act 5 memorable dialogue

PAULINA

Music, awake her! Strike!

Music sounds.

'Tis time. Descend. Be stone no more.

Approach.

Strike all that look upon with marvel. Come,
I'll fill your grave up. Stir, nay, come away.

Bequeath to death your numbness, for from
him

Dear life redeems you.—You perceive she
stirs.

Hermione descends.

Start not. Her actions shall be holy as
You hear my spell is lawful. Do not shun her
Until you see her die again, for then
You kill her double. Nay, present your hand.
When she was young, you wooed her; now in
age

Is she become the suitor?

LEONTES O, she's warm!



The play and its problems

Read Stephen J. Miko's article *Winter's Tale* (1987). In it, he lists the following problems:

- 1. The Trouble With The Bear (which seems like a ludicrous addition to the story)
- 2. Leontes jealousy fosters in the audience the expectation that the play will be a tragedy; yet the final parts conform more closely to the genres of romance and comedy (in that there is a happy ending)
- 3. In Act III and V, references to Nature and transformation propel the genre of the play in a new direction: the pastoral
- 4. Representations of magical and mythical happenings, as well as references to art (statues and music) should mean that this play can be classified as a romance

Shakespeare and his sources

- Original source: Robert Greene's *Pandosto* (1588)
- The major change Shakespeare makes to his version is that, in the original, Hermione dies
- Having Hermione come back to life is a striking change and one that made the play wildly popular during Shakespeare's time because of the spectacle of seeing a statue come to life (also, audiences generally prefer a happy ending)
- Leontes's jealousy is a vice that leads him to lose his entire family and most of his loyal friends; the pattern of his family being lost and then restored to him after many years conforms to the conventions of other such stories about loss and regaining what is lost
- Stories about loss and return in literature were particularly popular in Renaissance Italy and Medieval England. Examples include the stories of Day 2 (about Fortune) in Boccaccio's *Decameron* and the 'Clerk's Tale' in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.
- Even the book of *Job* in the Bible conforms to this familiar pattern of loss and restitution

Activity

Now that you've read *The Winter's Tale*, write a one-page essay analysing the theme of loss and restitution in the play. Lay out your answer as you would a normal summative assessment (although this is a formative assessment). Include quotations that are properly integrated into grammatically correct sentences. In the course of your essay, you should look at the factors that cause Leontes to lose his family; the extent of his suffering, and whether or not you think his reconciliation with his family is a satisfying conclusion.

