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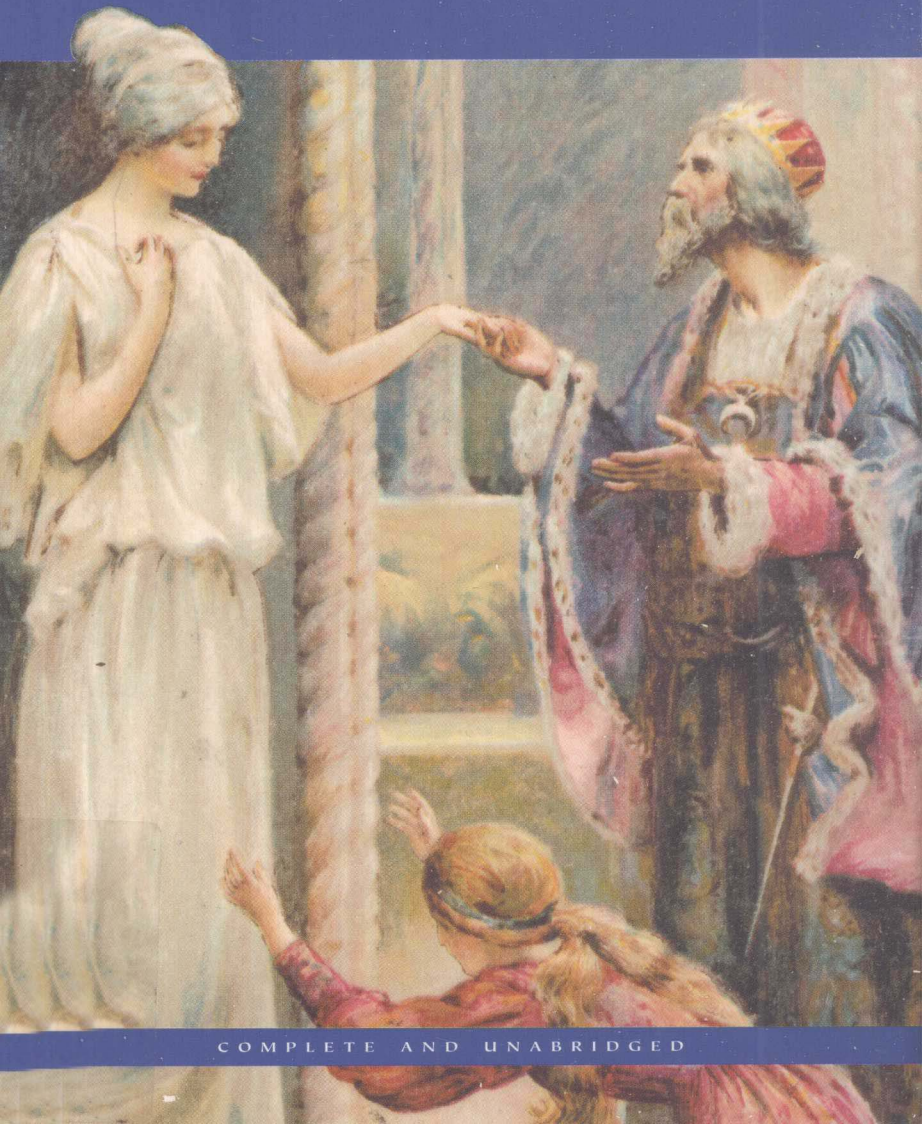
The Winter's Tale

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

THE WINTER'S TALE

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William Shakespeare

Edited by
CEDRIC WATTS

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In the new Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series, the inaugural volumes, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry V*, have been followed by *The Taming of the Shrew*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Much Ado about Nothing*, *Julius Cæsar*, *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *The Winter's Tale*. Previously, the Wordsworth Shakespeares often adopted, by arrangement, an earlier Cambridge University Press text. The new series, however, consists of fresh editions specially commissioned for Wordsworth Classics. Each play in this emergent Shakespeare Series is accompanied by a standard apparatus, including an introduction, explanatory notes and a glossary. The textual editing takes account of recent scholarship, while giving the material a careful reappraisal. The apparatus is concise rather than elaborate. We hope that the resultant volumes prove to be handy, reliable and helpful. Above all, we hope that, from Shakespeare's works, readers will derive pleasure, wisdom, provocation, challenges, and insights: insights into his culture and ours, and into the era of civilisation to which his writings have made – and continue to make – such potently influential contributions. Shakespeare's eloquence will, undoubtedly, re-echo 'in states unborn and accents yet unknown'.

CEDRIC WATTS
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

> [I]n the plays of the final period . . . , we are no longer in the real world, but in a world of enchantment, of mystery, of wonder, a world of shifting visions, a world of hopeless anachronisms, a world in which anything may happen next.
>
> (LYTTON STRACHEY.)

> *The Winter's Tale* . . . seems to remind one of itself.
>
> (A. D. NUTTALL.)[1]

I

Around 1610, as Shakespeare's great sequence of tragedies came to an end, there emerged a distinctive group of late comedies. This group has been termed 'The Romances', and it consists of *Pericles* (written largely, though not wholly, by Shakespeare), *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and, finally, *The Tempest*.[2] Since the seventeenth century, the generic term 'romance' has been applied to those literary works which, in contrast to more realistic writings, depict the far-fetched, strange and exotic (sometimes invoking the supernatural): their plots usually involve dramatic and even melodramatic events, coincidental meetings, and reunions of long-separated people. It is a literary kind or *genre* which can be traced to the Greek tales produced between the first century B.C. and the third century of the Christian era by such writers as Chariton, Xenophon of Ephesus, Heliodorus and Longus: the reunion of a sundered couple was a favoured ending. We can trace the kind even further: to the Bible, to classical legends (such as that of Atalanta),[3] and to ancient myths, particularly myths concerning the seasonal cycle, the apparent death and vernal rebirth of nature.

These four Shakespearian plays aptly fit the 'romance' definition. We journey through unfamiliar regions and times; the magical or supernatural are prominent; events defy everyday logic; and bizarre catastrophes are complemented by apparent miracles. Long-lost relatives are eventually discovered, and often (though not always) loved ones thought dead are found to be living. Although weak productions of these dramas can unveil their absurdities and magnify their implausibilities, good productions can create a sense of mythical resonance, strangeness and profundity. We may find ourselves ambushed by poignant emotion and startled by intuitive recognition.

Certainly, the first time I read it, *The Winter's Tale* seemed to be a puzzling mixture of tragic, comic and legendary material. In Act 1, the violent jealousy of Leontes made me think that I had arrived in the middle of a tragedy like *Othello*. As the plot proceeded, I cackled with heartless mirth at '*Exit pursued by a bear*' and groaned as coincidence followed coincidence. Even in Shakespeare's time, *The Winter's Tale* received some mockery. Ben Jonson had it in mind when, in *Bartholomew Fair* and *Every Man in His Humour*, he derided '*Tales*, *Tempests*, and such like drolleries': plays which were far-fetched and disunited, and which exploited time-worn devices such as 'a nest of antics' (with their 'jigs and dances') or a 'roll'd bullet' and 'tempestuous drum' to herald thunder and storm.[4] If you wished to make a hostile assessment of *The Winter's Tale*, you could point out that, culturally, chronologically and historically, it's a bizarre muddle. Apollo's oracle at Delphos is consulted, Perdita invokes Jove, and Hermione praises the gods, so the era seems to be that of classical Hellenic civilisation; yet, before that, we hear a specific reference to the Christian doctrine of original sin; later, Perdita speaks of 'Whitsun pastorals', while Autolicus mentions not only the Prodigal Son but also hallowed items which 'brought a benediction to the buyer'; and, later still, we are told that a statue of Hermione has been completed by the famous Giulio Romano (employee of Pope Leo X), who died as recently as 1546. Camillo mentions Jesus and Judas. Autolicus, with his songs, tricks and thieves' slang, belongs distinctly to Shakespeare's day, as do the country-folk at their festival. Hermione is daughter of the Emperor of Russia. The currency of Bohemia proves to be pounds and shillings. Thus, the historical era veers to and fro between ancient and modern, while

the cultural frame of reference is sometimes polytheistically classical and sometimes strongly Christian; and if, occasionally, we seem to be located in ancient Sicily, at other times we seem to be in the midst of Shakespeare's Warwickshire. Although Sicily was the homeland of pastoral poetry (a tradition established by Theocritus, Moschus and Bion), here Bohemia is the main provider of pastoralism. Thus muddles abound. From Chaucer's day to Milton's, literary works often did display cultural inconsistencies which would never appear in modern novels; but, in *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare seems to be more conspicuously inconsistent than are most of his contemporaries. Because parts of the play are remarkably intelligent, its apparent stupidities become the more noticeable.

If you value elegant unity of structure, you certainly won't find it in *The Winter's Tale*. This play begins in Sicilia (i.e. Sicily), proceeds to Bohemia (with its notorious sea-coast), and returns to Sicilia. At the beginning of Act 4, Time himself enters to warn us that we must imagine that sixteen years have passed. Furthermore Hermione, supposed dead by her husband and his courtiers, has to remain secretly alive, although apparently immured, for all those years. The evidence that she was dead and buried is insistently strong: Leontes saw her corpse, a state funeral has taken place, and her ghost has visited Antigonus. (All other ghosts in Shakespeare emanate from the dead, in conformity with convention; so we may assume that this one, too, is a conformist.) Nevertheless, almost as though the playwright changed his mind during the writing, Hermione returns to resume her marital life. Just as Leontes' murderous jealousy suddenly arises from next to nothing, so arbitrariness repeatedly characterises the plot: we are abruptly told that Mamillius has sickened and died; good old Antigonus is eaten alive; and an entire ship's crew of mariners is calamitously drowned. Then, as if to annoy democrats, we learn that though Perdita has been brought up as a shepherd's daughter, her royal blood still shows through:

> [N]othing she does or seems,
> But smacks of something greater than herself,
> Too noble for this place.

Certainly, there's a promising glint of egalitarianism when Perdita says of Polixenes,

> The selfsame sun that shines upon his court
> Hides not his visage from our cottage, but
> Looks on alike[;]

yet the play's system of rewards and punishments endorses a conventionally hierarchical society. Whereas Autolicus, a petty thief, fears 'beating and hanging', Leontes, who ordains the death of a baby, and whose capacity for murderous derangement reveals him to be unfit to rule, remains in place as monarch and as the centre of sympathetic concern and loyal devotion. He is eventually re-united with his daughter because, when she was a shepherdess in Bohemia, it chanced not only that a prince saw and fell in love with her, but also that when this prince and Perdita ran away, they were directed on a voyage to Sicilia by a courtier who happened to be an exile from the court of Leontes. Flukes, coincidences, contrivances: the play abounds in them. If you value the neo-classical unities of time, place and action (as you well may, if you know *Andromaque* and *Phèdre*, the great tragedies of Jean Racine), you may be affronted by what you find in *The Winter's Tale*. If you are accustomed to the gritty realism of many a current drama for cinema or television, you may be antagonised by the peculiar mixture of modes in Shakespeare's romance.

It could be argued that in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare solved the problems which he failed to solve in *The Winter's Tale*. In both plays, the theme of regeneration entails a time-gap of numerous years so that an innocent daughter becomes old enough to fall in love and be marriageable. In *The Winter's Tale*, as we noted, Time himself has to ask us to imagine the passage of the years. In *The Tempest*, we begin on the later side of the time-gap, and the past events are reported to us by Prospero's narration to Miranda: which is arguably a more elegant solution of the temporal problem. Furthermore, all the dramatised events happen within an afternoon, a few hours of one day. In *The Tempest*, again, from the start of Act 1, scene 2, we know that a magician is in charge of the action, so bizarre transformations can be expected. This permits various plot-surprises to be more plausible than are some in *The Winter's Tale*, and it generates some celebrated poetic meditations on metamorphoses: notably on the transitions between life and death, between dreams and awakening, and on the world's mutability:

> The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
> The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
> Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
> And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
> Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
> As dreams are made on; and our little life
> Is rounded with a sleep.

In addition, in striking contrast to the geographically rambling nature of *The Winter's Tale*, the action in *The Tempest* is confined to a small Mediterranean island. *The Tempest* thus approaches a neo-classical elegance of form and theme.[5] It has moral elegance, too. In *The Winter's Tale*, Perdita and Hermione are eventually found to be alive after all, but young Mamillius, good Antigonus and the mariners remain irredeemably lost. In *The Tempest*, all the supposedly dead people, including the mariners, survive. *The Tempest* thus offers the full flowering of Shakespeare's post-tragic imagination, whereas, in *The Winter's Tale*, elements of tragedy linger to the last.

Nevertheless, as we recall its initial reversal, the trial of Hermione, the landfall on Bohemia, the rural festivities and the eventual spectacular effect of the living statue, we see that *The Winter's Tale* is one of the most strikingly theatrical of Shakespeare's plays, and in the theatre it can blaze with life. It is as though Shakespeare's aim is less to achieve plausibility than to create a startlingly diverse vitality of emotional effect. For example: Leontes' jealousy gains expression in some of the most vivid poetry of sexual disgust that Shakespeare ever wrote:

> There have been
> (Or I am much deceived) cuckolds ere now,
> And many a man there is (even at this present,
> Now, while I speak this,) holds his wife by th'arm,
> That little thinks she has been sluiced in's absence,
> And his pond fished by his next neighbour, by
> Sir Smile, his neighbour . . .
> Should all despair
> That have revolted wives, the tenth of mankind
> Would hang themselves. Physic for't, there's none:

> It is a bawdy planet, that will strike
> Where 'tis predominant; and 'tis powerful: think it:
> From east, west, north, and south, be it concluded,
> No barricado for a belly.

The angrily reductive phrasing ('she has been sluiced', 'his pond fished', 'No barricado for a belly') has an idiomatic gusto which lends realism; while, in passing, the speaker has a sly glance at the husbands in the audience ('even at this present, / Now, while I speak this'). In contrast, in the sustained dignity of her response, Hermione becomes a memorably gracious figure, citing not a bawdy planet but a malevolent one:

> There's some ill planet reigns:
> I must be patient, till the heavens look
> With an aspect more favourable . . .
> Do not weep, good fools,
> There is no cause. When you shall know your mistress
> Has deserved prison, then abound in tears
> As I come out. This action I now go on
> Is for my better grace. – Adieu, my lord.
> I never wished to see you sorry; now
> I trust I shall.

As for the trickiest piece of staging, the pursuit of Antigonus by the bear: I've seen that enacted in a way that was not ludicrous but awesome, as a vast bear-like form, fitfully illuminated by flashes of lightning amid thundering darkness, seized, crushed and crunched the writhing human. In the contrastingly comic action, Autolicus may be presented as no mere huckster but a song-and-dance virtuoso who can – for a while – turn the rustics' festival into an exuberant musical comedy. One marked contrast between the play as a text for reading and the play as performance is that, in stage productions, the lyrical elements are magnified. A stage-direction specifying a dance by country-folk may take only a second to read at a desk, but its enactment in the theatre may fill rumbustious minutes. Regarding the most blatant *coup de théâtre* in the play, the descent of the statue: in good staging this can be breathtakingly effective and poignantly moving. Though reason says that a living Hermione has only been pretending to be a statue, the emotional

effect can approximate that of the witnessing of a resurrection. Paulina has said, 'It is required / You do awake your faith'; and it can seem as though we, in the audience, are collaborating by our wishes in a regenerative act. When she touches Leontes, and he responds with the terse and utterly credible 'Oh, she's warm!', it is as if a miracle has been completed.[6]

What makes that scene so resonantly potent, giving such a strong *déjà-vu* feeling, may, for some of us, be a recollection of related myths and legends: we may recall Pygmalion the sculptor, who found that the beautiful statue was becoming warm and responsive to his caresses, or such returners from the deathly underworld as Alcestis, resurrected for Admetus, or Eurydice emerging with Orpheus. In numerous ancient and still-current religions and superstitions, resurrection is a central tenet; and the coming to life of an apparently inanimate being has long been a striking image in literature and films of fantasy and science fiction. As so many kindred situations are recalled or sensed, the play may there seem to 'remind one of itself'. In the case of Hermione's return, we may experience vicarious wish-fulfilment. 'Heavenly consolation is no earthly use', C. S. Lewis once remarked.[7] Many of us have experienced the loss of loved ones and wished that they could return to life, here on earth. For Leontes, and subliminally for us, that is what seems to be happening. Of course, this Hermione is more wrinkled than the Hermione whom Leontes had lost; and, certainly, for those who need it, there is a 'realistic' explanation (however tenuous) of her long absence. For others, though, such an explanation may be redundant. In this play, Shakespeare repeatedly makes bold excursions from the realm of everyday plausibility into a realm of nightmares and dreams, of fears and longings. In *The Winter's Tale*, the ramshackle plot is largely a vehicle for – if partly a subverter of – one of the richest thematic structures that Shakespeare ever developed.

As themes are usually elastic and capacious, attention to them tends to lend unity to a work which may otherwise seem divided. The thematic structure of *The Winter's Tale* is one in which age, corruption and destruction are contrasted with youth, love and creation, so that eventually a predominantly harmonious (but marginally discordant) resolution can be attained.[8] We are reminded that age, corruption and destruction are manifest not merely in

individuals and the courtly world, but in greater nature too: in wintry blasts, lethal storms, and predatory creatures; just as youthfulness, love and sexuality are associated with the natural bounty of spring and summer, with the regenerative aspects of the seasonal cycle, and with the perennial benign activities of the countryside. Sometimes the blending of the sexual, vernal and the lyrically mythical is audaciously assured:

> Now (my fair'st friend),
> I would I had some flow'rs o'th'spring, that might
> Become your time of day; and yours, and yours,
> That wear upon your virgin branches yet
> Your maidenheads growing. – O Proserpina,
> For the flow'rs now, that (frighted) thou let'st fall
> Fròm Dis's waggon: daffodils,
> That come before the swallow dares, and take
> The winds of March with beauty; violets (dim,
> But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes
> Or Cytherea's breath) . . .

It is as though the mythical transformative energies of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* have invaded a distinctively English countryside: maidenheads become blossoms on forked branches; spring flowers are scattered by Proserpina as Dis carries her to the underworld; daffodils precede the swallow but in their beauty 'take' (bewitch, capture, enrapture) the March winds; and the 'dim' violets (softly-coloured, lowly,) surpass in their colour the violet-tinged eyelids of Juno and exceed in their sweet odour the breath of the love-goddess Cytherea herself. The sensuousness of the subject is echoed in the sound-patterning: the alliteration and assonance burgeon richly at 'O Proserpina, / For the flow'rs now, that (frighted) thou let'st fall'. The poetry anticipates by two centuries the Romantic Movement and particularly the sensuous delights of Keats's odes.

Repeatedly, the imagery in which the relationship of Florizel and Perdita is expressed invests their love with the mythical and legendary, with the lushly floral, and with the richly procreative; though Perdita also voices an intelligent sense that hyperbole should be checked and social realities recalled. At the opening of Act 4, scene 4, Florizel relates Perdita's beauty, as she stands in a flower-decked gown, to the goddess Flora and to springtime: