

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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The Winter's Tale 1610
Shakespeare

Overview

The category of problem play has for some critics included the present text. If one concentrates on the first half of the play, Acts One to Three, there is an abundance of unresolved material, the stuff of the problematic. Who impregnates Hermione? Was the oracle that went to Delos telling the truth? Was Polixenes deranged, in his early and quick assumption that his wife had betrayed him? These are all problems presented by the play, and furthermore they collectively raise a problem; what is the tone of this tale, which has elements of a leisurely fireside narration, and elements of deep evil and loss?

The final two acts of the play, which bubble with country merriment, buffoonery, and at the end fairly satisfying resolution, attempt to establish a tone of high spirits, and 'all's well that ends well,' but cannot fully pull it off. (This play is no comedy.) Hanging over the whole structure is the issue of the assumed adultery of Hermione. The introduction of her, as an idealized statue who comes back to life, is vague and of uncertain meaning, like the 'resurrection' of Alcestis, in Euripides' play of that name. The issue of Mamillus, the son of Hermione and Leones, is will not go away. He was death doom from the start of his life. (Why?) Did he die of a broken heart at the abuse that was poured on his mother, and the painful separation of his parents, which was so disastrous for them? These jamming notes enforce a dissonance inside the play, and confirm the free wheeling perspectives that Shakespeare is determined to permit in this late work.

Characters

Leontes,	King of Sicily
Mamillus,	young Prince of Sicily
Camillo,	honest Sicilian nobleman
Antigonus,	Paulina's husband
Cleomines,	Sicilian lord
Dion,	Sicilian lord
Hermione,	Queen wife of Leontes
Perdita,	Daughter of Leontes and Hermione.
Paulina,	wife to Antigonus.
Emilia,	a Lady.
Polixenes,	King of Bohemia.
Florizell,	Prince of Bohemia.
Old Shepherd,	reputed Father of Perdita.
Clowne,	his Son
Autolycus,	a Rogue.
Archidamus,	a Lord of Bohemia.
Other Lords, and Gentlemen, and Servants.	
Shepherds, and Shepherdesses.	

Story

Childhood. The play opens on the pastoral tone—two powerful kings, of medieval Sicily and Bohemia—schmoozing over the wonders of their childhoods when they grew up playing and learning in daily contact with one another. They are still the closest of friends, but they are heading into rough waters,

which will separate them. A little conflict sets it all off, with that quiet convincing power at which Shakespeare is such a master.

Visitors. Polixenes has been visiting Leontes in Sicily, when Polixenes feels that it is time for him to go home. He alleges, as the main driver, his desire to check up on his son, who is a young prince, like Leontes's son. Leontes suggests that his friend should consult with Hermione, Leontes' wife, about whether he should leave immediately. And at that point the story takes a fatal turn, for there is something, in the persuasion of Hermione, that Polixenes should stay, that alerts Leontes to trouble. Of a suspicious mind, he factors in his awareness that Hermione, who has been spending months with the guest, is pregnant. His mind vaults to the conclusion that Hermione and Polixenes are lovers, and have been for a long time.

Jealousy. With Shakespeare—think of *Othello*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*—jealousy is a rich theme, and in the present play, as part of an effort to characterize Leontes, the author devotes the most meticulous attention to what Leontes suddenly observes—his wife's sighs, blushes, reluctances to leave a room where her lover is standing, lack of any sense of time. So strong is this Intuition of deception that, although Hermione will soon take the opportunity to deny all charges, she fails to convince her husband, who commissions his own closest advisor, Camillo, to poison his wife. At this point an important plot break is forced on the play, provoked by Camillo, who is deeply reluctant to carry out this mission, although he promises Leontes compliance.

Flight. Instead of poisoning his Lady, whom he reveres, Camillo goes to Polixenes, with whom he too has the most intimate childhood relationships, and explains the backstory, courageously and directly. Polixenes reacts immediately, knowing that Leontes will not be slow to act. The two men—Polixenes and Camillo—leave Sicily immediately, and head for Bohemia.

Elsewhere. Leontes sends a deputation to the oracle at Delphos—this will be Delos, an island in the Aegean, famed for birthing the god Apollo, of oracular power, and easily confused with the place name Delphi, where the central oracle of Greek antiquity was located; a tip toward the magical geography in which Shakespeare sets this play, as he does, say, *Pericles Prince of Tyre*, which is swimming in a late mediaeval spatio-temporal time warp. The oracle confirms what the reader suspected—including the fact that Leontes has overreacted—for by this time Leontes will have sent his baby daughter to be abandoned on the coasts of Bohemia, thereby acting out his own shame, jealousy, and vengeance—and that Leontes will die without heir if he does not regain his lost scion.

Tragedy. The tragedy of Leontes's overreaction is greatly magnified by the simultaneous loss of his own son, victim of despair and ill health conjoined. The first three acts of the play will thus have been constructed around the self-destructive behavior of Leontes, who has (presumably) mistakenly accused his wife, lost his son and best friend, and cut himself off without heir.

Repentance. The culmination of this first half of the play is the outpouring of remorse and repentance that overcome Leontes, as he realizes that he has essentially lost everything he loves. The second part of the play, which occurs sixteen years later, as we are informed by the figure of Time, who appears to the audience at the end of Act III, faces a tough assignment, which Shakespeare addresses by returning to the mode of tale, from his title. We slip from harsh psychological reality back into what will be pastoral, of a unique and uneasy brand.

Playing out. Remember, sixteen years have passed. (The audience, now transported to a new present, must gasp, facing temporal passage in such a new gear, jolting, charming, dangerous.) Camillo, the friend of Polixenes who had refused to poison Hermione, who had returned to Bohemia in a rush, with Polixenes, has been sixteen years in the service of the same Polixenes. Now Camillo wants permission to return to Sicily, to visit.

Refusal. Polixenes refuses Camillo's request, on the grounds of work to do in Bohemia. It seems that Polixenes' son, Prince Florizell, has fallen in love with a shepherd girl, Perdita, who—as chance will have it—was the baby daughter to whom Hermione gave birth sixteen years earlier. It is nearly time for the

marriage, a rustic shearing festival at which the couple can bring together their two cultures. Shakespeare is at his characteristic, at this point, intermixing with the high ceremony of this royal marriage, the blather, country speech, country antics of the place; and he highlights, in the course of this rough and tumble joviality, the pranks and downright thieveries of his bumpkin cut-up, Autolycus.

Revelation. In the aftermath of the wedding, and thanks to the discovery of trinkets and trophies which link Perdita to the waif found on the Bohemian seashore, sixteen years before, Perdita and Florizell are granted their wish to travel to Sicily, which, as they now know, was home to the daughter of Hermione and Leontes. In her old home, Perdita and her husband, Camillo and Polixenes are rejoined with Leontes, and a festive welcoming return. This is the classic Shakespearean wrap up, which in a Comedy of Errors type play, such as the author creates in the play of that name, comes out seamless and benevolent.

Finale. The present play hardly wraps itself up at all. The finale involves the coming back to life of Hermione, the eternal love of Leontes, and her reincorporation—is it mystical, is it naturalistic?—into the original family group. To understand the reality level, on which this transformation is effected, we have again to review the dream world atmosphere in which this late play—or *Pericles*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *The Tempest*—is bathed. No such critique, however, will explain away the starkness of the death of the beloved son of Hermione and Leontes. His youthful death, in part the result of despair, at his parents' separation, sticks like a burr in the fabric of the play, and leaves us wounded.

Themes

Jealousy. Jealousy, impetuous and irresistible, drives Leontes to suspect his wife of infidelity, a long lasting preoccupation which survives until he receives the official oracle report from Delphos. His impetuous initial error in judgment is then matched by his explosion of repentance, when he learns that he has lost both his son and his wife.

Death. Death pervades this play, taking from it two of its beguiling characters, then, at the end, allowing one of them, Hermione, to return to a kind of half-life, as does the born again figure of Alcestis in Euripides' play of that name.

Resurrection. Leontes' redemptionary outbursts suggest a kind of personal rediscovery, Perdita is born into a kind of new life when the shepherd discovers her on the coast of Bohemia, and, above all, Hermione is 'resurrected,' if indeed she has not, as some readers have thought, simply been sequestered off scene, for many years, and then brought in for the grand finale.

Rusticity Shakespeare is often at his best when he brings the rustic, crafty, salty, salacious folkways of ordinary people crashing into the midst of a carefully staged drama. The festival of sheep-shearing, in the Bohemian wedding of Florizell and Perdita, is the author at his best, and above his best in the daring, funny, nasty portrait of the local Clowne and the thieving troublemaker cut up, Autolycus.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

LEONTES

character. Leontes is one among several plot-driving characters, and yet it is he who moves the play toward its final significance. Leontes' wild jealousy, his impulse to poison his wife, his consultation of the oracle and his consequent repentance—all these hasty and consequential moves, on Leontes' part, move the action of the play. It is perhaps his repentance that most moves and marks this character, who by the end is a quite passive recipient of the conclusion of the drama. Leonte passes his life in review, before repenting, and comes up into a theological category somewhat like the *anagnorisis* of ancient Greek theater, a recognition of one's deep wrong among others, and a desire to make them whole at last.

Parallels. Admetus, the husband of Alcestis, in Euripides' play of that name, is (like Leontes) too quick to respond, and too slow to understand, so that he responds one step behind the action, and must only

later, as in the case of the death of Hermione, realize what a drama he has been caught up in. The *anagnorisis* which sweeps over Leontes, as he passes into repentant mode, resembles the shock of recognition in Oedipus, in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, when he realizes, much too late, that he himself is the guilty person he seeks.

Illustrative moments

Fun. When we first see Leontes he is having fun with his old friend, Polixenes. They are reviewing their happy childhood past together, as young princelings.

Suspicion. Leontes wants Polixenes to extend his visit to Sicily, but his friend manifests impatience to get going. Yet Leontes suggests that his wife, Hermione, should do the persuading. That does the trick immediately. Leontes is transfixed with suspicion.

Overreaction. Leontes moves from suspicion to quick action, sending Camillo to poison Hermione, then banishing his new daughter. Overreaction? Or recklessness?

Legalistic? Leontes is either legalistic or just, depending on your view of the trial to which he submits his wife, before receiving the report from the Oracle at Delphos. Or self-righteous, and on the verge of forming a guilty conscience?

Acceptance. By the play's end, sixteen years later than the beginning, Leontes has come to terms with his tumultuous past, and is delighted to receive his visitors from Bohemia. He is chastened, and thus perhaps of a mindset to 'accept' the mysterious return of his wife.

Discussion questions

What is the effect of the sixteen year break in the middle of the play? Does it shed a different dramatic light on the later portions of the action? Has the tension and psychological intricacy, which mark the early scenes of the play, dissolved?

How do you interpret the death of Hermione? Has she really been alive all the time? Or has she been transformed into a supernatural figure?

How do you interpret the title of the play? Does it suggest a benign fireside narrative, to be recounted to children, or has it a sinister underside? What have we learned about human nature, by play's end?