

The winter's Tale

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Context

Likely the most influential writer in all of English literature and certainly the most important playwright of the English Renaissance, William Shakespeare was born in 1564 in the town of Stratford-upon-Avon in Warwickshire, England. The son of a successful middle-class glove-maker, Shakespeare attended grammar school, but his formal education proceeded no further. In 1582, he married an older woman, Anne Hathaway, and had three children with her. Around 1590 he left his family behind and traveled to London to work as an actor and playwright. Public and critical success quickly followed, and Shakespeare eventually became the most popular playwright in England and part owner of the Globe Theater. His career bridged the reigns of Elizabeth I (ruled 1558-1603) and James I (ruled 1603-1625); he was a favorite of both monarchs. Indeed, James granted Shakespeare's company the greatest possible compliment by endowing them with the status of king's players. Wealthy and renowned, Shakespeare retired to Stratford, and died in 1616 at the age of fifty-two. At the time of Shakespeare's death, such luminaries as Ben Jonson hailed him as the apogee of Renaissance theatre.

Shakespeare's works were collected and printed in various editions in the century following his death, and by the early eighteenth century his reputation as the greatest poet ever to write in English was well established. The unprecedented admiration garnered by his works led to a fierce curiosity about Shakespeare's life; but the paucity of surviving biographical information has left many details of Shakespeare's personal history shrouded in mystery. Some people have concluded from this fact that Shakespeare's plays in reality were written by someone else--Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford are the two most popular candidates--but the evidence for this claim is overwhelmingly circumstantial, and the theory is not taken seriously by many scholars.

In the absence of definitive proof to the contrary, Shakespeare must be viewed as the author of the 37 plays and 154 sonnets that bear his name. The legacy of this body of work is immense. A number of Shakespeare's plays seem to have transcended even the category of brilliance, becoming so influential as to affect profoundly the course of Western literature and culture ever after.

The Winter's Tale is one of Shakespeare's final plays. Composed and performed around 1610-11, it joins *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest* in the list of genre-defying later plays that are usually referred to as romances, or tragicomedies. Each of these productions has a happy ending that sets them apart from earlier histories and tragedies, but each emphasizes the danger and power of evil in the world, and death, while never finally victorious, is an ever-present force in the stories. In *The Winter's Tale*, we are given a joyous ending, but the playwright demands that we endure the savage madness of Leontes, and the deaths of three innocent people before we reach the happy resolution.

There is no one source for *The Winter's Tale*, although Shakespeare relies heavily on the works of Richard Greene, a London writer in the 1580s and '90s. (Greene may have been the author of a 1592 pamphlet attacking Shakespeare, which makes the Bard's borrowings from the deceased writer particularly appropriate.) From *Pandosto*, Greene's 1588 prose romance, Shakespeare borrowed most of the characters and events of the first three acts; and the character and habits of Autolycus seem to be drawn from Greene's pamphlet accounts of criminals in Elizabethan London. The story of the abandoned royal baby, meanwhile, owes much to popular folklore of the time, and the seasonal themes touched on in Act IV echo Ovid's *Metamorphoses*--Perdita is associated with Proserpina, whose emergence from the Underworld in Greek myth was supposed to herald the return of spring. Finally, the resurrection of Hermione in Act V owes an obvious debt to the Pygmalion story, in which a sculptor's work comes to life through divine intervention.

In terms of strength of character, unity of plot, and audience satisfaction, *The Winter's Tale* may be the best of the later romances, and it has been a favorite of directors and audiences down to the present day.

Short Summary

King [Leontes](#) of Sicilia begs his childhood friend, King [Polixenes](#) of Bohemia, to extend his visit to Sicilia. Polixenes protests that he has been away from his kingdom for nine months, but after Leontes's pregnant wife, [Hermione](#), pleads with him he relents and agrees to stay a little longer. Leontes, meanwhile, has become possessed with jealousy--convinced that Polixenes and Hermione are lovers, he orders his loyal retainer, [Camillo](#), to poison the Bohemian king. Instead, Camillo warns Polixenes of what is afoot, and the two men flee Sicilia immediately.

Furious at their escape, Leontes now publicly accuses his wife of infidelity, and declares that the child she is bearing must be illegitimate. He throws her in prison, over the protests of his nobles, and sends to the Oracle of Delphi for what he is sure will be confirmation of his suspicions. Meanwhile, the queen gives birth to a girl, and her loyal friend [Paulina](#) brings the baby to the king, in the hopes that the sight of the child will soften his heart. He only grows angrier, however, and orders Paulina's husband, Lord [Antigonus](#), to take the child and abandon it in some desolate place. While Antigonus is gone, the answer comes from Delphi--Hermione and Polixenes are innocent, and Leontes will have no heir until his lost daughter is found. As this news is revealed, word comes that Leontes's son, [Mamillius](#), has died of a wasting sickness brought on by the accusations against his mother. Hermione, meanwhile, falls in a swoon, and is carried away by Paulina, who subsequently reports the queen's death to her heartbroken and repentant husband.

Antigonus, meanwhile abandons the baby on the Bohemian coast, reporting that Hermione appeared to him in a dream and bade him name the girl [Perdita](#) and leave gold and other tokens on her person. Shortly thereafter, Antigonus is killed by a bear, and Perdita is raised by a kindly [Shepherd](#). Sixteen years pass, and the son of Polixenes, Prince [Florizel](#), falls in love with Perdita. His father and Camillo attend a sheepshearing in disguise and watch as Florizel and Perdita are betrothed--then, tearing off the disguise, Polixenes intervenes and orders his son never to see the Shepherd's daughter again. With the aid of

Camillo, however, who longs to see his native land again, Florizel and Perdita take ship for Sicilia, after using the clothes of a local rogue, [Autolycus](#), as a disguise. They are joined in their voyage by the Shepherd and his son, a [Clown](#), who are directed there by Autolycus.

In Sicilia, Leontes--still in mourning after all this time--greet the son of his old friend effusively. Florizel pretends to be on a diplomatic mission from his father, but his cover is blown when Polixenes and Camillo, too, arrive in Sicilia. What happens next is told to us by gentlemen of the Sicilian court: the Shepherd tells everyone his story of how Perdita was found, and Leontes realizes that she is his daughter, leading to general rejoicing. The entire company then goes to Paulina's house in the country, where a statue of Hermione has been recently finished. The sight of his wife's form makes Leontes distraught, but then, to everyone's amazement, the statue comes to life--it is Hermione, restored to life. As the play ends, Paulina and Camillo are engaged, and the whole company celebrates the miracle.

Characters

Leontes - The King of Sicilia, and the childhood friend of the Bohemian King Polixenes. He is gripped by jealous fantasies, which convince him that Polixenes has been having an affair with his wife, Hermione; his jealousy leads to the destruction of his family.

Hermione - The virtuous and beautiful Queen of Sicilia. Falsely accused of infidelity by her husband, Leontes, she apparently dies of grief just after being vindicated by the Oracle of Delphi, but is restored to life at the play's close.

Perdita - The daughter of Leontes and Hermione. Because her father believes her to be illegitimate, she is abandoned as a baby on the coast of Bohemia, and brought up by a Shepherd. Unaware of her royal lineage, she falls in love with the Bohemian Prince Florizel.

Polixenes - The King of Bohemia, and Leontes's boyhood friend. He is falsely accused of having an affair with Leontes's wife, and barely escapes Sicilia with his life. Much later in life, he sees his only son fall in love with a lowly Shepherd's daughter--who is, in fact, a Sicilian princess.

Florizel - Polixenes's only son and heir; he falls in love with Perdita, unaware of her royal ancestry, and defies his father by eloping with her.

Camillo - An honest Sicilian nobleman, he refuses to follow Leontes's order to poison Polixenes, deciding instead to flee Sicily and enter the Bohemian King's service.

Paulina - A noblewoman of Sicily, she is fierce in her defense of Hermione's virtue, and unrelenting in her condemnation of Leontes after Hermione's death. She is also the agent of the (apparently) dead Queen's resurrection.

Autolycus - A roguish peddler, vagabond, and pickpocket; he steals the Clown's purse and does a great deal of pilfering at the Shepherd's sheepshearing, but ends by assisting in Perdita and Florizel's escape.

Shepherd - An old and honorable sheep-tender, he finds Perdita as a baby and raises her as his own daughter.

Antigonus - Paulina's husband, and also a loyal defender of Hermione. He is given the unfortunate task of abandoning the baby Perdita on the Bohemian coast.

Clown - The Shepherd's buffoonish son, and Perdita's adopted brother.

Mamillius - The young prince of Sicilia, Leontes and Hermione's son. He dies, perhaps of grief, after his father wrongly imprisons his mother.

Cleomenes - A lord of Sicilia, sent to Delphi to ask the Oracle about Hermione's guilt.

Dion - A Sicilian lord, he accompanies Cleomenes to Delphi.

Emilia - One of Hermione's ladies-in-waiting.

Archidamus - A lord of Bohemia.

Act I, Scenes i-ii

Summary

In the kingdom of Sicilia, King **Leontes** is being visited by his childhood friend, King **Polixenes** of Bohemia. One of Leontes's lords, **Camillo**, discusses the striking differences between the two kingdoms with a Bohemian nobleman, **Archidamus**. The conversation then turns to the great and enduring friendship between the two kings, and the beauty and promise of Leontes's young son, **Mamillius**.

These two lords go out, and Leontes comes in, along with his wife **Hermione** (who is pregnant), Mamillius, and Polixenes, who is making ready to depart for home. Leontes pleads with him to stay a little longer in Sicilia, but his friend refuses, declaring that he has been away from Bohemia for nine months, which is long enough. Hermione then takes up the argument, and Polixenes yields to her entreaties, promising to stay for a little longer. He tells the Sicilian queen how wonderful his childhood with Leontes was--how "we were, fair queen / Two lads that thought there was no more behind / But such a day tomorrow as today / And to be boy eternal"(I.ii.63-66).

Leontes, meanwhile, tells Hermione that she has never spoken to better effect than in convincing Polixenes to stay--save for once, when she agreed to marry him. But as his wife and his friend walk together, apart from him, he feels stirrings of jealousy, and tells the audience that he suspects them of

being lovers. He turns to his son and notes that the boy resembles him, and this reassures him that Mamillius is, in fact, *his* son and not someone else's; his suspicion of his wife remains, however, and grows quickly, until he is certain that she is sleeping with Polixenes. He sends the two of them to walk in the garden together, promising to join them later, and then calls Camillo over, asking if he has noticed anything peculiar about Polixenes's behavior lately. Camillo says that he has not, and Leontes accuses him of being negligent, and then declares that Hermione and Polixenes have made him a cuckold--that is, a betrayed husband. Camillo, appalled, refuses to believe it, but his king insists that it is true, and orders the lord to act as cupbearer to Polixenes--and then poison him at the first opportunity.

Camillo promises to obey, but his conscience is greatly troubled, and when Leontes has gone and Polixenes reappears, the Bohemian king realizes that something is amiss. Saying that Leontes just gave him a peculiar and threatening look, he demands to know what is going on, and Camillo, after a moment of anguish, tells him of the Sicilian king's suspicions and desire to have him poisoned. He begs protection of Polixenes, who accepts him as a servant, and they decide to flee the country immediately by sneaking out of the castle and taking ship for Bohemia. Camillo promises to use his authority in Sicilia to help their escape, and the two men slip away together.

Commentary

The appearance of the two lords at the opening of the play is a typical Shakespearean device, in which minor characters prepare the audience for what they are about to see. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for instance, two Roman soldiers comment on Antony's decline; in *King Lear*, Gloucester and Kent discuss the division of the kingdom that their monarch is about to undertake. In this play, however, one may question whether the audience *does* see what Camillo and Archidamus prepare us for. They describe two kings with "rooted between them...such an affection which cannot choose but branch now...the heavens continue their loves!"(I.i.23-31). What we see, however, is one king's deepening jealousy of the other--for although Leontes is trying to persuade his friend to stay as their scene together opens, we are meant to believe that he already suspects Polixenes and his wife of adultery.

The opening can be played many different ways, of course, and one could legitimately suggest that Leontes's jealousy does not take flight until *after* Hermione convinces Polixenes to stay. But a number of clues suggest otherwise. For one thing, all the cheerful speeches belong to Hermione and Polixenes. The Bohemian king is given a long discourse on the bliss of his childhood friendship with Leontes, while the Sicilian king is conspicuously silent until he is left alone to nurse his jealousy, speaking only in short, clipped sentences--"Stay your thanks awhile / And pay them when you part"(I.ii.10-11), he says after Polixenes has spoken for nine lines, and after another lengthy speech by the Bohemian king, he replies tersely "We are tougher, brother, / Than you can put us to't"(I.ii.16-17). Polixenes uses the flowery language that one would expect between royal friends in Shakespeare, but Leontes seems to have already put their friendship behind him.

Meanwhile, the initial speech by Polixenes calls attention the fact that he has been in Sicilia for "Nine changes of the watery star"(I.ii.1), which coincides, rather obviously, with the length of Hermione's pregnancy, and suggests that Shakespeare wishes to call attention to the idea of infidelity from the

beginning. And when Leontes later says "I am angling now, / Although you perceive me not how I give line"(I.ii.180-81), one can easily imagine that the entire business of asking Polixenes to stay is another "angling," designed to trap the Bohemian king and enable Leontes to dispose of him.

The roots of Leontes's jealousy are uncertain. Shakespeare allows him some of the play's most brilliant, and biting lines--"And many a man there is, even at this present, / Now while I speak this, holds his wife by th'arm, / That little thinks she has been sluiced in's absence / And his pond fished by his next neighbor, by / Sir Smile, his neighbor"(I.ii.192-96)--but refuses to give an easy explanation as to why he is so certain of Hermione's infidelity. The play allows no possibility of her guilt, but he does see her "paddling palms and pinching fingers"(I.ii.116), which (unless we think that Leontes hallucinates) suggest a degree of physical intimacy with her husband's friend. Still, a wide gulf remains between such behavior and Leontes's grim certainty of sexual relations. There is a traditional male fear of illegitimacy at work, of course, as we observe in the king's attempts to see his own likeness in Mamillius's face--in a time when male heirs were critical to dynastic survival, wifely adultery was a great fear, as one could witness with Henry VIII and his execution of multiple wives only a half-century before Shakespeare. At the same time, a number of critics have found a clue to Leontes's madness in the intensity of his friendship with Polixenes, whose depiction of their unfallen, innocent boyhood suggests that they have "tripped since"(I.ii.77) by marrying. "Of this make no conclusion," Hermione protests, "lest you say / Your queen and I are devils"(I.ii.82-83), but the real suggestion is that the closeness of Polixenes and Leontes was so great that it is difficult for the adult king of Sicilia to separate himself from his friend, even now that they are married. "To mingle friendship far is mingling bloods"(I.ii.110), Leontes says, but that is exactly what he does--he feels corrupted, in some odd sense, by his marriage to Hermione, and so he projects his guilt upon his friend, "mingling friendship" too far and so destroying it.

Act II, Scenes i-iii

Summary

Hermione asks her little boy, **Mamillius**, to sit by her and tell her a story. Meanwhile, **Leontes** storms in, having just learned of **Polixenes**'s escape and **Camillo**'s role in accomplishing it. To his diseased mind, this is proof positive that his suspicions were correct--he decides that Camillo must have been in Polixenes's pay from the beginning. He orders Mamillius taken away from Hermione, and then accuses his wife of being pregnant with the king of Bohemia's child. Hermione, astonished, denies it vigorously, but to no avail, and her husband orders her taken away to jail, along with her ladies-in-waiting. When she has been dragged off, the lords of Sicilia plead with Leontes, declaring that he is mistaken and his queen is innocent; Hermione's most vocal defender is a lord named **Antigonus**. The king will have none of it, however--he is certain of his own rightness, and says that anyway, the matter is none of their concern. However, he does promise to ask the celebrated oracle of Apollo, at Delphi, for a verdict before proceeding against his wife.

In prison, Antigonus's wife **Paulina** attempts to visit Hermione, but is rebuffed by the guards. She is, however, allowed to speak with one of the queen's ladies, **Emilia**, who reports that her mistress has given

birth to a beautiful daughter. Overriding the uncertain jailer, Paulina decides to take the child from the cell and bring it to Leontes, in the hopes that the sight of his new-born daughter will release the king from his madness.

Meanwhile, Mamillius has fallen ill since Hermione's imprisonment. Leontes, of course, attributes his son's ailment to shame over his mother's infidelity; meanwhile, he angrily wishes that Polixenes had not managed to escape his wrath. Paulina brings the child to the king, and he grows furious with her, demanding of Antigonus why he cannot manage to control his wife better. Paulina, instead of falling silent, argues with Leontes, defending Hermione's honor and then laying the baby before the angry king before she departs. When she is gone, Leontes orders Antigonus to take the child away and throw it into the fire, so that he will never have to see another man's bastard call him father. His lords are horrified by this order, and beg him to reconsider. He relents after a moment, but only a little--instead of burning the infant, he tells Antigonus to carry it into the wilderness and leave it there. As the unhappy nobleman takes the child and departs, word arrives that his messengers to the Oracle of Delphi have returned, bringing with them the divine verdict on the matter.

Commentary

Despite its title, *The Winter's Tale* is only set during the winter months during the first three acts; in the latter two, spring and summer enter, bringing renewal. The resonance of the title for the opening acts is suggested in this scene by Mamillius, who promises to tell his mother a story, and then says "a sad tale's best for winter"(II.i.25). And, indeed, the portion of the play set in winter is "a sad tale"--but by bringing about a happy ending in the summer sun, the playwright seems to suggest that Mamillius is only partially correct, and that the best winter story will end not with sadness, but with the promise of spring.

This is the little prince's only real contribution to the story, save as a victim of the retribution against Leontes--he is quickly cleared off the stage, and his parents step to the fore. If we had any doubt of the king's madness before now, it is quickly swept away when he enters, and declares that Camillo must have been hired by Polixenes to kill him--"Camillo was his help in this, his pander. / There is a plot against my life, my crown. All's true that is mistrusted"(II.i.46-48). This blindness, accusing Polixenes of the very crime of which he himself is guilty, is the mark of a true paranoid, unencumbered by facts, yet nevertheless certain that "all's true that is mistrusted." Hermione, meanwhile, makes a strong showing, even if the play only allows her the twin emotions of outrage and grief. She does the best with her maddened husband as anyone could, offering him a way out of his folly--"Should a villain say so," she says of his accusation, "He were as much more villain. You, my lord, / Do but mistake"(II.i.7881). But, of course, in his mind he does *not* mistake, and so her pleas are fruitless.

Equally fruitless is the work of Paulina, who embodies good sense and natural feeling; the audience sympathizes with her hope that Leontes will regain his faith in his wife when he sees his child. His reaction to her attempt at reasoning with him is revealing, since it suggests that a deep misogyny, a fear of female power, is at work in the Sicilian king. Again and again, he demands of Antigonus why he "canst not rule her?"(II.iii.46), and then mocks husband and wife both--"A manking witch!" (II.ii.67) he calls Paulina, (witchcraft was a typical accusation leveled against disobedient women) and "Thou dotard," he says to

the loyal nobleman, "thou art woman-tired, unroosted / By thy Dame Partlet here"(II.iii.74-76). In some awful way, then, the king seems to see himself as an enforcer of patriarchal discipline--my wife was rebellious, too, he seems to say, but I didn't let her get away with it.

Act III, Scenes i-ii

Summary

Making their way back from Delphi, the lords [Dion](#) and [Cleomenes](#) discuss events in their native Sicilia, and express their hope that the message they bring from the Oracle will vindicate the unfortunate [Hermione](#). Meanwhile, [Leontes](#) convenes a court, with himself as judge, in order to give his wife a fair trial. She is brought from the prison to appear before him, and the indictment, charging her with adultery and conspiracy in the escape of [Polixenes](#) and [Camillo](#), is read to the entire court. Hermione defends herself eloquently, saying: that she loved the Bohemian king "as in honor he required"(III.ii.62), but no more, certainly not in a sexual fashion; that she is ignorant of any conspiracy; and that Camillo is an honest man. Leontes, paying little heed to her words, declares that she is guilty, and that her punishment must be death. Hermione laughs bitterly at this and says that given her sufferings so far, death would be a blessed release.

At this juncture, the two lords arrive with the Oracle's message. It is unsealed and read aloud--"Hermione is chaste," it reports, "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"(III.ii.131-34). The courtiers rejoice, while Leontes refuses to believe it; at that moment, however, a servant rushes in with word that [Mamillius](#) has died, and the enormity of the king's mistake suddenly comes crashing down on him. Hermione faints, and she is quickly carried away by her ladies and [Paulina](#), who are frantically attempting to revive her. Leontes, now grief-stricken, pours curses upon his own head, and Paulina re-enters and tells him that Hermione, too, has died, and that he has murdered her. One of the lords rebukes her, but Leontes accepts her accusation as no more than his due. Ordering a single grave for the body of his wife and son, he pledges to spend the rest of his life doing penance for his sin.

Commentary

One of the most striking features of the early part of the play--which serves to highlight Leontes's madness--is the fact that *everyone* is on Hermione's side. "If th'event o' th'journey / Prove as succesful to the queen--O be't so!"(III.i.11- 12) says Dion, and Cleomenes echoes him "These proclamations, / So forcing fault upon Hermione, / I little like"(III.i.15-17). This general sentiment links up with the emphasis upon Leontes's role as a "tyrant," a phrase that is used repeatedly, culminating in the Delphic Oracle's verdict. The link between the personal and political suggests parallels with *Hamlet*, in which a personal, even sexual betrayal leads to "something rotten in the state of Denmark." What is rotten in the state of Sicilia, however, stems not from real crimes, but imaginary ones--from a Hamlet-figure who is mistaken in his suspicions.

The revelation of the Oracle is the tragic climax of the play--the moment of awful illumination for Leontes, and the moment of greatest disaster, since it leaves us with Mamillius and Hermione dead, and the baby seemingly lost forever. Hermione's final speech before she passes away is a masterpiece of pathos and wronged innocence. She lists all the terrible things that have befallen her, and then asks "Now, my liege, / Tell me what blessings I have here alive, / That I should fear to die?"(III.ii.105-107). She dies immediately after, and it is important to note that there is no reason for the audience to doubt Paulina's report of her mistress's death at this stage in the play--only later, in the resurrection scene, does the offstage death come to seem suspicious.

But even in the midst of all this woe, the playwright offers a suggestion that this is not a truly unhappy, tragic play. Things seem dark now, but the Oracle's prophecy, with its suggestion that the lost infant may yet be found, offers hope for the future. So when Leontes goes out, saying "lead me / To these sorrows"(III.ii.240-41), one has hope that the sorrows will not be permanent.

Act III, Scene iii-Act IV, Scene iii

Summary

Unaware of the Oracle's revelations, [Antigonus](#) has arrived on the desolate Bohemian coast, bearing the infant princess. He tells the audience how [Hermione](#) appeared to him in a dream, telling him to name the babe [Perdita](#), and declaring that he would never see his home, or his wife [Paulina](#), again. He lays the infant down in the woods, and places gold and jewels beside her, and a note telling the child's name, and then makes ready to depart. A storm has come up, however, and a bear appears and chases him off stage. After a time, a [Shepherd](#) comes in and finds the baby; he is joined by his son, a [Clown](#), who reports seeing a man (Antigonus) killed by a bear, and a ship (Antigonus's vessel) go down in the storm. The two men then discover the wealth left with Perdita, and they rejoice in their good fortune and vow to raise the child themselves.

On the empty stage, an actor appears, playing Time, and announces that in the space between acts, sixteen years have passed. The scene shifts to [Polixenes](#)'s castle in Bohemia, where the king is conversing with [Camillo](#). Camillo asks leave of Polixenes to return to his native Sicily, since sixteen years away have made him homesick--and besides, the still-grieving [Leontes](#) would welcome him home with open arms. Polixenes replies that he cannot manage the kingdom without Camillo's assistance, and the two men discuss the king's son, [Florizel](#), who has been spending a great deal of time away from court, at the house of a wealthy shepherd--a shepherd whose daughter is reputed to be a great beauty. Somewhat worried, Polixenes decides that they will visit this shepherd's house, but in disguise, and see what Florizel is up to.

Meanwhile, in the Bohemian countryside, a jovial vagabond, peddler, and thief named [Autolycus](#) is wandering along a highway and singing loudly. He comes upon the Clown on his way to market, counting a substantial sum of money with which he plans to buy supplies for a country sheepshearing (a great event in the area). Autolycus accosts him and pretends to be the victim of a robbery. As the Clown

commiserates with him, the crafty thief picks his pocket, and when his victim has gone on his way, Autolycus resolves to make an appearance at the sheepshearing--in a different disguise, of course.

Commentary

The end of Act III, even before the entrance of Time in Act IV, marks the play's shift in mood. The scene on the sea-coast of Bohemia (there is, of course, no coastline--Bohemia was an inland German principality) begins darkly, with the abandonment of Perdita, followed by Antigonus's death at the hands of Shakespeare's finest stage-direction: *Exit, pursued by a bear*. But the sudden appearance of the Shepherd and his son, with their comic dialogue (there has been no comedy in the play up until this point) and their discovery of the baby provides the first hint that this may not be a tragedy after all--indeed, it may be instead a classic fairy tale, complete with a lost princess raised in ignorance of her heritage.

A number of critics have criticized the appearance of Time, personified, and pointed out that having sixteen years pass between Acts gives the play a disjointed feeling. These complaints are valid, as far as they go, but the disjunction between Acts I-III and Acts IV-V is built into the narrative, and has as much to do with theme, mood, and setting as it does with the sixteen-year gulf. Indeed, after the brief scene with Camillo and Polixenes, which serves to set the stage for the Act's events, we are plunged immediately into a world that is completely different from the winter-time Sicilia of the earlier action. Bohemia was an oppressive winter wilderness when Antigonus landed there, but with the entrance of Autolycus it has become a different place. As his song puts it, "When daffodils begin to peer, / When 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." (IV.iii.1-4) Winter has given way to "the sweet o'the year," a time of flowers and fairy tales rather than jealousy and death.

Autolycus is one of Shakespeare's more endearing rogues. His name is taken from Greek myth: in Homer, he was the finest mortal thief, while Ovid made him the son of Hermes, the trickster god and patron of thieves. He robs and cheats with abandon, but no one seems really hurt by him--certainly the Clown recovers well from being fleeced, well enough to accept Autolycus as a servant later in the play. His songs add a cheery musical backdrop to Act IV, which is one of the most song-filled portions of any of Shakespeare plays, and his cheerful attitude toward sex ("When heigh! The doxy over the dale") contrasts with Leontes's morbid obsession with infidelity. And his small-scale villainy serves a purpose, if only to prevent the bucolic paradise around the Shepherd's farm from seeming *too* perfectly idyllic. The romantic comedy of Florizel and Perdita needs him--his cheerful misbehavior provides an entertaining counterpoint to their earnest devotion.

Act IV, Scene iv, lines 1-440

Summary

On the day of the sheepshearing, [Perdita](#) and [Florizel](#) walk together outside her home. She is decked out in flowers, and he compliments her on her grace and beauty. It quickly becomes apparent that the couple is deeply in love, but Perdita expresses concern over the possibility of their eventual union, pointing out that Florizel's father is bound to oppose it. The prince reassures her, declaring that "I'll be thine, my fair, / Or not my father's"(IV.iv.42-43). As they talk together, the [Shepherd](#) comes in with a huge crowd, including the [Clown](#), a group of shepherdesses, and the disguised [Polixenes](#) and [Camillo](#). The Shepherd tells his adoptive daughter to act the hostess, as is proper, and so she busies herself distributing flowers to the new arrivals, which leads to a discussion of horticulture with Polixenes. Watching and listening to her, Florizel is inspired to another effusive declaration of his love. At this point we learn that he is going by the alias of Doricles./PARAGRAPH Polixenes remarks to Camillo that Perdita is "the prettiest lowborn lass that ever / ran on the greensward. Nothing she does or seems / But smacks of something greater than herself, too noble for this place"(IV.iv.156-59). He asks the Shepherd about "Doricles," and the Shepherd tells him that his daughter's suitor is some high-born fellow, and that the two are deeply in love--"I think there is not half a kiss to choose / Who loves another best"(IV.iv.175-76). Meanwhile, a peddler arrives, with the promise of entertaining the company with songs. He is allowed in--it is [Autolycus](#), in a peddler's costume--and sets about selling ballads to the Clown and the shepherdesses, and then singing for the entire group. As he does so, Polixenes asks Florizel why he has not bought anything for his love, and the prince replies that he knows that Perdita does not desire such silly things as the peddler is offering. He then decides to take this moment to ask the Shepherd to seal their betrothal, and the old man gladly agrees to do so./PARAGRAPH Before they make the compact, however, Polixenes asks Florizel why he does not consult his father before getting engaged, and the prince (still unaware of whom he is speaking with) replies that there are reasons, which he dares not share, why his father cannot know of his betrothal. He urges the Shepherd to "mark our contract"(IV.iv.16), but the king now casts aside his disguise and declares that the betrothal shall not go forward: the Shepherd will be executed for allowing a prince to court his daughter; Perdita's beauty shall be "scratched with briars"(IV.iv.424); and Florizel will be disinherited if he ever speaks of her again. He relents slightly, after a moment, and decides to spare the life of the Shepherd and the face of his daughter, but tells them that if they ever see the prince again, their lives will be forfeit. Polixenes then departs, ordering his son to follow him to court, and leaving everyone horrified.

Commentary

Perdita and Florizel make an appealing couple. Shakespeare gives him a number of excellent speeches to direct toward his beloved, including this one--"When you speak, sweet, / I'd have you do it ever: when you sing, / I'd have you buy and sell so, so give alms, / Pray so, and, for the ord'ring of your affairs, / to sing them too: when you do dance, I wish you / A wave o' the sea, that you might ever do / Nothing but that, move still, still so / And own no other function"(IV.iv.136-43). Meanwhile, Perdita is implicitly linked with the Roman goddess Proserpina (Persephone in Greek myth), who was kidnapped and forced to marry Pluto, god of the underworld, but who lives only half the year underground, and brings the spring with her every year on her return to the brighter world. Perdita is like Proserpina in that she, too, brings the spring--she is crowned with flowers, and dispenses them to all the guests, and the audience feels that this "winter's tale" has broken out into spring color, and it is all due to her arrival.

The flowers occasion a debate between Polixenes and Perdita over the value of interbreeding flowers--he argues that a gardener can legitimately "mend nature--change it rather"(IV.iv.96-97), while she prefers a purer nature, unsullied by human hands. Some critics have argued that this debate illuminates Shakespeare's own inner debate over the relation between his art and nature. The scene is ironic, however, for Polixenes argues for something in flowers--"you see, sweet maid, we marry / A gentler scion to the wildest stock"(IV.iv.93)--that he opposes in his son's case, namely, the mixing of royal and common blood. The Bohemian king forfeits our sympathies almost completely in this scene, for while we may sympathize with his anger at his son, nothing can justify the absurd heights of his vitriol against the manifestly worthy Shepherd and the wonderful Perdita.

Meanwhile, Autolycus's appearance as the peddler provides both a comic counterpoint to the more serious love-plot, and an opportunity for Shakespeare to satirize the ballad-sellers of his own London, and the eager buyers who snatched up their wares. "Here's one to a very doleful tune," Autolycus declares, "how a usurer's wife was brought to bed of twenty moneybags at a burden, and how she longed to eat adders' heads and toads carbonadoed." The guileless shepherdess asks, "Is it true, think you?" to which the salesman replies, "Very true, and but a month old"(IV.iv.262-66). The sale is made, and the audience can only applaud the virtuosity of the huckster.

Act IV, Scene iv, lines 441-846

Summary

Both [Perdita](#) and the [Shepherd](#) despair, with the latter cursing [Florizel](#) for deceiving him and then storming off. The prince is remarkably unfazed, however, and assures Perdita that he will not be separated from her--that he is willing to give up the succession and flee Bohemia immediately. [Camillo](#) advises him against it, but Florizel insists that he will not break his oath to Perdita for anything in the world. This resolve gives Camillo an idea, and he advises the prince to flee at once to Sicilia, where [Leontes](#), believing him sent from [Polixenes](#), will give him a good welcome. In the meantime, Camillo promises to bring Polixenes around to the notion of his son marrying a commoner. In truth, however, Camillo hopes that the king will follow his son to Sicilia, and bring him along, thus allowing him to return to his native land.

Florizel agrees to the old lord's plan, but points out that he does not have an appropriate retinue to appear in the court of Sicilia as Polixenes's son. While they discuss this problem, with Camillo promising to furnish the necessary attendants and letters, [Autolycus](#) comes in, bragging to himself about all the cheap goods he sold and all the purses he stole during the sheepshearing. Noticing him, Camillo asks the rascal to exchange clothes with Florizel. Autolycus, baffled, agrees, and the prince puts on the peddler's rags, which, he hopes, will enable him to reach a ship undetected by his father. This done, Florizel, Perdita, and Camillo leave Autolycus alone on stage. The crafty peddler/thief declares that he has figured out their business from listening to them, but will not go and tell the king, since that would be a good deed--and good deeds are against his nature.

As Autolycus talks to himself, the Clown and the Shepherd come in. Seeing an opportunity for mischief, he pretends to be a nobleman (he is still wearing Florizel's clothing). The Clown is advising the Shepherd to tell King Polixenes how he found Perdita in the forest years before--since if she was a foundling, he is not her real father and therefore not responsible for her actions. Hearing this, Autolycus tells them that the king has gone aboard a nearby ship, and sends them in that direction. In fact, he sends them to the ship that Florizel and Perdita are taking to Sicilia.

Commentary

The steadfastness of Florizel at this juncture is impressive--he has clearly wrecked matters with his father, but his love for Perdita never wavers, and nor does his desire to do what is right. (In his devotion to his future mate, and in his honorable behavior, he makes a stark contrast with Leontes.) Camillo now sets in motion the return to Sicilia, and although his behavior, involving as it does a sort of double betrayal, is not up to his usual standards of highly moral conduct, he is the agent of the happy ending, and so can be forgiven. Besides, the old man's desire to see his homeland again demands the audience's sympathies.

Once the decision is made to flee to Sicilia, Autolycus takes over this portion of the play. We are given his philosophy of life, beginning with his statement (after robbing the entire sheepshearing party) that "Ha, ha, what a fool Honesty is! and Trust, his sworn brother, a very simple gentleman!"(IV.iv.594-95). In a different play, this statement would have a sinister cast, and so would his justification for not running to tell the king what has happened--"If I thought it were a piece of honesty to acquaint the king withal, I would not do't. I hold it the more knavery to conceal it, and therein I am constant to my profession"(IV.iv.677-80). This echoes the deliberate evil of villains like Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*--with the great distinction that Autolycus lacks their capacity for harm. None of his crimes have dire consequences, and his "knavery" actually ends up doing everyone a great deal of good, leaving the audience free to delight in his "constancy," and in his bamboozling of the poor Shepherd and his son, whom he terrifies with promises of the king's vengeance: "He has a son, who shall be flayed alive; then 'nointed over with honey, set on the head of a wasp's nest; then stand till he be three quarters and a dram dead; then recovered again...(and) set against a brick wall, the sun looking with a southward eye upon him, where he is to behold him with flies blown to death"(IV.iv.780-87). Indeed, so delightful is his bad behavior, that his promise to "go straight" and enter in the Shepherd's service in the next Act may actually seem a disappointment, leavened only by the hope that the rascal will eventually abandon respectability and return to being a rascal.

Act V, Scenes i-iii

Summary

In Sicilia, Leontes is still in mourning for Hermione and Mamillius, although some of his lords urge him to forget the past, forgive himself, and marry again. Paulina, however, encourages his continued contrition, and extracts from him a promise that he will never take another wife until she gives him leave. Word comes of the arrival of Prince Florizel and his new wife Perdita from Bohemia, and the couple is ushered

into Leontes's presence and greeted eagerly--since the Sicilian king has had no word from Bohemia for years. Everyone remarks on the beauty and grace of Perdita, and Florizel pretends to be on a diplomatic mission from his father. As they talk, however, a lord brings news that Polixenes himself, along with Camillo, are in the city, in pursuit of Florizel--and that they have the Shepherd and the Clown (who came to Sicilia on Florizel's ship) in their custody. Leontes, stunned, immediately resolves to go down and meet his former friend, bringing the despairing Florizel and Perdita with them.

What follows is told second-hand, by several lords of Leontes's court to the newly-arrived Autolycus. Briefly, once the Shepherd tells everyone his story of finding Perdita on the Bohemian coast, and reveals the tokens that were left on her, Leontes and Polixenes realize who she is; both kings--but especially Leontes--are overcome with joy, and there is general rejoicing. The lords also tell Autolycus that the happy group has not yet returned to court, since Perdita expressed a wish to see a statue of her mother, recently finished in Paulina's country house. Then the Clown and Shepherd come in, having both been made gentlemen, and Autolycus pledges to amend his life and become their loyal servant.

The scene shifts to Paulina's home, and she unveils the statue, which impresses everyone with its realism and attention to detail--as well as the fact that the sculptor made Hermione look exactly sixteen years older than the queen was when she died. Leontes is overcome by the sight of her, and tries to touch the statue's hand. Paulina keeps him back, saying that she did not expect it to move him to such grief, and offers to draw the curtain, but the king refuses to allow it. Paulina then offers to make the statue come down from the pedestal--and, to everyone's amazement, there is music and the statue moves. It steps down, and embraces Leontes: it is the real Hermione, alive again. She blesses her daughter, saying that she hoped to see her again, and then Leontes, now overcome with happiness, betrothes Paulina and Camillo and then leads the company out, rejoicing in the apparent miracle.

Commentary

We return, finally, to Sicilia, and although sixteen years have passed, Leontes is still in exactly the same place where we left him--mourning his wife, and repenting his crimes--while Paulina is still fanning the flames of guilt within him. This frozen-ness, the sense of time halting until a curse is lifted, is a typical fairy tale trope, and Leontes's Sicily resembles the enchanted castle of the Beast, or the thorn-choked palace of Sleeping Beauty in which everyone sleeps, waiting for the Prince to awaken them. When the awakening comes in this fairy tale, though, as Leontes is finally released from his suffering by the restoration of his daughter, the scene is kept offstage. We are given an eloquent account of it from Leontes's courtiers--"There might you have beheld one joy crown another, so and in such manner that it seemed sorrow wept to take leave of them, for their joy waded in tears"(V.ii.42-46)--but Shakespeare makes a wise dramatic choice, knowing that one joyful climax is enough for a play. And despite the rejoicing over Perdita, *The Winter's Tale's* true climax is reserved for the final scene.

The final scene is a difficult one for critics to interpret, since the playwright deliberately obscures whether Hermione has actually been resurrected, or whether she never really died and was hidden away by Paulina. Certainly there are suggestions that the latter is the case--including the fact that the queen died off-stage, with only Paulina as a witness. Also, Paulina's insistence in V.i that the king promise to never

marry again implies that she anticipates Hermione's return. But at the same time, the characters seem to accept the event as a true miracle, and who are we to argue with them? In either case, the resurrection of the wronged queen closes the circle, thematically--what began with death and winter now ends with spring and a true rebirth. [Antigonus](#) and Mamillius, Leontes's victims, are forgotten--Paulina mentions "my mate, that's never to be found again"(V.iii.133), but this sorrowful mood is out of place, and so she is quickly given a new husband. Mamillius is not needed, since both kingdoms now have an heir--the *same* heir, in fact--and both marriages and friendships are restored; for good, one supposes.

Analysis

The Winter's Tale is a perfect tragicomedy. Set in an imaginary world where Bohemia has a seacoast, and where ancient Greek oracles coexist with Renaissance sculptors, it offers three acts of unremitting tragedy, followed by two acts of restorative comedy. In between, sixteen years pass hastily, a lapse which many critics have taken as a structural flaw, but which actually only serves to highlight the disparity of theme, setting, and action between the two halves of the play. The one is set amid gloomy winter, and illuminates the destructive power that mistaken jealousy exercises over the family of [Leontes](#), King of Sicilia; in the second half, flower-strewn spring intervenes, and all the damage that the King's folly accomplished is undone--through coincidence, goodwill, and finally through miracle, as a statue of his dead wife comes to life and embraces him.

As the force behind the tragedy stems from Leontes's belief that his wife, [Hermione](#), and best friend, King [Polixenes](#) of Bohemia, are lovers, so Leontes has attracted more critical interest than any other character in the play. An Othello who is his own Iago, he is a perfect paranoiac, convinced that he has all the facts and ready to twist any counter-argument to fit his (mistaken) perception of the world. Perhaps because of its uncertain origin, Leontes's madness is a terrifying thing: he becomes a poet of nihilism, demanding, when told that there is "nothing" between Hermione and Polixenes, "Is this nothing? / Why, then the world and all that's in't is nothing, / The covering sky's nothing, Bohemia nothing, / My wife is nothing, nor nothing have these nothings, / If this be nothing"(I.ii.292-296). The roots of his jealousy seem to run too deep for the play to plumb--there are hints of misogyny, of dynastic insecurity, and of an inability to truly separate himself psychologically from Polixenes, but no definitive answers. Indeed, the only answer is his own--in one of Shakespeare's finer images, Leontes says "I have drunk, and seen the spider"(II.i.45).

To balance his morbid, brooding nihilism and sexual jealousy, Shakespeare makes Leontes's daughter [Perdita](#) a poet of spring, rebirth, and revitalization, whose own lover (Polixenes's son [Florizel](#)) is as constant and generous as Leontes is suspicious and cruel. She appears decked in flowers, and when she dispenses them to everyone around her, the play links her with Proserpina, Roman goddess of the spring and growing things. If Leontes is a tragic hero, then she is a fairy-tale heroine, a princess reared among commoners who falls in love with a prince and--eventually--lives happily ever after. Leontes casts her out as an infant in Act III, when he is in the grip of darkness; in Act V she returns to him, and restores him to happiness. The miracle of Hermione's resurrection at the play's close is only a fitting close to the spirit of rebirth that Perdita brings into the story.

The play is also notable for its rich group of supporting characters. Hermione is an exemplary and eloquent figure, despite the fact that she spends the play defending herself against unjust accusations, and her friend [Paulina](#) is the voice of sanity while Leontes is mad and then the voice of reminder and penance once he regrets his crimes. The rustic [Shepherd](#) who takes in Perdita and the ever-faithful lord, [Camillo](#) are both sympathetic characters, too, but none can match [Autolycus](#), the peddler, thief and minstrel who is a harmless villain (he robs, lies, and cheats)--so harmless, in fact, that the audience forgives and even applauds him as he sings, dances, and robs his way through the play, contriving even to find time to provide a helping hand to the other characters as they struggle toward their happy ending.