

## The Winter's tale

*Shakespeare*

April 9, 2011

This is one of the latest plays by Shakespeare. It is also rather different from his classical plays. More of a fantasy with miraculous aspects, in the nature of a fairy tale. The plot is slightly ridiculous, but so are often the plots of Shakespeare. Yet I must admit that it does contain an element of suspense, which is the hallmark of a good plot.

In short. Leontes the king of S. and Polixenes the king of B.<sup>1</sup> are childhood friends, but nevertheless, or perhaps because of it, Leontes is seized with an insane jealousy as Polixenes innocently engages with Hermione the wife of Leontes<sup>2</sup>. Leontes gives rant to his suspicion in elaborate out-bursts larded with vulgarities, and instructs his courtier - Camillo to poison his former friend and royal colleague. Camillo cannot bring himself to do it, instead he spills the beans to the intended victim and they together leave the shores of S. to go back to B. In the meantime Hermione gives birth to a child, a daughter, whom Paulina, acting as a mid-wife, and the wife to another of Leontes courtier - Antigonus, tries to bring to the attention of the jealous monarch. He, as to be expected wants to truck with it, claiming it to be a bastard and to be consigned to the pyre, and eventually it is agreed with Antigonus to take it far afield and abandon it to its fate. A common practice to deal with unwanted newborns in the past, one should hasten to add. Antigonus takes off, while Hermione is brought to trial for her transgressions. She pleads her innocence, but to no avail. Meanwhile two other courtiers - Cleomenes and Dion have been consulting a delphic oracle, and brings back with them the sealed verdict. That is broken and read out during the trial, and professes the innocence of all concerned. Leontes is skeptical, but so he is brought the news that his young son is dead, and that news strikes Hermione with such force that she too succumbs. Leontes is filled with remorse and realizes that he has been wrong all along. Antigonus reaches the shore of B. but in depositing the infant girl, he is chased by a bear, caught and devoured. His final fate and what is left of his body is observed by a shepherd - Clown, while his aged father discovers the girl and decides to bring her up.

Sixteen years passes, which is announced to the audience via a chorus. How to solve such a technical detail in a drama? The solution could have been worse. Now the young son of Polixenes has grown up and fallen in love with the daughter Perdita of Leontes, the very girl set to be abandoned by her father but saved by the old shepherd. Polixenes has gotten wind of that his son is courting a simple girl, and decides to spy on him in disguise together with his faithful companion Camillo. What follows is a pastoral scene

---

<sup>1</sup> Sicily and Bohemia respectively. Both although geographical terms could as well be fully made up, and refer to countries of Britain instead.

<sup>2</sup> In fact the jealousy is not entirely baseless. Ironically leontes has tried to induce his friend Polixenes to stay on longer, but the latter is anxious to return to his kingdom. Leontes then send s his wife to entice him, and is alarmed with her speedy success

with dances and flowers and pretty singing, in which Perdita, radiant with beauty, is the center of attention. The disguised King admonishes his unsuspecting son to inform his father of the lovely object of his court, but the son refuses. Then the King casts off his disguise and changes character, from having been a most delighted observer to a most censorious one, ordering his son to break off the liaison, and threatening the old shepherd with execution, even it that might only cut off his life with a week.

Through the machinations of Camillo the young prince is set off to S. with his bride to pay court to Leontes and escape the censure of his father. The shepherds have proof of the royal birth of their foundling, which they need to bring to the attention of Polixenes. Will they succeed? It is on this issue the suspense of the plot hinges,. As they enlist the help of a certain shade character Autolycus, who has been seen before having pick-pocketed Clown, there is further unease being planted in the audience. However, in the end, the true ancestry of Perdita is made known to the relevant parties, something the audience only finds out through eavesdropping on a conversation between some auxiliary gentlemen. The fears are laid aside, to prepare for the true climax of the play, when everybody is collected to pay homage to a likeness of the dead Hermione. They do so and Leontes is struck by the life-likeness of the statue. He embraces it, and indeed it comes to life, it turns out that the Queen has been alive all along, although no one has suspected, least of all Leontes who has suffered sixteen years of unmitigated remorse. Thus in the end the play turns out to be a comedy and not a tragedy, although for most of the time it could have ended either way.

Now the plot is melodramatic, and to a modern observer rather unpruned. There are so many extraneous characters, non-sequiturs, and aborted developments. And the add-on at the very end of the Queen coming to life, seems rather affected, the natural climax of the play being the revelation of the true identity of Perdita. Is it really written by the old bard? But of course the awkwardness of the execution of the plot points rather to it being genuine, the practical demands of putting up a theatrical production preventing the classical purity of form. And the plays of Shakespeare are in general marked by a certain untidiness. In fact there is an obvious source of the plot, a short 16th century pastoral romance by a certain Robert Green, called *Pandosto*. In fact Shakespeare is uncharacteristically faithful to his source, changing very little, except of course the ending, making it into a comedy. The '*Pandosto*' itself is more unforgiving to the characters. Hermione is not revived, and Leontes slays himself<sup>3</sup>.

Would the play not be excellent material for an opera? Operas traditionally thrive on the theatrical and melodramatic. There would be occasion for some good arias in the beginning. The King venting his jealousy, the Queen protesting her innocence, and then falling down dead on the stage upon the news of the death of the young prince. Antigonus on the stormy shore, would have occasion too to sing loudly while the music

---

<sup>3</sup> Of course this story would have been forgotten today, had it not been for '*The Winter's tale*'. The story is not inept, the plot is cleaner and more believable than in the adaptation by Shakespeare. *Padosto*, i.e. Leontes has some reason for his jealousy. The baby girl is abandoned in a boat that drifts onto the shore. The identity of her, and the way it is resolved is done more believable than by Shakespeare. And also the language is not devoid of some beauty. Yet the flights of fancy that a genius allows himself, and more to the point we allow him, adds to a piece, regardless of the formal elegance.

is stepping up and wind is been blown upon the stage. How to depict the pursuing bear is quite another thing, if you do not want to make it slightly ridiculous, as the dragon in the Magic Flute. The pastoral scene with dancing would also be great on the stage. Lots of people could partake, and the music would be joyous and uplifting, and end in a dramatic confrontation. Likewise the antics of Autolykus would provide comic relief and be the occasion for some light, frivolous music. Finally the stupid business with the statue turning into life could be cut out, or maybe not. Perhaps it could be fused with the revelation of Perdita's true identity, because after all the scene has great stage potential. A marble statue the only object illuminated in the darkness of center-stage, standing still and quiet, and then suddenly coming to life in a concluding aria, which would tie all the loose threads together. The final with everyone singing at full throttle would be a fitting end to the whole spectacle. Maybe it has already been done, librettos written, music composed, stages set and a performance conducted<sup>4</sup>. But if not, who would be up to the task of writing the libretto, tampering with the supposedly immortal text of the old Bard himself? And more to the point who would have the genius to set it all to music. Handel is gone, so is Mozart and Verdi. A modern composer would probably have the sense to stay away.

April 10, 2011 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se

---

<sup>4</sup> In fact no reference of such a chain of events are to be found in the Wikipedia article, although adaptations to the film have been made. The closest indication to a musical performance I can find, concerns performances staged at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in the 80's and 90's.