

The Winter's Tale

By William Shakespeare

The Winter's Tale is a fairy tale unparalleled in Shakespeare's plays. Leontes' quick and brutal descent into dangerous jealousy and the awful consequences of this madness are at the center of the first half of the play- the winter's tale Mamillius speaks of to his mother in jest. The second half of the play resurrects the spring and all that it brings, including the long-lost princess of fairy tale lore, a Prince Charming in disguise, the Unfair Father, the magical restoration of a Beautiful Lady and the reunion of loved ones that prompts the saying "they all lived happily ever after."

Like any fairy tale, this story relies on these archetypes to get to the heart of the play- the language Shakespeare uses to describe what his characters think and feel. We quickly accept that a man could be so very jealous, or we might never hear "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." Or "Inch-thick, knee-deepe; ore head and ears a fork'd one."

The story

Leontes, the King of Sicilia, has asked his dearest friend from childhood, Polixenes, the King of Bohemia, to extend his visit. Polixenes has not been home to his wife and young son for more than nine months. Leontes enlists his wife, Hermione, as his champion and she finally convinces her husband's friend to stay a bit longer. As they talk apart, Leontes sees or thinks he sees inappropriate behavior in his wife and friend, for as soon as they leave his sight he is imagining them "leaning cheek to cheek, meeting noses, kissing with inside lip." He commands a courtier, Camillo, to stand as cupbearer to Polixenes and poison him as soon as he can. Camillo cannot bring himself to believe that Hermione is unfaithful and when Polixenes returns they both escape to Bohemia, before Leontes can do them any harm.

Leontes, upon hearing that Polixenes and Camillo have disappeared, accuses Hermione of adultery, takes Mamillius from her arms and throws her (nine months pregnant) in jail. He sends Cleomines and Dion to the Oracle at Delphi, for an answer to his charges. While Hermione is in jail her daughter is born, and Paulina, her friend and wife to Antigonus, take the baby girl to Leontes. She hopes that the sight of his infant daughter will soften Leontes heart. By this time Leontes has decided that Polixenes, Hermione and Camillo were all conspiring to murder him. He orders Antigonus to throw the baby into the fire, but Antigonus will not. Leontes relents a bit and commands that the baby be abandoned in a desolate place.

Leontes puts Hermione on trial, and the Oracle at Delphi confirms that she is chaste, the child is not a bastard, Camillo is honest and Leontes is a tyrant. The oracle also says that until what is lost is found, Leontes will not have an heir. Leontes refuses the truth and then we find out the true meaning of the pronouncement. Mamillius, pining for his mother, has died. Hermione faints, Leontes realizes his terrible errors, and Paulina enters with the horrible news that Hermione has died.

Antigonus arrives on the sea coast of Bohemia (very fairy-tale-ish, since Bohemia doesn't actually have a seacoast, especially one inhabited by lions and tigers and bears, oh my!) and leaves the baby, named Perdita, to her fate. His fate is to exit, pursued by a bear. Her fate is to be found very quickly by an Old Shepherd and his son, who decide to raise her as their own.

With the help of Time, we skip forward 16 years or so. Perdita is now a young lady, in love with the young man Doricles. He is actually Florizel, a real prince charming, and son of Bohemia's King Polixenes, all grown up. Perdita is the queen of the local sheep-shearing festival and entertains everyone with her winning personality, good looks and natural charm. We meet a whole new cast of characters, including the rogue, vagabond and pickpocket Autolycus. Polixenes and Camillo are looking for Florizel, who is not being a dutiful prince at all. They finally catch up with him at the festival and watch the happy shepherds and shepherdesses frolic in the spring air.

Autolycus charms and cons everyone, including Dorcas and Mopsa, and Florizel asks the Old Shepherd to bless his betrothal to Perdita. Polixenes, in disguise, asks Florizel why he does not ask for his own father's permission, and Florizel explains that there are important reasons why his father must not know of the impending wedding. Polixenes loses his cool and removes his disguise. He declares that the betrothal will not go forward and that the Old Shepherd will be executed for allowing a prince to court his daughter. In addition, Perdita will be "scratched with briars" and Florizel disinherited if he ever sees her again.

We return to Sicilia, where Leontes is still mourning the death of his family so long ago. Paulina gets him to agree never to marry again unless she gives the go ahead. Florizel and Perdita show up and Leontes greets them happily. Florizel is pretending to be on a diplomatic mission from Bohemia and both charm Leontes. Quickly, though, word arrives that all is not as it seems. Leontes vows to help the young couple and they go off, to reunite with Polixenes and Camillo, after all these years. We then hear from three lords that the lovely young shepherdess is actually the long-lost heir of Sicilia, and that Paulina has revealed an amazing statue of the long-dead Hermione, done by that Italian master, Julio Romano, don't you know! They all go to see this wonder and Paulina, with the aid of music, magic and art, reveals the surprise end of the play- in fact, you could say they all live happily ever after!

The Characters

Leontes, King of Sicilia: He becomes psychotically jealous at the beginning of the play and tries to kill everyone he loves. He spends the rest of the play paying for it.

Hermione, Queen of Sicilia: She becomes the focus her husband's blind jealousy by being friendly with his best friend, Polixenes.

Polixenes: King of Bohemia. He has been away from Bohemia more than nine months at the beginning of the play, and is ready to go home to his own queen and young son.

Antigonus: A lord of Sicilia, married to Paulina. He has a headstrong wife and tries to be loyal to Leontes. He is a father himself, and lays down his life to save the doomed infant daughter of Hermione.

Paulina: Dear friend to Hermione, she takes it upon herself to champion the wronged queen and spends long years in her desolate cabin, waiting for a prophesy to come true.

Camillo: Lord of Sicilia. Leontes commands that Camillo poison Polixenes. Camillo agrees but cannot do it in the end.

Dion and Cleomines: Sicilian lords, sent to the Oracle at Delphos, to determine Hermione's guilt or innocence.

Archidamus: Lord of Bohemia, overwhelmed with the kind treatment afforded his King by Sicilia.

Old Shepherd and the Clown: Father and son, they find the abandoned Perdita as an infant and raise her as their own.

Perdita: Her father Leontes commands that she be abandoned at "some remote and desert place" because he believes she is the bastard of Polixenes.

Florizel: The heir to Bohemia, he is on the lam from court life.

Autolycus: Conman and entertainer, he picks pockets and steals hearts thru-out Bohemia.

Dorcas and Mopsa: Silly shepherdesses who battle for the favor of the same men.

The Bear: The focus of the most famous stage direction in theatre- *Exit, pursued by a bear*. One wonders what they did at the Globe. It is known that live bears were regularly "baited" or set to fight against dogs and men, while chained, in the same district of London as the theatres. The most famous of these animals was Blind William. He was so big and dangerous that his captors blinded him, in order to increase their sport and protect themselves.