

A Guide to
THE WINTER'S TALE

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *The Winter's Tale* in or around 1610, when he was in his mid-forties. He was a member and shareholder of the King's Men, the country's most prestigious theatre company.

As well as the large open-air Globe Theatre, which had been the company's home since the start of the century, the King's Men had recently started performing in the Blackfriars Theatre, a smaller indoor space with an intimate, candlelit atmosphere. This venue offered exciting new possibilities in terms of sound, lighting, and special effects, all of which Shakespeare was quick to exploit in his later plays such as *The Winter's Tale*.

Recent years had seen the great tragedies of *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*; however, at this stage in his life, Shakespeare seems to have taken a decisive step away from tragedy. The major plays written in these later years of his career – *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest* – are variously referred to as the Late Comedies, the Tragicomedies, or the Romances. In these plays, elements of tragedy, comedy, pastoral, myth, and symbolism are mingled. There is a strong emphasis on father-child relationships; and the painful separation of family members is a recurring theme, ending with eventual homecoming, reconciliation, and redemption.

The plot of *The Winter's Tale* was based on a lurid, sensational story, *Pandosto*, by Robert Greene. (It was Greene who, twenty years before, had scathingly referred to Shakespeare – the young provincial newcomer who lacked a university education – as an 'upstart crow'.) Shakespeare transformed Greene's melodramatic tale into a rich, thought-provoking, magical piece of theatre:

"Shakespeare made his play out of a paperback romance about royalty, sex, scandal, sudden violent feelings, death, lost children ... In Shakespeare's hands the story becomes a profound play with an extraordinary range of ideas and feelings and tones, a complete living world, rich with challenging, beautiful and varied verse and fine prose. The play has the attractive air of having been written by a great artist who knows exactly what he is doing; who can handle everything, from tiny effects to big emotions, with ease and skill."

Levi Fox, *The Shakespeare Handbook*, 1987

Lifelong friends

The magnificent court of Sicilia is playing host to an important guest: Polixenes, king of Bohemia, is visiting Leontes, the Sicilian king.

The two men have been close friends since childhood. Now, however, their royal duties, and the distance between their kingdoms, mean that their meetings are rare and precious.

Winter has arrived, and the royal visit is nearing its end. Polixenes has been in Sicilia for several months now, and is due to return to Bohemia shortly.

Curtain up

Two kingdoms

I, i

In the court of king Leontes, in Sicilia, two noblemen are in conversation. One, Archidamus, is a companion of the visiting Bohemian king, while the other, Camillo, is a Sicilian courtier. They are discussing the possibility that, following the two kings' amicable reunion in Sicilia, Leontes is planning, in return, to visit his friend in Bohemia later in the year.

Archidamus is concerned that Bohemia will seem mean and insignificant in comparison with the splendour of Sicilia. Camillo dismisses his concerns, but Archidamus insists that he is simply being honest. He cannot find words to describe the welcome they have received from Leontes:

Archidamus: ... you shall see, as I have said, great difference betwixt our Bohemia and your Sicilia ... Wherein our entertainment shall shame us, we will be justified in our loves;¹ for indeed –

Camillo: Beseech you –

Archidamus: Verily, I speak it in the freedom of my knowledge. We cannot with such magnificence – in so rare – I know not what to say.

¹ *although we will not be able to entertain you adequately, we will make up for it with our love*

Their hospitality has been offered freely, insists Camillo, and Archidamus need not feel indebted in any way. The important thing is the strength of the bond between the two nations and their kings. Although visits have been relatively rare in the past, the relationship has been maintained through frequent gifts and letters between the two leaders.

Archidamus mentions Leontes' son, the young prince Mamillius, who is widely admired. Camillo agrees that the boy is a great asset to his country:

Camillo: ... It is a gallant child; one that, indeed, physics the subject,¹ makes old hearts fresh. They that went on crutches ere² he was born desire yet their life to see him a man.³

¹ *reinvigorates the people of Sicilia*

² *before*

³ *hope to stay alive until he has grown to manhood*

Perhaps Camillo is exaggerating, suggests Archidamus; although the prince undoubtedly represents great promise for the future, the elderly will cling onto their lives with or without a good reason.

A change of heart

I, ii

In Leontes' palace, Polixenes is explaining to his friend that the time has come for him to return, reluctantly, to Bohemia. He has been in Sicilia for nine months, and it would take the same time again to thank him for his kindness. Instead, he can only offer one final word of thanks:

Polixenes: Time as long again
Would be filled up, my brother, with our thanks,
And yet we should for perpetuity
Go hence in debt.¹ And therefore, like a cipher,
Yet standing in rich place,² I multiply
With one 'we thank you' many thousands moe
That go before it.

Leontes: Stay³ your thanks a while,
And pay them when you part.

Polixenes: Sir, that's tomorrow.

¹ *I would still be forever in your debt*

² *like a zero at the end of a large number*

³ *hold, save*

Polixenes is anxious about what may be happening in Bohemia in his absence; besides, he says, he does not wish to outstay his welcome. Leontes tries to persuade his friend to stay a little longer, but Polixenes insists that he must take his leave.

Leontes turns to his wife Hermione, who is heavily pregnant, and asks her if she can change their visitor's mind. She points out that news arrived only yesterday from Bohemia confirming that all was well. She appreciates that Polixenes is undoubtedly missing his son, but demands teasingly that he stay for another week. When her husband goes to Bohemia on his forthcoming visit, she promises that she will allow him to stay beyond his planned date even though it will be a painful sacrifice for her.

Hermione refuses to take no for an answer, and her playful cajoling finally succeeds. Polixenes agrees to stay for another week:

Polixenes: I may not, verily.¹

Hermione: Verily?

You put me off with limber² vows. But I,
Though you would seek t'unsphere the stars with oaths,³
Should yet say 'Sir, no going'. Verily
You shall not go. A lady's 'verily' is
As potent as a lord's. Will you go yet?⁴
Force me to keep you as a prisoner,
Not like a guest: so you shall pay your fees⁵
When you depart, and save your thanks. How say you?
My prisoner? Or my guest? By your dread 'verily'
One of them you shall be.

Polixenes: Your guest then, madam.

¹ *truly, honestly*

² *limp, feeble*

³ *even if you swore so violently that the stars left their orbits*

⁴ *are you still determined to go?*

⁵ *pay your jailer for your board and lodging*

Reminiscences

Delighted that their guest has agreed to stay longer, Hermione questions him good-humouredly about his childhood with her husband Leontes. Polixenes has fond memories of long, carefree days together:

Hermione: Come, I'll question you
Of my lord's tricks¹ and yours when you were boys.
You were pretty lordings² then?

Polixenes: We were, fair queen,
Two lads that thought there was no more behind
But such a day tomorrow as today,³
And to be boy eternal.

¹ *games, pranks*

² *handsome little fellows*

³ *our only idea of the future was another day like today; nothing would ever change*

Hermione is curious to know whether her husband had been the more mischievous of the two. Polixenes insists that they were both harmless, innocent boys:

Hermione: Was not my lord
The verier wag¹ o'th' two?

Polixenes: We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i'th' sun
And bleat the one at th'other: what we changed
Was innocence for innocence;² we knew not
The doctrine of ill-doing,³ nor dreamed
That any⁴ did.

¹ *more of a rascal*

² *all the words and thoughts we exchanged were innocent*

³ *we had not learned to behave badly*

⁴ *anyone*

We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i'th' sun ...

“Renaissance commentators were more inclined to discuss male – male friendship in the intimate and affectionate terms we might now reserve for romantic partnerships ... Many of Shakespeare’s comedies dramatize marriage as the painful severing of strong male affections.”

Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith, *30 Great Myths about Shakespeare*, 2013

At some point, suggests Hermione, they must have lost their innocence. Polixenes replies that temptation did not come until later, when he and Leontes met their future wives. In that case, Hermione retorts light-heartedly, giving in to temptation was forgivable as long as no one else was involved.

Leontes now comes over to join them. He is pleased, he tells his wife, that she has succeeded in persuading their friend to stay longer. He can only think of one occasion when her words were more effective:

Leontes: Is he won yet?

Hermione: He’ll stay, my lord.

Leontes: At my request he would not.
Hermione, my dearest, thou never spok’st
To better purpose.

Hermione: Never?

Leontes: Never, but once.

Hermione pretends not to understand, and demands that Leontes spell out exactly when this other occasion was. She craves praise and encouragement, she tells him jokingly, and will be delighted to know of the other time when her words were so meaningful.

She is pleased to hear that it was when she agreed, after an agonising wait, to marry him:

Leontes: Why, that was when
Three crabbed¹ months had soured themselves to death
Ere I could make thee open thy white hand
And clap thyself my love.² Then didst thou utter,
'I am yours for ever.'

Hermione: ... Why, lo you now,³ I have spoke to th' purpose⁴
twice.
The one for ever earned a royal husband;
Th'other for some while a friend.

¹ *difficult, unpleasant*

² *clasp my hand and pledge your love*

³ *that's remarkable*

⁴ *said the right thing*

With that, Hermione takes Polixenes' hand, and they resume their conversation.

An unspoken fear

It now becomes clear that Leontes, under his calm exterior, is burning with jealousy and suspicion. He observes Polixenes and Hermione closely, convinced that there is an intense sexual attraction between them:

Leontes: This entertainment
May a free face put on¹ ...
But to be paddling palms and pinching fingers,²
As now they are, and making practised smiles
As in a looking-glass; and then to sigh, as 'twere
The mort o'th' deer³ ...

¹ *this hospitable treatment may wear an innocent expression*

² *stroking palms and squeezing fingers*

³ *like the dying breath of a hunted deer*

Leontes calls for his son Mamillius. He tries to talk to the boy, but is drawn obsessively to the subject of Hermione. He even starts to doubt whether he is the boy's father, despite their clear resemblance:

Leontes: ... they say we are
Almost as like as eggs¹ – women say so,
That will say anything.

¹ *identical to one another*

Scarcely able to contain his anguish, Leontes soon becomes visibly upset. His wife and Polixenes both notice his distress, and come to find out what is troubling him.

Leontes apologises, and explains that he sometimes becomes overly emotional when he looks at his son. He admits that his sentimentality can seem amusing to others:

Hermione: You look
As if you held a brow of much distraction.
Are you moved,¹ my lord?

Leontes: No, in good earnest.
How sometimes nature will betray its folly,
Its tenderness, and make itself a pastime
To harder bosoms.² Looking on the lines
Of my boy's face, methoughts I did recoil³
Twenty-three years, and saw myself unbreeched,⁴
In my green velvet coat ...

¹ *upset, angry*

² *sometimes our natural feelings for our children result in excessive fondness, making us figures of fun to harder-hearted people*

³ *I felt as if I was taken back*

⁴ *too young to wear a man's breeches*

Leontes asks his friend if he too is devoted to his young son. Polixenes replies that, when he is at home in Bohemia, he is forever in his boy's company. The child invigorates him, and prevents him from becoming melancholy:

Polixenes: If at home, sir,
He's all my exercise, my mirth, my matter;¹
Now my sworn friend, and then mine enemy;
My parasite,² my soldier, statesman, all.
He makes a July's day short as December,
And with his varying childness cures in me
Thoughts that would thicken my blood.³

¹ *my concern, the subject of all my thoughts*

² *flatterer, follower*

³ *with his changing moods, he dispels any feelings
of gloom or despair*

Leontes now asks Polixenes and Hermione to leave him alone with Mamillius. He instructs his wife to look after their guest well. As they leave for a walk in the garden, however, there is a hidden menace in his words:

Hermione: If you would seek us,
We are yours i'th' garden. Shall's attend you¹ there?

Leontes: To your own bents dispose you.² You'll be found,
Be you beneath the sky.³

¹ *shall we wait for you*

² *do whatever you want*

³ *as long as the sky is above you; wherever you are*

Hermione offers Polixenes her arm, and the two of them leave, chatting amicably. Leontes watches, filled with loathing and disgust.

“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 lose friends; and they check with business ... They dispose kings to tyranny, husbands to jealousy, wise men to irresolution and melancholy ... in fearful natures they gain ground too fast. There is nothing makes a man suspect much, more than to know little ...”

Francis Bacon, *Of Suspicion*, 1625

Accusations

Alone with his young son, Leontes becomes even more tormented. He is by now certain that his wife is unfaithful to him. He orders Mamillius to go away and play on his own, reflecting bitterly that in time the boy, like everyone else, will regard him with scorn and ridicule:

Leontes: Go play, boy, play. Thy mother plays,¹ and I
Play too; but so disgraced a part, whose issue
Will hiss me to my grave.² Contempt and clamour
Will be my knell.³

¹ *is playing sexual games; is adulterous*

² *I am playing a role, but such a loathsome one
that onlookers, including my own child, will jeer
me off the stage*

³ *my funeral bell*

The world is full of men whose wives are unfaithful, he declares scathingly, though most do not know it. Adultery is everywhere, and there is no escape:

Leontes: Physic¹ for't there's none:
It is a bawdy planet,² that will strike
Where 'tis predominant;³ and 'tis powerful, think it⁴ ...

¹ *medicine, a cure*

² *the cause is the influence of the planet Venus, which
provokes lust*

³ *take effect when the planet is in the ascendant*

⁴ *believe it*

Leontes calls for his adviser Camillo, and questions him about Polixenes. When Camillo agrees that everyone is aware that the king's guest is staying for a further week, Leontes seizes on his words. He is convinced that the entire court, and probably the populace in general, is aware of the queen's debauched behaviour.

He accuses Camillo of deliberately keeping him in the dark:

Camillo: I think most understand
Bohemia¹ stays here longer.
Leontes: Ha?
Camillo: Stays here longer.
Leontes: Ay, but why?
Camillo: To satisfy your highness, and the entreaties²
Of our most gracious mistress.
Leontes: Satisfy?
Th'entreaties of your mistress? Satisfy?
Let that suffice. I have trusted thee, Camillo,
With all the nearest things to my heart ...
But we have been
Deceived in thy integrity, deceived
In that which seems so.³

¹ *the king of Bohemia, Polixenes*

² *appeals, requests*

³ *deceived by your superficial air of honesty*

Hermione is no better than a common prostitute, states Leontes; and it is clear that Camillo, whether from cowardice, malice, or negligence, has been hiding the truth from him.

“Leontes seeks to disengage himself from the very ongoing nature of life. His is a cold spirit of negativism. Brooding like the winter on a procreative past, Leontes expresses his fear of time through hatred of sex, a hysterical misogyny, and obsessive threats of death.”

Charles Frey, *Shakespeare's Vast Romance*, 1980

Leontes: Dost think I am so muddy, so unsettled,
To appoint myself in this vexation?¹
... Give scandal to the blood² o'th' prince, my son,
Who I do think is mine, and love as mine,
Without ripe moving to't?³ Would I do this?
Could man so blench?⁴

Camillo: I must believe you, sir.
I do, and will fetch off Bohemia⁵ for't ...

¹ *so unstable that I would bring this vexation upon myself*

² *cast doubt on the parentage*

³ *without a well founded motive*

⁴ *go so far from the truth, make such a mistake*

⁵ *remove Polixenes*

There is one condition, says Camillo: when Polixenes has been disposed of, the king must never again suggest that Hermione has behaved dishonourably. Their marriage must be as it was before and, for the sake of their son and the reputation of the kingdom, there must not be the slightest suggestion of infidelity attached to the queen.

Leontes agrees, and confirms that he had come to the same conclusion himself. He agrees, too, that he must continue to treat their guest in a friendly, hospitable manner. After their next meal together, promises Camillo, Polixenes will no longer be a problem. The king is satisfied, but as he leaves he gives Camillo a final warning:

Camillo: I am his cupbearer.
If from me he have wholesome beverage,
Account me not your servant.

Leontes: This is all.
Do't, and thou hast the one half of my heart;
Do't not, thou splitt'st thine own.

Camillo: ... you may as well
Forbid the sea for to obey the moon
As or by oath remove or counsel shake
The fabric of his folly,¹ whose foundation
Is piled upon his faith² and will continue
The standing of his body.³

¹ *alter his irrational delusion either by swearing oaths or through sensible argument*

² *which is based on his absolute conviction*

³ *as long as he lives*

The matter is urgent, Camillo declares. Both their lives are in danger. He offers to help Polixenes and his attendants to leave Sicilia in secrecy this very night: as a trusted adviser to the king, Camillo is authorised to use the various hidden gates in the city walls. In return, he asks if he may join Polixenes' entourage and travel with him to Bohemia.

Polixenes trusts Camillo's judgement, and willingly goes along with his proposal. Remaining in Sicilia and confronting Leontes would be reckless, and might put the queen in peril, despite her innocence. Leontes' anger, though misguided, is likely to be deadly:

Polixenes: This jealousy
Is for a precious creature. As she's rare,¹
Must it² be great; and, as his person's mighty,
Must it be violent, and as he does conceive
He is dishonoured by a man which ever
Professed to him,³ why, his revenges must
In that be made more bitter.

¹ *wonderful, exquisite*

² *so must his jealous anger*

³ *who has always claimed to be his friend*

Camillo immediately sets about organising their departure.

Leontes passes judgement

II, i

Unaware of her husband's troubled state of mind, Hermione is with her ladies-in-waiting and her young son Mamillius. The boy is pestering her, and she asks one of her ladies to look after him. He speaks defiantly to his carers:

Lady: Come, my gracious lord,
Shall I be your playfellow?

Mamillius: No, I'll none of you.¹

Lady: Why, my sweet lord?

Mamillius: You'll kiss me hard, and speak to me as if
I were a baby still.

¹ *I won't have anything to do with you*

One of the women mentions that the queen is expecting another child. Mamillius may be choosy about his companions now, she warns, but he will have to fight for his share of attention when the new baby arrives:

Lady: Hark ye,
The queen, your mother, rounds apace.¹ We shall
Present our services to a fine new prince
One of these days, and then you'd wanton with us²
If we would have you.

¹ *is quickly growing fuller*

² *you'll be determined to play with us*

Hermione comes back to her son and tries to settle him down. She asks him to tell a story:

Hermione: Pray you sit by us,
And tell's a tale.

Mamillius: Merry or sad shall't be?

Hermione: As merry as you will.¹

Mamillius: A sad tale's best for winter. I have one
Of sprites² and goblins.

¹ *as you like*

² *spirits, ghosts*

