

Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*

May 2010

These study materials are produced for use with the Classic Players production of *The Winter's Tale*.

smart

SHARING MASTERWORKS OF ART

AN EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH OF BOB JONES UNIVERSITY

An Introduction to the Play, Its Ideas and Its Structure

The last four plays written entirely by Shakespeare form a group in more than a chronological sense. During his final years as a playwright, Shakespeare confined his efforts to a type of drama referred to today as *romance*. The word *romance* in this case means “fictitious,” and it designates a type of drama that includes events more extraordinary and miraculous than those in the comedies, tragedies or histories.

Typical elements in the prose romance literature popular in Shakespeare's day include separation and reunion of lovers and family members, the adoption of royal children by shepherds, and rescues of infants and fair maidens from dangerous animals. Stories of this sort admit elements of tragic conflict and absurdly improbable coincidences but resolve them in the conventional happy ending of comedy.

Shakespeare's beautiful, haunting final works seem to represent the view of life toward which he had been progressing in the earlier 33 plays, for the romances incorporate yet transcend the experiences of the other genres. All four emphasize the necessity of patience in adversity and the intervention of Providence in human affairs.

Of these four works—*Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*—only *The Tempest* is well known to modern audiences. But each of them, and for our audiences *The Winter's Tale* in particular, offers a rich and powerful theatrical experience by achieving both the depth of tragedy with its sin and suffering and the joy and laughter associated with repentance and rebirth.

The Winter's Tale opens with talk of friendship and hope for the future of Sicilia's royal progeny. But recollections of the carefree, innocent boyhood of kings Leontes and Polixenes soon give way to Polixenes' regrets about the temptations attendant upon coming of age and Leontes' resentment of the time he spent courting his wife, Hermione. With only these slight suggestions that Leontes is self-centered, comedy suddenly turns to tragedy some 150 lines into the play when he flies off in a jealous rage, accusing his wife and his best friend of adultery.



Actors and critics alike have found this sudden outburst from Leontes problematic, but Shakespeare's audiences did not look for consistent motivation in stage characters; they were much more interested in seeing an exciting story unfold. After all, we might reason in the case of Leontes, it is the nature of jealousy to construct reality out of nothing.

Like the tragic protagonist Othello whom Shakespeare created some six years earlier, Leontes is driven to insane passion and folly under the delusion that he is a cuckold, or a foolish man whose wife has been unfaithful. But Othello's jealousy is inflamed by the scheming villain Iago while Leontes' springs out of his own mind. Leontes is also like the character King Lear, one who tears apart his own family, but without the machinations of the evil daughters Goneril and Regan.

continued on next page »

An Introduction ...

Yet even though Leontes' cruel violence destroys his entire family, Shakespeare holds the negative within bounds and counterbalances it with virtue. In the characters Hermione and Mamillius he presents the beauty and dignity of truth and innocence, and in the servants Paulina and Camillo he depicts loyalty and courage. All four of these virtuous characters respond with truth to the untenable situation Leontes creates.

Hermione's patient endurance of her husband's cruel abuse epitomizes the major theme of the romances: "This action I now [undergo] is for my better grace" (II.i.121-22). Confident that the divine powers will vindicate her, she courageously surrenders to Leontes' will as she is taken off to prison. Later at her trial she is eloquent and articulate in her own defense, yet she finally rests her case with the gods: "Apollo be my judge!" (III.ii.116).

In addition to such strong positive characterization, Shakespeare softens the tragedy of the early scenes of *The Winter's Tale* with allusions to a benevolent Providence. He employs the dramatic device of the oracle to represent divine powers in this play set in a pre-Christian age, probably because of the restraints of censorship under which he worked. After a law was passed in 1606 forbidding the use of names of members of the Trinity onstage, Shakespeare substituted "heavens," "Jove" or the name of some other pagan deity for "God" in his scripts.

Apollo is the god of light and truth. In the manner of good dramatic irony, however, Apollo's revelation of the innocence of Hermione, Polixenes and Camillo comes too late to save Leontes, whose follies culminate in accusations of falsehood against the very oracle of god. Immediately upon the king's blasphemous "there is no truth at all i' th' oracle" (III.ii.140), a servant enters to announce the death of Mamillius, brought about by anxiety over his mother. It is this revelation of the consequences of his sin, namely the death of his innocent son, that brings Leontes to the point of dramatic climax. Soon after he confesses his guilt and begs pardon of Apollo, Leontes receives word that Hermione also is dead.

"The thrust of romance, as a genre, is the redemption of a world full of misfortune, a blossoming of a new life out of loss and death, and an affirmation of the ultimate harmony that may follow, even proceed from, tragedy." – Peggy Ann Knapp

Leontes is not the sole object of moral retribution in the early acts of *The Winter's Tale*. Because of his role in disposing of the infant Perdita on a remote, stormy seacoast, the nobleman Antigonus is chased offstage and eaten by a bear. This grotesque episode symbolizes the evil nature of man as well as the hideous consequences of psychological abuse. Similarly, Leontes, whose name means "lion," has unleashed his passion to the savage destruction of his wife and children. Even the mariners transporting Antigonus and the newborn daughter of Hermione—Perdita, "the lost one"—are drowned by an angry sea, which, like the bear, acts as Nature's instrument of retribution.

If *The Winter's Tale* had been a tragedy, it might have ended with this convincing illustration of the destructive nature of passion and the inevitability of reaping what one has sown. But rather than ending the play here, Shakespeare employs this strange scene as a pivotal point between tragedy and romance. The storm which symbolizes divine displeasure also represents the tempest of birth. The turning point is underlined by a remark made by the Shepherd, who discovers the infant Perdita, to the Clown, who witnessed the destruction of Antigonus: "Thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born" (III.iii.113-14).

Act IV opens with Time serving as Chorus to announce a 16-year interval during which the contrite Leontes has paid the price of his sin in grief and loneliness. The appearance of personified Time would have reminded Shakespeare's audience of two commonplace notions: repentance and healing are facilitated by the passage of time, and time reveals truth. The subtitle of Shakespeare's major source for *The Winter's Tale*, Greene's *Pandosto*, is *The Triumph of Time*. Leontes already knows that his accusations against Hermione and Polixenes were false, but he has still more truth to learn.

The action of the second movement of the play begins in a pastoral setting, where Bohemian shepherds and shepherdesses enjoy a simple life away from the artificiality and corruptions of court. In this natural setting the kind old shepherd who found the abandoned baby Perdita has reared her. She is now a beautiful, vital and unaffected young woman. Presiding over the sheepshearing festival as Flora, the goddess of flowers, she represents the beauty of spring with its renewal and rebirth.

Life in Bohemia is not without adversity, however. The rogue Autolycus has come from the court to hoodwink the gullible country folks. In addition, Polixenes, giving place to wrath, casts a temporary shadow over the romance of Perdita and his son Prince Florizel.

Fleeing Polixenes' sudden cruelty, the young lovers arrive in Sicilia, where the long barren winter of evil and suffering has persisted for 16 years. But Leontes is now a wiser man than Polixenes, and the whole final action is concentrated at his court, where the young lovers take refuge.

On Jealousy

"Jealousy is as cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are fiery coals and a vehement flame."
– Geneva Bible, Song of Solomon 8.6b

"The ear of jealousy heareth all things, and the noise of the grudging shall not be hid."
– Geneva Bible, Wisdom of Solomon (Apocrypha) 1.10

"How many fools serve mad jealousy!"
– Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*

"O! beware, my lord, of jealousy;
It is the green-eyed monster which doth mock
The meat it feeds on."
– Shakespeare, *Othello*

"Trifles light as air
Are to the jealous confirmations strong
As proofs of holy writ."
– Shakespeare, *Othello*

Using both Christian symbolism and natural mythology, Shakespeare transcends the tragic pattern of sin, suffering and death by incorporating resurrection and reconciliation in the final scene: man and wife, child and parents, servants and masters, and estranged friends are all reunited. Thus the play's sequence of birth, death and rebirth is complete. Hermione and Perdita are restored to Leontes. He also gains Florizel, a prince who is within a month of Mamillius' age and who therefore, in a sense, counterbalances his loss of a son and heir.

Perdita, a symbol of grace and the continuation of her mother's innocence, plays a key role in the resurrection of Hermione, for it is her presence that unlooses her mother's speech. The statue which comes to life before the audience's eyes has actually never died, but her life is nonetheless a miracle of grace. Furthermore, Leontes' recovery of Hermione, who has the marks of grief and age upon her, is undeserved and unexpected. After beholding her own youthful image preserved in Perdita, Hermione looks forward to the prospects of a new life with her family.

Thus although in the first part of *The Winter's Tale* young people are victims of the evil of their elders, in the second part they are instruments of recovery and reconciliation. After the long winter of death and injustice, the restoration of love and life culminates in the betrothals of two couples, one young and one old. And thus Shakespeare's symbolic pattern concludes with the high summer of fulfillment and hope for the future. ❧

On Suspicion

by Sir Francis Bacon (1601)

Suspicious amongst thoughts are like bats amongst birds; they ever fly by twilight. Certainly they are to be repressed or at least well guarded: for they cloud the mind; they [let go of] friends; and they check with business, whereby business cannot go on currently and constantly.

Suspicious dispose kings to tyranny, husbands to jealousy, wise men to irresolution and melancholy. They are defects, not in the heart, but in the brain; for they take place in the stoutest natures, as in the example of Henry the Seventh of England. There was not a more suspicious man nor a more stout. And in such a composition they do small hurt. For commonly they are not admitted, but with examination, whether they be likely or no.

But in fearful natures *suspicious* gain ground too fast. There is nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little; and therefore men should remedy suspicion, by procuring to know more and not to keep their suspicions in smother.

Suspicious that the mind of itself gathers, are but buzzes; but *suspicious* that are artificially nourished and put into men's heads by the tales and whisperings of others have stings.

Certainly, the best means to clear the way in this same woods of *suspicious* is frankly to communicate them with the party that one suspects; for thereby he shall be sure to know more of the truth of them than he did before; and withal shall make that party more circumspect, not to give further cause of suspicion.

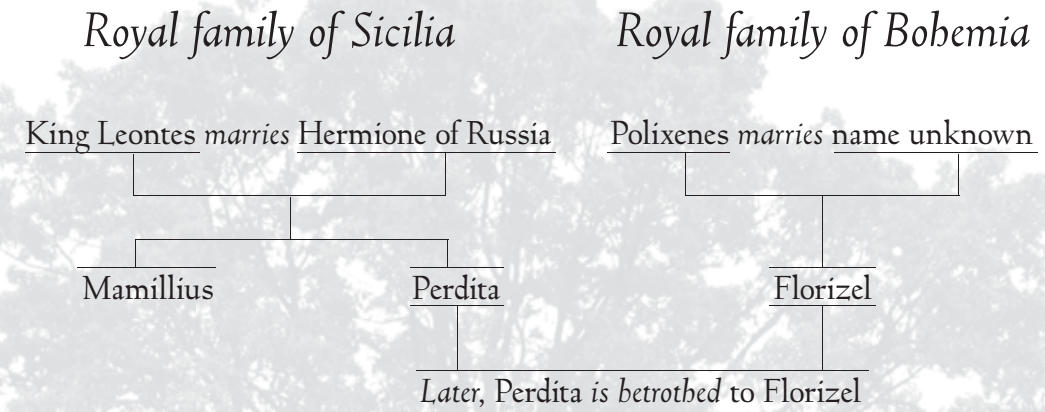
But this would not be done to men of base natures; for they, if they find themselves once suspected, will never be true. ❧



Leontes



Hermione



The Oracle:

“Hermione is chaste,
Polixenes blameless, ...
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.”



Mamillius



Perdita



Polixenes



Florizel

WM. SHAKESPEARE
THE WINTER'S TALE
Plot Summary

King LEONTES of Sicilia urges his lifelong friend King POLIXENES of Bohemia to extend his visit at the Sicilian court. When Polixenes resists, Leontes asks his wife, Queen HERMIONE of Sicilia, to persuade their guest to stay. When she succeeds where her husband has failed, Leontes is embarrassed. His vexation builds into a raging jealousy, and he accuses Hermione of being unfaithful to him with Polixenes. After learning of Leontes' intent to have him killed, Polixenes flees to Bohemia.

Hermione is placed in prison, where she gives birth to a daughter. Suspecting that the baby is illegitimate, Leontes consigns her to abandonment at some desert place. The courtier who carries out the deed names the baby PERDITA (“the lost one”).

During Hermione's public trial for treason and adultery, two lords whom Leontes has dispatched to the shrine of Apollo return with the divine revelation (Oracle) that Hermione is guiltless. Leontes, however, persists in his false accusations.

The trial is interrupted with the announcement that the young prince MAMILLIUS has died of anxiety. When Leontes learns of the boy's death, he repents, but it is too late to save Hermione, who swoons and is later reported dead. Leontes resolves to spend his life in solitary penitence.

The abandoned baby Perdita is rescued on the seacoast of Bohemia. Sixteen years later she falls in love with a handsome young prince named FLORIZEL. Across a vast gulf of time and space, mysteries begin to unravel and reconciliation occurs, setting the stage for the recovery of “that which is lost.”

Shakespeare's Depiction of the Family in *The Winter's Tale*

In *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare weaves both tragedy and comedy into the interactions between a pair of royal families. The story of King Leontes of Sicilia and King Polixenes of Bohemia unfolds over two generations. These two men, both heads of states as well as of families, grew up together as close childhood friends. Polixenes alludes to the days when they "as twinn'd lambs did frisk i' th' sun."

When the play begins, Leontes' entire immediate family appears in the plot: his wife, Hermione, who anticipates the imminent birth of the family's second child; and his young son, Mamillius.

Polixenes, a gracious visitor at Leontes' court, has left his young son, Florizel, at home far away in Bohemia. Polixenes' wife neither appears nor is mentioned in the script. The small number of mother figures in Shakespeare's plays can be at least partially accounted for by theatrical practice of the day. Boy actors played all the female roles, and Shakespeare's company of actors included few boys.

As Shakespeare begins to unfold Leontes' terrible, passionate jealousy, Mamillius' playful behavior invites the audience to contrast the carefree ease of childhood with the stresses of adulthood in a fallen world. The boy likes to play, tease, and tell scary stories, all activities that require a child to pivot between the worlds of illusion and reality.

Leontes, on the other hand, cannot distinguish between outward appearance and inner truth as they relate to Hermione and Polixenes' innocent friendship. His jealousy constructs reality out of nothingness and dreams. Ironically, he fears the evil without—in fidelity—but is actually destroyed by that which comes from within himself.

Overcome by irrational jealousy of his wife and best friend, Leontes begins to verbally abuse Hermione, Mamillius, and Polixenes and then with extreme cruelty actually destroys his entire family, including the newborn second child, a daughter. In doing so, he fails as head of both family and state, misusing his royal power to tyrannize over those he falsely perceives as enemies



David Burke as Leontes and William Burkholder as Polixenes, 2010



Erin Naler as Hermione, David Burke as Leontes and Isaac Talbert as Mamillius, 2010



Ben Toler as Florizel and Marjorie Peters as Perdita, 2010

in his private life. Not just his family but his entire kingdom will suffer because of his actions. Sicilia becomes a troubled kingdom without an heir to the throne.

Subjected to imprisonment and public trial as a traitor and adulteress, the innocent Hermione appeals to a higher power for vindication, resolving, "I must be patient, till the heavens look/With an aspect more favorable."

Hermione then gives birth to a daughter. Doubting the baby's paternity, Leontes sends his own child away to be killed. Shortly thereafter, overcome with fear of his father and anxiety about his mother's fate, Mamillius sickens and dies. The death of this prince, whose name means "dependent on mother for life," is the price of Leontes' sin.

Immediately after hearing of his son's death, Leontes recognizes the truth: "Apollo's angry, and the heavens themselves/Do strike at my injustice." His repentance comes too late to save Hermione, however, who swoons at the announcement of Mamillius' death and is later reported dead herself.

The jealousy which comes upon Leontes so soon after the play begins produces hatred, injustice, death, and the loss of family and friends. He thereafter assumes a solitary existence. Having cast off and destroyed his wife, son and daughter, he spends his life in remorse and penitence.

Sixteen years pass, during which Leontes' daughter lives in rural Bohemia, ignorant of her true identity. She is reared by a kindly old shepherd who calls her Perdita, or "the lost one," and has brought her up with his clownish son as her brother. There she meets and falls in love with Florizel, son of Polixenes, the man who inflamed her father's jealousy many years earlier.

When the disguised Polixenes discovers that his son, also in peasant clothing, loves a lowly shepherdess, he is at first charmed by this beautiful young woman's behavior and appearance. Soon thereafter, however, like his friend before him, Polixenes explodes with anger. It is not the anger

of jealousy but the anger of a father who does not want his royal son yoked to a common "queen of curds and cream." The young couple's plans for marriage thus seem shattered.

With the help of the kindly old lord Camillo, however, the young pair flee to Sicilia, where Florizel renews friendship with his father's estranged friend, Leontes. At this point Leontes becomes the prime mover for good in the plot when he agrees to intercede with Polixenes on behalf of young love, finding Perdita especially sympathetic.

The next actions that advance *The Winter's Tale* toward a happy ending for the royal families of Leontes and Polixenes do not take place onstage for the audience to see. Instead three gentlemen report the marvelous discovery at Leontes' court that Perdita is the Sicilian king's lost daughter, the baby he sought to dispose of long ago. In a bittersweet reunion Leontes and Perdita rejoice in each other's presence but feel deep sorrow when Leontes tells his daughter of the fate of Hermione, the mother whom Perdita has never known.

When Polixenes arrives in pursuit of the elopers, Leontes embraces the friend he so badly wounded 16 years earlier and asks his forgiveness.

Leontes' faithful court attendant, Paulina, then leads the two kings and their betrothed children to a chapel to see a statue erected to Hermione's memory. They all comment on the lifelikeness of the beautiful work of art. After calling for music, Paulina urges the statue to move, saying, "Dear life redeems you!"

At this point the greatest wonder in *The Winter's Tale* occurs: Hermione steps down from the pedestal, a living woman who is reunited with her husband and daughter. She reveals that for 16 years she has lived in seclusion, hoping one day to see her prison-born daughter. Thus Perdita, who at first was the cause of her parents' separation, becomes the instrument of their reconciliation. Two families, with the exception of Mamillius, are reconstituted.

Leontes entreats the forgiveness of his wife and friend Polixenes and tells Hermione that their daughter will marry Florizel, Polixenes' son.

Thus two families that were long severed are given a fresh opportunity to enjoy love and happiness as Paulina urges them, "Go together, you precious winners all!" For young and old alike, life has new meaning as the play ends. ❧

Supporting Characters in *The Winter's Tale*

Autolycus is a peddler and compulsive pickpocket who serves as the merry rogue in *The Winter's Tale*, pilfering at the spring sheep-shearing festival in Bohemia. He is also a cony-catcher (a con man or "confidence trickster") who hoodwinks the gullible country people. Although Autolycus seeks to gain royal favor, his plan fails, and he unwittingly becomes an instrument of good.

William McCauley as Autolycus, 1993



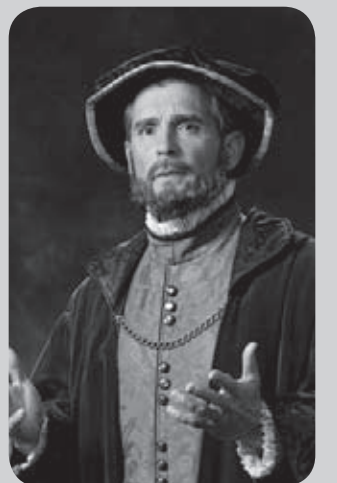
The Winter's Tale cast also includes two Sicilian upper class servants who typify loyalty, courage and truth in service.

Paulina is the brazen lady-in-waiting who staunchly defends Hermione's virtue and condemns Leontes for his jealous fantasies which destroy his family. In contrast, her husband Antigonus succumbs to the king's evil demands. Paulina attends Leontes in his penitence and becomes instrumental in the play's final restoration and reunion.



Camillo is Leontes' chief counselor, but he refuses to follow the king's command that he poison Polixenes. Instead, he flees to Bohemia and enters Polixenes' service, becoming a wise and gentle adviser to the king and the prince. ❧

Jean Cook as Paulina and Brad Payne as Camillo, 2010



A Note on Characterization and Motivation in Shakespeare's Plays

When men and women attended the theater in Shakespeare's day, they saw neither mirror images of themselves nor characters they could identify with in *Macbeth*, *Lady Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Cordelia* or the like. Instead they saw images of extraordinary human beings, acting out stories that in no way represented what they could reasonably expect to unfold in the same manner in their own lives. In the words of Tom F. Driver, these audiences had "the ability to participate in the experience of another, who [was] unlike [themselves] and whom [they had] to relate to by an act of imaginative correlation."

Similarly, realistic motivation and character consistency were not high priorities for Renaissance English writers. This is not to say that Shakespeare never achieved verisimilitude, or lifelikeness, in his characters. But telling a good story was always a higher priority in his playwriting. If, on occasion, Shakespeare had to choose between creating a dramatic plot and maintaining consistent motivation for a character, he would choose the former instead of the latter.

Shakespeare also gave higher place to developing the thought, or theme, of his plays than to making his characters lifelike. This priority he had inherited from medieval English drama, plays in which characters personify such abstractions as beauty, knowledge and good works.

In contrast to playgoers of Shakespeare's day, 21st-century audiences enjoy seeing lifelike portrayals of themselves and characters they can identify with in their entertainment. They are keenly interested in what makes people tick, perhaps even more so when it comes to literary or stage characters than in real life.

Psychological analysis is helpful in the study of Shakespeare, however, only if and when it sheds light on the play as a whole. Those who put too much emphasis on the psychology of one or two characters often entirely miss the dramatic purpose of a scene or misinterpret the play's larger themes and methods.

In the four romances Shakespeare's characterization is generally even less realistic and more symbolic than in the earlier plays. In the case of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, the playwright simply does not reveal directly why this character suddenly becomes the instigator of evil. The play as a whole, however, presents a case study of pathological jealousy, its destruction and its eventual cure.

Shakespeare deliberately eliminates the plausible motivation for Leontes' jealousy from his source for the first three acts of *The Winter's Tale*. In Robert Greene's novel *Pandosto: or, The Triumph of Time* (1588), the jealous king, Pandosto of Bohemia, has circumstantial grounds for his jealousy because his wife visits his friend's bedchamber several times for conversation. Greene's theme is "the infectious sore of jealousy." Shakespeare's version differs from Greene's in two other important respects:

Hermione's counterpart actually dies and Leontes' commits suicide. Shakespeare's reconciliation in the end of *The Winter's Tale* emphasizes the grace that enables even one who has been insanely jealous to move from his sin to remorse and finally to forgiveness. ❧



The Boy Mamillius

Shakespeare employs child characters throughout his plays as a means of reinforcing ideas and garnering sympathy for his point of view. Many of them suffer as innocent victims of familial or political strife. Such is the fate of Mamillius in *The Winter's Tale*, yet the audience sees the young son of Leontes and Hermione as a laughing, chattering child. The boy's grief and consequent death, brought on by his father's evil destruction of his mother, are not developed onstage. ❧

Pictured above as Mamillius in past *Classic Players* productions are Dyke Habegger in 1993 (left) and Bob Jones III in 1945 (right).

Bears & Bohemians

"Exit Antigonus, Pursued by a Bear."

The most famous Shakespeare stage direction comes from *The Winter's Tale*. It is also the playwright's most challenging instruction for directors, designers and stagecraft technicians.

"III.iii. Location: Bohemia. The sea-coast."

Shakespeare's most notorious geographical slip-up is also in *The Winter's Tale*. Bohemia, an independent kingdom in Shakespeare's day and today a region in the Czech Republic, is 400 kilometers away from the sea. The same blunder or joke appears in Shakespeare's source. ❧

These materials are original and ©2010, Bob Jones University, Dr. Janie Caves McCauley, writer. All rights reserved. No part of this study guide may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

FA 048 (6911) 3/10