

# The Winter's Tale

[Graphic drawn from [theatrealliance.org](http://theatrealliance.org)]

by William Shakespeare

“A sad tale’s best for winter. I have one  
of sprites and goblins.”

“Let’s have that, good sir.

Come on, sit down: come on, and do your best  
To fright me with your sprites; you’re powerful at it.”

— Mamillius and Hermione, Act II, scene I

§ A Playgoer’s Companion §



William Shakespeare

William Baker, *William Shakespeare* (2009)]

**William Shakespeare** was the third oldest child of John and Mary Shakespeare, born on 26 April 1564 and died on 23 April 1616. At 18 years old Shakespeare married a girl named Anne Hathaway, a woman who was pregnant and eight years older than Shakespeare himself. Their first child was Susanne, who was born only six months after their marriage. Twins, Hamnet and Judith, were born three years later. Hamnet lived only to the age of eleven. [from

## What is a “Winter’s Tale”?

A winter’s tale was traditionally a story told by families huddled around their fireplaces for warmth on a long cold winter night. The stories were similar to fairy tales, with exaggerated plotlines that were far from realistic.

Indeed, the plot of *The Winter’s Tale* does meet the criteria of a fairy tale: this is even stated in the text of the play: “Like an old tale still, which will have matter to rehearse, though credit be asleep and not an ear open” (V, ii). A young Perdita is abandoned in the forest and survives unharmed and is then raised by a humble shepherd. She then meets and falls in love with a prince who happens to be related to her long lost mother and father. When it is discovered that she is the long lost princess, she is reunited with her father and is there to witness her mother come back to life.

There is also an actual mention of a tale told in the winter: “a sad tale’s best for winter,” says Mamillius, who then goes on to begin to tell Hermione a story of a man who dwelt down by the churchyard – but the audience does not get to hear the entirety of the story because he goes on to whisper it in her ear. The beginnings of this winter tale he is telling Hermione may foreshadow what is to come in the rest of the play.

[adapted from [shmoop.com](http://shmoop.com)]

## “Morbid Jealousy”

The character of Leontes shows many characteristics of having what now is classified as a mental disorder, termed “Morbid Jealousy” (or pathological jealousy). Morbid Jealousy is sometimes referred to as Othello syndrome.

Morbid Jealousy is defined as a range of irrational thoughts and emotions, together with associated unacceptable or extreme behaviour, in which the dominant theme is a fixation with a partner’s sexual unfaithfulness based on weak or non-existent evidence.

"Healthy" people, or those who do not suffer from Morbid Jealousy, become jealous only in response to firm evidence. In contrast, morbidly jealous individuals interpret conclusive evidence of infidelity from irrelevant occurrences, refuse to change their beliefs even in the face of conflicting information, and tend to accuse the partner of infidelity with many others. [adapted from *Advances in Psychiatric Treatment* 19:2 (2013)]

## The Globe Theatre

The Globe Theatre was built in 1599 by actor James Burbage and his brother-in-law on the South bank of the river Thames in Southwark, London. Its architecture was intended to be similar to the Coliseum in Ancient Rome – architecture on a grand scale, which would house a capacity of between 1500 and 3000 people. “Groundlings” would pay a penny to stand in the “Pit of the theater. The gentry would pay to sit in the galleries, often using cushions for comfort. Rich nobles could watch the play from a chair set on the side of the Globe stage itself. The earliest performance of *The Winter’s Tale* was recorded by Simon Forman, the Elizabethan astrologer, who noted in his journal on 11 May 1611 that he saw it at the Globe playhouse. The play was subsequently performed in front of King James at Court on 5 November.

[adapted from wikipedia]



## Time in *The Winter’s Tale*

Time stands at the center of *The Winter's Tale*, both literally and figuratively, giving a strikingly emblematic stage life to a theme that had resonated in Shakespeare's imagination since the sonnets and the earliest plays, through the often turbulent drama of the playwright's middle years, and into the romances, those strangely fabulous works that play variations on all that came before.

*The Winter's Tale* – with its memories, fond and bitter, its plans and prophecies, its tales and ballads, and its striking leap of sixteen years – reveals this temporal background with a prominence and self-consciousness unusual even in Shakespeare. In keeping with the other pairs that serve to organize this dramatic diptych (Sicilia and Bohemia, youth and age, Nature and Art, rosemary and rue), *The Winter’s Tale* presents the experience of time in terms of a duality – one that edges into paradox. On the one hand, man lives in the present, a moment so complete in its immediacy that it seems to escape time entirely. As Time itself boasts:

I witness to  
The times that brought them in; so shall I do  
To th' freshest things now reigning, and make stale  
The glistering of this present, as my tale  
Now seems to it. (IV,i)

[from Stanton B. Garner, “Time and Presence in *The Winter’s Tale*” (*Modern Language Quarterly*, 1985)]

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English 2223: The Page and the Stage

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