

William Shakespeare: A brief history of his life and *The Winter's Tale*

Shakespeare was born in 1564 on Henley Street in Stratford, which is north of London. The day of his arrival is uncertain, but it has been suggested that he was born on April 23. It is speculated that Shakespeare was educated at a local grammar school called King Edward VI in Stratford. He would have been able to view local theatrical productions by groups of traveling players. His education would have consisted of Latin, Logic and History. In 1592 when William Shakespeare arrived in London it was the fastest growing city in Europe, with many playhouses to explore. It may well have been that his initial contribution to the theatre was to hold the horses outside but it was not long before he became involved in the plays themselves. We know that by 1592 he had gained a reputation for both acting and writing, and was already an important member of the theatre company then based at The Rose Theatre in Southwark.

It is speculated that William Shakespeare wrote *The Winter's Tale* in late 1610 or early 1611. The play's first known performance occurred at the Globe Theatre on May 15, 1611. Most critics agree that the style and the themes in *The Winter's Tale* are linked with Shakespeare's late romances.

Nobody knows the real cause of his death, but he is recorded as having been buried on 25th April 1616 and just as his birth, his death was taken to have occurred on 23rd April. (Drawn from "William Shakespeare - His Life in Context," <<http://www.stratford-upon-avon.co.uk/>>)

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A Playgoer's Guide to



by William Shakespeare

Summary:

Leontes, King of Sicily, suddenly comes to believe that his wife Hermione is having an adulterous affair with his best friend Polixenes, King of Bohemia. He orders Camillo, his trusted friend and advisor, to poison Polixenes. However Camillo follows his conscience and helps Polixenes escape back to Bohemia. After discovering this, King Leontes has his wife Hermione, who is pregnant, thrown into jail where she has the baby. The baby is then taken to a remote area by Antigonus as ordered by Leontes. The oracle of Apollo at Delphi proclaims Hermione is innocent and that Leontes will be without an heir until the infant daughter is found. He rejects this, and discovers that Prince Mallimus has died; Hermione dies of grief. In a dream, Hermione's ghost names the child Perdita. Antigonus is eaten by a bear when taking Perdita to a remote area; she is found by a shepherd who raises her as his own. Sixteen years pass and Camillo, who has served the King of Bohemia since leaving Sicily, longs to go back.

Polixenes, not wanting him to leave, persuades Camillo to go with him in disguise to the house of the shepherd's daughter that the king's son, Prince Florizell, has been visiting. Autolycus hears of the upcoming sheep shearing festival, and he resolves to use the celebration to con more money out of the revelers. At the festival, King Polixenes observes Florizell proclaim his love for Perdita and threatens to disown Florizell and execute Perdita. Camillo tells them to go to the court of King Leontes. Florizell exchanges clothing

with Autolycus to escape. Autolycus pretends to be an important courtier and promises to bring them to the king. Florizell and Perdita arrive, and Leontes greets them warmly. But a messenger arrives soon afterward, telling Leontes that Polixenes has arrived searching for his son. Perdita is proven to be Leontes' long lost daughter. The two families go to Paulina's house where there is a statue of Hermione which Paulina "brings to life." The families are reunited.

Elizabethan Theatre

Because theatre had a bad reputation London authorities wouldn't allow plays within the city; therefore some theatres opened up across the Thames in Southwark, which was the outskirts of the city. Before these theatres opened plays would be performed in the courtyards of inns or even in the courthouse of noblemen. The first proper playhouse that opened in London area was called "Theatre" (1576), and after that the *Rose* (1587) theatre, and the *Hope* (1613) theatre. The most famous Theatre was the *Globe* that was built by the company in which Shakespeare had a stake.



The Rose

Plays were put on by traveling troupes of actors who would travel the country in wooden wagons that would be transformed into makeshift stages. They would go wherever they could find an audience. The traveling acting companies often had the reputation of being shiftless vagabonds, largely because of the audiences that they attracted. The people would become disorderly and such a big crowd would attract pickpockets, beggars, prostitutes, and other undesirables, thereby; facilitating the spread of disease.

In a typical Elizabethan acting company, there were roughly ten shareholders, several salaried actors, and apprentices. All the actors were men because the theatre atmosphere was too crude and disorderly for women to be around. Besides being able to act, Elizabethan actors also had to be able to sing, clown, fence, perform acrobatic feats, and dance.

Greek and Roman Influences

Perdita refers to the classical myth that is the basis for the underlying allegory of *The Winter's Tale*:

O Proserpina,
For the flowers now that. frightened, thou letst fall
From Dis's wagon - (IV.4.116-118)

Proserpina the Greek goddess Persephone, who after being abducted by Hades (Dis), makes a deal whereby she will spend six months of the year below ground, and six months of the year above ground. This is the only time Shakespeare mentions her, and he refers to Dis only once again, in *The Tempest*, in a similar fertility context.

Thus she is the archetypal goddess of summer, bring new life and fertility to the earth and to humankind after the long cold of winter, and she is therefore associated with flowers. She appears at this point, because it is in the middle of a festival -- the sheep-shearing festival -- that is has precisely the same symbolic image of new life, the shearing off of the old, the ending of the white wool of winter.

Here, then, the classical and folk traditions meet, though, like the trickster figure, the pagan concept of the goddess of winter/summer was never lost, and Persephone is one of the Greek figures who was remembered by the medieval world.

This central celebration of rebirth and renewal is the surface representation of the allegory of rebirth and renewal that is inherent in the whole plot. She is cast out as dead, but in fact she is a seed, planted in winter ground, that will grow and blossom in the natural world of Bohemia, the flower-maiden.

Similarly her mother Hermione has been cast out as if dead, and will come to life again only when the rebirth -- the new generation -- returns in the renewal of summer. She is, in a sense, Persephone, cast out for the winter, reborn for the summer -- only this winter is 16 years long, for the allegory is operating in real time, rather than seasonal time. At least it seems to be, until one realizes that time in the play is not real time at all, but mythical time, so that 23 days can pass completely unnoticed, and 16 years pass at the behest of Time as Chorus. So in terms of the myth, of the renewal and rebirth, it doesn't matter if it's summer/winter or 16 years, as allegorically they are the same thing.

(Drawn from Mark Morris, "Winter's Tale," English 339 Web page, University of Alberta, 2003.

<http://www.humanities.ualberta.ca/morris/239/winter's_tale.htm>