



WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE	KING LEAR	HAMLET	MACBETH	OTHELLO	ROMEO AND JULIET	JULIUS CAESAR	CORIOLANUS
CYMBELINE	TITUS ANDRONICUS	TIMON OF ATHENS	TROILUS AND CRESSIDA	ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA	KING JOHN		
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HENRY VIII	ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL	AS YOU LIKE IT	THE COMEDY OF ERRORS	LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST			
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# The Winter's Tale

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## Themes

posted Aug 9, 2013, 11:42 PM by alaa hagag [ **updated Aug 9, 2013, 11:42 PM** ]

## Compassion and Forgiveness

While the first three acts of *The Winter's Tale* are marked by the pain and suffering caused by Leontes's jealousy, the latter half of the play is all about compassion, forgiveness, and redemption. Perdita's true identity is restored, the princess is reunited with her father and mother (who is seemingly "resurrected" from the dead), and Paulina gets engaged to Camillo. The play's joyous ending not only restores domestic and political order, but it offers an optimistic view of humanity.

## Jealousy

The first three acts of *The Winter's Tale* are a study of jealousy and its destructive effects. In the play, Leontes's sudden and unfounded fear that his pregnant wife is sleeping with his best friend eats away at him like a disease. Leontes's wild jealousy is often compared to that of [Othello](#). Both men unfairly suspect their wives of infidelity and their violent responses destroy their families and upset the political balance. The differences, however, are significant. Unlike Othello, Leontes convinces himself of his wife's "affair" all by himself – there's no Iago figure whispering in his ear and goading him along. (If anything, Leontes is his own Iago.) More importantly, Leontes's abuse of his family is not entirely permanent, unlike Othello's. After repenting and suffering for sixteen long years, Leontes is reunited with his wife and long-lost daughter, which puts a redemptive spin on *The Winter's Tale*, whereas *Othello* is just plain tragic.

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## Friendship

Like many of Shakespeare's plays (*Two Gentleman of Verona* and *The Merchant of Venice*, especially) and *The Sonnets*, *The Winter's Tale* examines the nature of male friendship. Bromance was a pretty big deal in the Renaissance and was valued above marriage and other male-female relationships. In the play, the friendship between Leontes and Polixenes is portrayed as an ideal bond that developed during the innocence of childhood and was interrupted by their adolescent interest in women and sex. As adults, Leontes's friendship with Polixenes is characterized by rivalry and Leontes's jealous fears that his wife has come between them. There are examples of female friendship in the play (most notably, Paulina's fierce loyalty to Hermione), but bromance is given much more attention.

## Youth and Old Age

*The Winter's Tale* dramatizes a divide between the younger generation and their parents. The older generation (Leontes and Polixenes) is responsible for the loss of innocence, the disunion of families and friends, and immense suffering and heartache. When the younger generation (Perdita and Florizel) comes of age, their youthful love has the effect of restoring families and reigniting hope for the future. Yet, not all of the "sins of the fathers" can be redeemed by the younger generation. The permanent deaths of young Mammilius and old Antigonus remind us that some things are lost forever and cannot be resurrected. Because children are portrayed as "copies" or replicas of their parents, Shakespeare also leaves us with a sense that the younger generation could grow up to repeat their parents' mistakes.

## Suffering

In the play, Leontes's jealousy gives way to tyrannous behavior that causes immense pain suffering. Mammilius falls ill and dies when his mother is imprisoned and tried for adultery, Hermione is said to have died of a broken heart, and Leontes tortures himself for sixteen long years. In fact, the entire kingdom is made miserable by Leontes's behavior, which has left Sicily without an heir. This kind of anguish is inherent in Shakespearean tragedy, but because the play is a blend of tragedy and comedy, the suffering in the play ultimately gives way to redemption, which we discuss in "Compassion and Forgiveness."

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## Characters

posted Aug 9, 2013, 11:39 PM by alaa hagag [ **updated Aug 9, 2013, 11:39 PM** ]

### 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.

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### Summary

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*The Winter's Tale* opens in a Sicilian palace, where Polixenes (the King of Bohemia) is visiting his childhood BFF, Leontes (the King of Sicily). After a nine month visit, Polixenes is ready to head back home to Bohemia, but Leontes's devoted wife, Hermione, convinces Polixenes to stay a little bit longer. (We should point out that Leontes asks his wife to convince Polixenes to stay, and you'll see why this is important in a moment.) As Leontes watches his wife and best bud chat it up, Leontes suddenly becomes wildly jealous and suspects that his very pregnant wife is having a torrid affair with Polixenes – Leontes is certain that Hermione is carrying the man's love child. Leontes quickly arranges to have his old pal poisoned, but when Polixenes catches

wind of Leontes's plot to have him offed, Polixenes flees with a Sicilian guy named Camillo to his home in Bohemia.

Leontes is furious, so he throws his pregnant wife in the slammer, where she gives birth to a daughter (later named Perdita). Paulina, a good friend of Hermione and the only person willing to stand up to the jealous king, takes the newborn to Leontes and attempts to talk some sense into him. But, alas, King Leontes refuses to acknowledge that he is the baby's daddy. To make matters worse, Leontes orders one of his men, Antigonus, to take the little "bastard" for a ride out to the Bohemian "desert," where baby Perdita is left to the harsh elements. (Yeah, we know there's no "desert" in Bohemia but sometimes you just have to go with the flow.)

Meanwhile, Leontes puts Hermione on trial for adultery and treason (despite the fact that Apollo's Oracle announces Hermione is totally innocent and warns that the "king shall live without an heir" if Perdita, who is in the process of being disappeared, is not found. During Hermione's trial, a servant enters with news that Prince Mammilius (the precocious young son of Hermione and Leontes) has died because he's been so upset about the way Leontes is treating his mother. When Hermione hears the news, she falls to the ground and, soon after, we're told she is also dead. Leontes realizes what he's done and has a sudden change of heart – he immediately falls to his knees and begs forgiveness from the god Apollo for being such a rotten husband, father, and friend, which is nice to hear but is pretty much a day late and a dollar short.

Meanwhile, Antigonus reaches the coast of Bohemia (yeah, we know there's no "coast" in landlocked Bohemia either, but again, we just have to go with it). Antigonus dumps off baby Perdita and...is promptly eaten by a hungry bear! (We're not even kidding.) Luckily, an Old Shepherd happens along and finds baby Perdita, along with a bundle of riches and some documents that detail the kid's royal heritage. (Remember this, because it's important later.) The Old Shepherd and his country bumpkin son (the Clown) decide, what the heck, let's keep the cash and raise the kid as our own.

A figure called "Time" appears on stage and announces that sixteen years have passed and the audience should just sit back, relax, and enjoy Big Willie Shakespeare's show. (FYI: Flash-forwards were kind of a big no-no on the English Renaissance stage so, Shakespeare's being kind of innovative and irreverent here. Check out "Setting" if you want to know more about this.)

At a Bohemian sheep-shearing festival (a big, spring/summer party that uses sheep haircuts as an excuse for everyone to celebrate the nice weather and for young people to hook up), we learn that Perdita has grown up to be the prettiest girl in Bohemia (which is why she gets to be Queen of the Feast) and is going steady with a gorgeous young prince named Florizel, who just so happens to be the son of King Polixenes. (Yep, that's Leontes's ex-best friend all right. You probably see where this is going.) There's just one hitch – King Polixenes doesn't know his son is dating a lowly shepherd's daughter. (As you can see, nobody knows Perdita's true identity – not even Perdita.) When Polixenes finds out, he tries to put the kibosh on the young couple's engagement. Florizel, throwing caution to the wind, defies daddy's wishes. What's a father to do? Why, threaten to have Perdita's face disfigured and declare he's going to have the Old Shepherd executed, of course. (Hmm. Is it just us or, does Polixenes sound a lot like the tyrannous Leontes here?)

Florizel and Perdita run off to Sicily, where Leontes has been beating himself up for the last sixteen years (with the help of Paulina, who has seen to it that Leontes never, ever, ever forgets that he's responsible for the deaths of Hermione and Mammilius). Polixenes and his entourage chase the couple to the Sicilian court. Before Polixenes can break up the couple and make good on his promise to scratch up Perdita's pretty, young face, the Old Shepherd and the Clown arrive at Leontes's court with the letters that verify Perdita's identity. (Remember the bundle of cash and documents Antigonus left with baby Perdita before he was eaten by a bear?)

Big sigh of relief – now the royal couple can get hitched and Sicily will finally have a royal heir to take over Leontes's reign when the old man dies. Plus, Leontes and Polixenes can be best buds again.

But wait, there's more. Paulina invites the entire crew to her place, where she unveils a statue of Hermione. Everyone oohs and ahs over how lifelike the statue is when suddenly and miraculously the statue is...not a statue at all but a very *alive* Hermione. Hurray! Leontes and Hermione reunite as husband and wife. Leontes then announces that Paulina should get hitched to Camillo (since Paulina's late husband was eaten by a bear on account of Leontes and all).

And they all live happily ever after (except for Mammilius and Antigonus, who are still dead).

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