Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival

The Winter’s Tale
The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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# The Winter's Tale

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Shakespeare: Words, Words, Words
By S. S. Moorty

“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare*. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespeare-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449-1100; Middle English 1100-1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (*Hamlet*, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (*Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his General Introduction to *The Riverside Shakespeare* (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (*Othello*, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, * Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words* [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).
Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare’s vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare’s vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplausible’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespeare words “would have been strange to Shakespeare’s audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention that any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare’s language will forever be challenging and captivating.
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind
By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare's Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London's south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the "groundlings" may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging. Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don't yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience "Stinkards . . . glewed together in crowds with the Steames of strong breath" (Shakespeare's Globe: The Guide Book [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City's own Utah Shakespeare Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare's birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare's perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare's lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing Hamlet, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, "Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations." She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more "quotations" to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare's character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in Hamlet, Lawrence Fishburn in Othello, Leonardo de Caprio in Romeo + Juliet, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in Much Ado about Nothing in her advice to her cousin about
choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” *Coriolanus* presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in *Othello*, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,” are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’ continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”
Elizabeth’s England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (Richard II), France (As You Like It), Vienna (Measure for Measure), fifteenth-century Italy (Romeo and Juliet), the England ruled by Elizabeth’s father (Henry VIII) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare’s own time and place. But all Shakespeare’s plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth’s England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth’s reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man’s nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as “critic,” “assassinate,” “bump,” “gloomy,” “suspicious,” “and hurry;” and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespeare expressions as “catching a cold,” “the mind’s eye,” “elbow room,” and even “pomp and circumstance.”

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were “lower” than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called “the great chain of being.” When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet’s rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in Julius Caesar throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heavens, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering
Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun’s chariot in Greek mythology: “Down, down I come, like glist’ring Phaeton” (3.3.178).

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare’s plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare’s plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from “The Shakespeare Plays,” educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)
History Is Written by the Victors
From Insights, 1994

William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (King John) to the beginning of England's first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (Richard II) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (Richard III), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth's father (Henry VIII). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare's day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare's plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England's enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare's bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.
Mr. Shakespeare, I Presume
by Diana Major Spencer From Insights, 1994

Could the plays known as Shakespeare’s have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled him name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create Antony and Cleopatra, The Comedy of Errors, and Henry V? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create King Lear and Macbeth?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is “The Shakespeare Controversy.”

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the “real author” have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford—among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name “Shakespeare”—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton’s? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name “Shakespeare” could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the “facts” of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn’s The Mysterious William Shakespeare. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn’t Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one’s own life. “The Controversy” was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon.

Hooray for our side!
A Nest of Singing Birds
From Insights, 1992

Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespeare Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul’s Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, “I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures.”

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one’s part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in The Compleat Gentleman in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to “sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol.”

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors’ cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six
voices exist today, as do books of dance music: corrantos, pavans, and galliards. Records
from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including
twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and
two “great organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large
group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the
players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from
long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the
public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespeare Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas
of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the
Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and
learning.
Actors in Shakespeare’s Day
By Stephanie Chidester From Insights, 1994

The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors, often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery plays. The actors of Shakespeare’s age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were alternately classified as “vagabonds and sturdy beggars,” as an act of Parliament in 1572 defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In 1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians’ social status. In the first one, the Queen forbade “the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liversies, badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of this realm)” in order to “curb the power of local grandees” (Dennis Kay, Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away.

To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the “Acte for the punishment of Vacabondes” (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared “vagabonds and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment” (Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, A Short View of Elizabethan Drama [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre. He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly The Comedy of Errors) and then decided to take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: “On one occasion the Stratford corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d ‘to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.’ Davi Jones had been married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves for the Whitsun pastime?” (S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).
But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as both actor and author: “There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country” (G. B. Harrison, Introducing Shakespeare [New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen” (Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert Greene: “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting talent. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum, 201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to ‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage servantes to the Lord Chamberlain’” (Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance. Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by officials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed successfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611.

It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (As You Like It, 2.7.149-50).
Shakespeare’s Audience: 
A Very Motley Crowd

From Insights, 1992

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords’ box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In Hamlet, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were “for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise.” His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in Julius Caesar.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o’clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear baitings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no
magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story
discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare’s theatre filling an educational need is probably that
of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the
Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years
from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events
of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London
crowd.

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed,
and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the
sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others,
the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever
opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest
in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers,
historians, humanists, and playwrights.
The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting
in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public
was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the
spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited
it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality,
and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his
contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for
the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to
be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.
Shakespeare Snapshots

From Insights, 2002

By Ace G. Pilkington

It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare’s life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582-83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare’s twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare’s career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It’s hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare’s life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare’s youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare’s birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—“upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes” (Peter Thomson, Shakespeare’s Professional Career [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, “The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs’s house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attford on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare’s “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford’s elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. “We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare’s road to London” (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare’s road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth’s words, “Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns” (Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.
In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. "Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: 'flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh', according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames" (Garry O’Connor, William Shakespeare: A Popular Life [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan "drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day" (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Ralegh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.
Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, “la plus fine femme du monde,” as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake’s neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors’ heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsman’s axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon’s entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare’s plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, “The Age of Shakespeare,” Social Backgrounds of English Literature, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person’s entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare’s Macbeth was supposedly cursed due to the playwright’s having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: “It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace’s
subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is benumbed; their senses bereft” (Walter Bromberg, “Witchcraft and Psychotherapy”, The Mind of Man [New York: Harper Torchbooks 1954], 54).

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespeare play, some obvious discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these three types haunts the pages of Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Richard III, or Hamlet, or, in some cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare’s ghosts are a capricious lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In Richard III there are no fewer than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In Macbeth the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible only to him. In Hamlet, the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but only to Hamlet in his mother’s bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: “If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory on Shakespeare” in Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare [New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963] 211).

Shakespeare’s audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting power, it seems that Shakespeare’s ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular. If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider bringing along a supply of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elizabethans simply had no need of it.
Shakespeare’s Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare’s time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, “off the rack” and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn’t want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren’t allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like Romeo and Juliet, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for Hamlet, or ancient Rome for Julius Caesar, or Oberon and Titania’s forest for A Midsummer Night's Dream, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today’s audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, Romeo and Juliet was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, West Side Story, an updated musical version of the Romeo and Juliet tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

Activity: Discuss what the affect of wearing “special” clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

Activity: Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.
Synopsis: The Winter’s Tale

Polixenes, king of Bohemia, has grown restless in his stay with his old friend King Leontes of Sicilia. Only the intervention of Leontes’ wife, Hermione, persuades him to prolong his visit. Consequently, Leontes suspects Hermione of adultery with Polixenes and persuades his friend, Lord Camillo, to poison him. However, Camillo is convinced of Polixenes’s innocence and, instead, the two flee to Bohemia.

Leontes dispatches servants to ask advice from the Delphic oracle and, enraged by Polixenes’s escape, confines Hermione to prison where a daughter, later named Perdita, is born. Paulina, Hermione’s friend and confidante, takes the child to the king in an attempt to soften his heart. However, Mamillius, the king and queen’s son, has fallen ill; and Leontes, blaming Hermione for the boy’s sickness, is determined to have revenge. Leontes refuses to accept the new baby as his own and orders Antigonus, a Sicilian lord and Paulina’s husband, to abandon her in the wild.

Leontes’s servants return from visiting the Delphic oracle, but, maddened, Leontes becomes an immovable tyrant and orders a public trial for Hermione. Even when confronted with the oracle’s pronouncement that Hermione is innocent, he refuses to believe that he is wrong. Suddenly a servant interrupts with the news that Prince Mamillius has died, and the queen falls into a faint. The blow brings Leontes to his senses, but too late; Paulina announces that the queen has died. Guilt-stricken, Leontes vows perpetual penance.

The scene shifts to a seacoast in the country of Bohemia, where Antigonus begins to abandon the baby princess. However, as debates this action, a bear appears and, in his attempt to guard the baby, Antigonus is killed. An old shepherd and his son appear on the scene and find the baby, taking her home to care for as their own daughter and sister.

The Chorus of Time then informs us that sixteen years have passed and that the lost Sicilian princess, Perdita, has grown healthy and beautiful in the shepherd’s household in Bohemia, not realizing her royal roots. Florizel, Bohemian King Polixenes’s son has been surreptitiously wooing the supposed shepherdess and resolves to marry her. Polixenes, however, discovers the plan and angrily threatens Perdita with punishment and Florizel with loss of his future throne. Camillo, still in exile from Sicilia, persuades Florizel and Perdita to fly to his homeland where they are greeted with joy by a repentant King Leontes who accepts his wronged friend’s son and Perdita whom he later recognizes as his daughter. King Polixenes soon follows, and is also welcomed by his old friend, Leontes.

Back in Bohemia the two shepherds discover Perdita’s true identity and, with this good news, also rush to Sicilia. All are happily reunited and travel together to a chapel in Paulina’s home to view a statue of the late Queen Hermione. When the miraculous statue is unveiled, Leontes is overcome by its extraordinary likeness to the queen. He tries to kiss it, and, at Paulina’s command, it moves. “She’s warm,” exclaims Leontes, and the living Hermione, long hidden, is reunited with her penitent and humble husband and their daughter.
Characters: The Winter’s Tale

Leontes, king of Sicilia: The husband of Hermione and father of Mamillius and Perdita, Leontes is quick to express emotions and opinions, as shown in his quick condemnation of his wife and daughter. However, he is also a man who truly repents and changes during the sixteen years between the first and last of the play. In the end he is honestly sorry and repentant and promises of a joyful family and country in the future.

Mamillius, prince of Sicilia: The son of Leontes and Hermione, Mamillius dies in the first part of the play. His death lends reality and pathos to the play because it is final; unlike his mother, he does not “return” to life at the end.

Camilo: A lord of Sicilia and, in the end, husband of Paulina, Camillo is loyal to Leontes but refuses to follow his master when he acts foolishly. He is an icon of virtue and good sense.

Antigonus: A lord of Sicilia and husband of Paulina, Antigonus is loyal to his master Leontes. However, when he tries to abandon the baby Perdita, he instead ends up giving his life to a bear attack to save the girl.

Cleomenes: A lord of Sicilia.

Dion: A lord of Sicilia.

Polixenes, king of Bohemia: The father of Florizel and long-time friend of Leontes, Polixenes flies Sicilia when Leontes suddenly changes and threatens his life. He objects to his son’s love of Perdita until he realizes she is a princess; but in the end is reconciled to both his son and his old friend, Leontes.

Florizel, prince of Bohemia: The son of Polixenes, Florizel is a pleasant young lover with a youthful belief that love will surmount all obstacles. In his case, optimism turns out to be justified when he falls in love with Perdita, whom he supposes to be a shepherdess but who is really a princess.

Archidamus: A lord of Bohemia.

Old Shepherd: This simple country shepherd finds Perdita as a baby and raises her as his own.

Clown: The old shepherd’s son.

Autolycus: A peddler and a con man who seems to have come straight out of the English countryside of Shakespeare’s time, Autolycus is a frequenter of feasts and fairs where he sells his wares, picks pockets, and steals keys. He is a rogue, but a realistic and merry one.

Hermione, queen of Sicilia: The wife of Leontes and mother of Mamillius and Perdita, Hermione is gentle, yet firm, magnanimous, and noble. An instrument of salvation for the other characters, she continually behaves with royal dignity, even when terribly wronged by her husband. She never becomes angry, but instead defends her points with skill.

Perdita: The daughter of Leontes and Hermione, Perdita is rejected as a baby by her father and sent to die in the wilds. However, she is rescued and raised by a shepherd and later marries Florizel, the prince of Bohemia. She is a daughter worthy of Hermione: her honesty and virtue are unassailable and her beauty is remarkable.

Paulina: The wife (and, later, widow) of Antigonus, Paulina is, above all things, loyal to her mistress, and she also acts as the conscience of Leontes during the sixteen years that Hermione remains hidden. In the end, she marries Camillo.

Emilia: A lady attending on Hermione.

Mopsa: A shepherdess.

Dorcas: A shepherdess.
The Winter’s Tale:  
A Story of All Seasons  
By Daniel Frezza

The action of The Winter’s Tale is often seen as progressing from winter’s death to spring’s rebirth. Shortly after the play begins Camillo says “I think this coming summer the King of Sicilia means to pay Bohemia the visitation which he justly owes him.” (1.1.5; Arden Shakespeare Third Series, ed. John Pitcher [London: Methuen Drama, 2010]) The line implies that the season is not summer. “A sad tale’s best for winter” says young prince Mamillius as he plays with queen Hermione’s attendants in act 2. (2.1.25) Hence the common view that the first part of the play happens in winter. But a literal reading of several lines doesn’t reveal Shakespeare’s complex interplay of seasonal imagery and what we may call the action’s “emotional temperature.” A deeper appreciation of the play may be attained by viewing the action as encompassing all seasons, often commingled.

What temperature, what season does Leontes’s sudden, rash jealousy evoke in your mind? Probably not winter. “Too hot, too hot,” (1.2.108) he mutters, describing what he thinks he sees in the relationship between his wife Hermione and Polixenes, his dearest friend. That these words also describe Leontes’s emotional state is suggested by the fragmented syntax and fevered imagery of his following speech to Mamillius—especially the passage “Affection? Thy intention stabs the centre” (1.2.138–146). Earlier in the scene, Polixenes describes the happy boyhood he and Leontes shared: “We were as twinned lambs that did frisk i’ th’ sun” (1.2.67). Thus, well before we hear Mamillius’s line about winter in act 2, Shakespeare gives us images of gentle summer and of blasting heat.

The time elapsed between acts 1 and 2 is only the few hours needed for Polixenes and Camillo to escape Leontes’s murderous rage. “A sad tale’s best for winter” does imply that the season is winter. The tale we are watching is indeed a sad one. But Mamillius is a child; a child’s view of time is limited. As Edith Sitwell notes, “He could not foresee the spring” (Edith Sitwell, A Notebook on William Shakespeare [Boston: Beacon Press, 1961], 204). Against this winter reference Shakespeare opposes a powerful, if indirect, sun reference. Even when he’s most misguided, Leontes seeks the truth from Apollo’s oracle. (2.1.183–7) Apollo, we remember, is the sun god.

Emotional heat and references to fire dominate act 2, scene 3. Hermione has delivered the child Leontes believes Polixenes fathered. The queen’s friend Paulina brings the baby girl to Leontes in an attempt to persuade him to acknowledge the child is truly his. Leontes tries to silence her, but Paulina’s hot temper proves a match for his. Six times Leontes threatens burning Hermione, the baby, or Paulina. (2.3.8; 94; 113; 133; 140; 155) Later he yields and orders the baby to be abandoned in the wild.

At the start of Hermione’s trial Leontes’s mood is one of grief (3.2.1) but his anger soon erupts. Hermione’s tone is in marked contrast to Leontes’s passionate, irrational accusations. In defending her honor she too is impassioned but ordered and controlled. Shakespeare explains Hermione’s cool rationality: “The Emperor of Russia was my father; / O that he were alive, and here beholding . . . / The flatness of my misery; yet with eyes / Of pity, not revenge!” (3.2.117–20). Twice earlier in the scene we heard that Hermione is the daughter of a king. This time Hermione adds a detail—her cold homeland—that is unnecessary in terms of plot but significant, particularly inher rejection of revenge, in moderating the emotional temperature. Her defiance of Leontes’s accusations avoids the heat of Paulina’s earlier confrontation and is the more powerful for it. Leontes rejects the oracle’s confirmation of Hermione’s innocence. In swift succession Mamillius’s death is announced, Hermione swoons and is carried off, and Paulina announces her death. Finally realizing his errors, Leontes is plunged into emotional winter.
The scene shifts to Bohemia where the infant is abandoned in the wilderness as ordered. She is immediately found by the Old Shepherd along with gold and a note that she is to be called Perdita (3.3.32). Sixteen years pass, as a Chorus in the person of Time tells us (4.1.5–6).

Act 4, scenes 3 and 4 abound in seasonal references. Autolycus, a thief and con man who lives by adapting to all situations/seasons makes his first entrance singing, and his song contains specific references to three seasons: “daffodils,” “winter’s pale,” and “summer songs” (4.3.1–12). His reference to “tumbling in the hay” may suggest autumn when hay is in the barn or summer when hay is cut. The great pastoral scene (4.4) celebrates the recently completed sheep shearing which, in Elizabethan England, occurred in summer. (Shakespeare’s England: Life in Elizabethan and Jacobean Times. R. E. Pritchard, Ed.[Gloustershire: Sutton Publishing, 1999], 80). Perdita confirms that it is mid-summer: “the year growing ancient, / Not yet on summer’s death nor on the birth / Of trembling winter” (4.4.79–81), she says as she gives rosemary and rue to two strangers (Polixenes and Camillo in disguise) who appear at the feast. These flowers, she notes, “Keep seeming and savor all the winter long” (4.4.75). Polixenes replies “well you fit our ages / With flowers of winter” (4.4.78). A moment later she gives them lavender, mint, marjoram—“flowers / Of middle summer” (4.4.106–7). Next Perdita tells her lover Doricles (actually Florizel, Polixenes’s son) “I would I had some flowers o’ th’ spring that might / Become your time of day” (4.4.113). Before concluding “O, these I lack,” she describes seven spring flowers. Thus Shakespeare establishes that the season is mid-summer and simultaneously invokes memories of winter and spring.

The action returns to Sicilia in act 5. The first scene’s sorrowful mood and multiple references to the deaths of Hermione, Mamillius, Antigonus, and the infant convey a penitential chill. Additionally, the likelihood that Leontes will die without an heir suggests winter’s sterility. The scene plays out Paulina’s earlier rebuke to Leontes: “T en thousand years together, naked, fasting, / Upon a barren mountain, and still winter / In storm perpetual, could not move the gods / To look that way thou wert” (3.2.208–11).

Paulina briefly moderates the chill. After extracting from Leontes an oath that he will not remarry except by her leave, she hints that she might find him a wife: “she shall be such / As, walk’d your first queen’s ghost”; but no; he shall not remarry until his “first queen’s again in breath” (5.1.84). A teasing impossibility! Is this not like those final days of winter when it seems spring will never come? But, of course, it does come. A servant enters with news of Florizel’s arrival with his princess—“the most peerless piece of earth / That e’er the sun shone bright on” (5.1.93). Leontes greets the young couple: “Welcome hither, / As is the spring to the earth” (5.1.150).

The restoration to Leontes of his friends, daughter, and wife in the final two scenes may indeed be considered an analogy of spring’s rebirth. Yet Camillo’s reference to sixteen winters and summers (5.3.51–52) implies that the play’s ending transcends any specific season and embraces the entire cycle of seasons and of life. References to death and life and to time’s passage recur throughout the final scene. Hermione’s supposed statue looks older than Leontes remembers her. Hermione and Perdita have been “preserv’d”—not reborn—and are now restored to their rightful places, suggesting a storing up until ripeness has been attained. Her work done, Paulina will live secluded, lamenting her lost husband until her own end (5.3.13–5). Leontes draws Paulina back into the group of “precious winners all” by betrothing her and Camillo, and the play concludes with marriages and one remarriage of three generations. Renewal is not just for the young, but for all.
The Winter’s Tale:  
The Infection of Jealousy

By Stephanie Chidester
From Midsummer Magazine, 1996

Shakespeare describes jealousy as a “green-eyed monster” in Othello (3.3.166; all references to line numbers are from The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed. Sylvan Barnet [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1972]), a figure that a hero might fight and conquer; in The Winter’s Tale, however, he describes it as a disease, an infection which strikes as quickly as the plague and is almost as difficult to eradicate. Before writing The Winter’s Tale, Shakespeare had delineated the perils of jealousy not only in Othello, but also in The Merry Wives of Windsor and Cymbeline. The Winter’s Tale reworks the themes of these earlier plays, and its central character seems molded out of Othello’s, Ford’s, and Posthumus’s worst parts.

Like Ford in The Merry Wives of Windsor, Leontes convinces himself, without evidence, that his wife is cuckolding him; like Posthumus in Cymbeline, who, after making a wager that Imogen cannot be seduced, is silly enough (and distrusts his wife enough) to believe that he has lost the bet, Leontes creates the situation which breeds his jealousy; and like both Posthumus and Othello, he sentences his wife to death.

But unlike all three of these characters, Leontes does not seek any more proof than that provided by his “weak-hinged fancy,” as Paulina reminds him (2.3.116-17); and unlike Othello, who needs “some eternal villain, / Some cogging, cozening slave” to chip away at Desdemona’s honor before he can be pushed into a murderous rage (Othello, 4.2.129-31), Leontes neither has nor needs a diabolical misleader—he is “easily jealous” (Othello, 5.2.341), and his own insecurities speed the progress of the infection.

Jealousy strikes Leontes with a suddenness which is rather difficult to comprehend. A modern psychologist might suggest that, with his wife in the later stages of pregnancy, Leontes feels neglected or sexually frustrated. Or perhaps he suspects that his people and his queen like him only because he is king of Sicilia and that Polixenes, also a king, threatens his relationship with Hermione and his subjects.

At any rate, Leontes doesn’t appear to feel secure about his relationships with his wife or his best friend, and it doesn’t help that Hermione’s attention is, of necessity, split between her husband and their noble guest. When Hermione succeeds in cajoling Polixenes into extending his stay in Sicilia, a task at which Leontes had failed, he is understandably disgruntled. But his brain soon leaps to the fevered conclusion that his wife and best friend are lovers; he proffers as proof that they are “paddling palms and pinching fingers, / . . . and making practiced smiles / As in a looking glass” (1.2.115-17), weak evidence at best.

Hermione and Polixenes are, ironically, fondly discussing Leontes’s childhood, Hermione trying to find out more about her husband: “Come, I’ll question you / Of my lord’s tricks, and yours, when you were boys / . . . Was not my lord / The verier wag o’ th’ two?” (1.2.60-1, 65-6). Furthermore, she is only doing what her husband has asked her to. Here, as in Shakespeare’s primary source for The Winter’s Tale, Robert Green’s Pandosto, The Triumph of Time, Leontes asks her to make his dearest friend feel as welcome as possible, a request which he probably first made when Polixenes arrived in Sicilia. “Hermione, / How thou lov’st us, show in our brother’s welcome; / . . . Next to thyself and my young rover, he’s / Apparent to my heart” (1.2.173-74, 176).

But with a wink of Othello’s “green-eyed monster,” Leontes’s good queen becomes in his mind “slippery,” “a hobbyhorse,” “as rank as any flax-wench” (1.2.273-77), and “a bed-swerver” (2.1.93).
He has difficulty finding enough derogatory terms to describe her. In Pandosto, Robert Green describes the symptoms of jealousy thus: “All other griefes are eyther to bee appeased with sensible persuasions, to be cured with wholesome counsel, to be relieved in want, or by tract of time to be worn out, (Jealousie only excepted) which is so sawsed with suspitious doubtes, and pinching mistrust, that whoso seekes by friendly counsaile to rase out this hellish passion, it foorthwith suspecteth that he geveth this advice to cover his owne giltinesse” (Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare, vol. 8, ed. Geoffrey Bullough [New York: Columbia University Press, 1975], 156).

Leontes fits this description precisely; paranoia follows hard upon the onset of the infection. Leontes tells himself that everyone in the court must see what he has seen—his wife’s adultery and his cuckold’s horns—and he imagines that his subjects, rather than bringing this information to their beloved ruler, are “whispering, rounding: / ‘Sicilia is a so-forth’” (1.2.217 18). He believes his people are no longer loyal or honest and that he has become the object of their ridicule. These symptoms become more severe when he finds that no one around him will credit his accusations. Camillo is the first to contradict him: “I would not be a stander-by to hear / My sovereign mistres clouded so, without / My present vengeance taken; ‘shrew my heart, / You never spoke what did become you less / Than this” (1.2.279 85). After this declaration Camillo drops in Leontes’s esteem from an honest and trusted confidant to “a coward,” “a fool,” “a gross lout, a mindless slave, / Or else a hovering temporizer” (1.2.245, 247, 299 302). And, of course, when Camillo flees to Bohemia, he is pronounced an accomplice to the adultery and declared a “pander” (2.1.46).

Camillo’s betrayal does nothing for Leontes’s failing sense of security; other kings’ courtiers have killed for them without question. But Camillo, first agreeing to kill Polixenes but then warning and running away with his target, reinforces Leontes’s suspicion that his subjects neither respect his authority nor follow where he leads. He even adopts the entirely baseless belief that Polixenes, Camillo, and Hermione have conspired to kill him (2.1.47, 194 96), which he uses as further justification for imprisoning his pregnant wife.

Likewise, when his courtiers refuse to take his word for truth, denying anything adulterous in Hermione’s behavior and swearing that she is honest, Leontes tells Antigonus, the most outspoken of the lords, that he’s either senile or foolish (2.1.173 74), and he begins to doubt everyone: “You’re liars all” (2.3.144).

There is evidence here that Leontes had not previously played the tyrant. Neither Camillo, Antigonus, nor any of the other lords hesitate to contradict him, even after the king’s warning that “he who shall speak for her is afar off guilty” (2.1.104 105). And no sane person, even Paulina, would break into the counsel chambers of a known tyrant, berate him as she does, and expect to leave with her person intact. Leontes is not a king who can command unquestioning obedience in such extraordinary circumstances; his subjects have followed him and his queen out of love and are now frightened by his unusual behavior, and it is their honesty which prompts them to challenge his actions.

Leontes’s courtiers are understandably frustrated and alarmed. The king is the center of Sicilia, and his madness threatens harm to nearly everyone, the most immediate victims being Hermione and young Mamillius. His people swiftly learn the futility of using rational argument to dissuade an increasingly irrational person from a disastrous course of action. Camillo voices his frustration before he abandons his home and his king: “You may as well / Forbid the sea for to obey the moon, / As or by oath remove or counsel shake / The fabric of his folly, whose foundation / Is piled upon his faith, and will continue / The standing of his body” (1.2.427 32). Leontes even ignores Apollo when the oracle sends the message of Hermione’s innocence: “There is no truth at all i’ th’ oracle. / . . . This is mere falsehood” (3.2.137 38).

The disease does not last until his death, as Camillo predicts, but it does take the loss of his
young son and (he thinks) his infant daughter and his wife to burn out the infection. The jealousy is removed, but not before it has consumed the greater part of his life.

Finally, the play suggests that jealousy is a plague quickly caught and difficult of cure. But, as usual in the romances, Shakespeare ends with the suggestion that health and love are the natural conditions of human beings, while illness and jealousy—however terrible, however long-lasting—cannot be permanent.

**The Winter's Tale:**

**Echoes of “The Old Tale”**

By Kay K. Cook

Shakespeare's final plays—of which The Tempest and The Winter's Tale are best known—reach beyond the comedies and tragedies to echo the tradition of the romance, or, as we are told so often in The Winter's Tale, the “old tale.” In his previous plays, Shakespeare continually reminded his audience of the thin line that separates comedy from tragedy: Romeo and Juliet and A Midsummer Night's Dream, for example, both explore the consequences of youthful lovers defying the older generation, but to very different ends. In the romances, however, the added elements of festival, spectacle, strangeness, magic, dreams, and prophecy speak to Shakespeare's later vision of the possibilities for redemption, both for human beings and the world in which they live.

In the romance, the old tale, or the fairy tale the truth is revealed not in an “imitation of an action,” as Aristotle would have it, but in a vision and a narrative that seeks to transcend the harsh realities of the earlier plays, especially the tragedies. The music, dance, and song, although a presence in the tragedies and the comedies, become a major emphasis of the romance, conveying the celebration of the ideal in nature, including human nature.

To illustrate these differences between The Winter's Tale (1610-11) and the plays that precede it, it is useful to contrast that play to Othello (1604), the tragedy so readily brought to mind by the romance. Othello traces the corruption of the title character's mental images of his wife Desdemona, an uncorrupted woman. Through the five acts, we witness first the powers of suggestion and finally the outright lying of Iago, so skilled in psychology that he is able to take advantage of every opportunity to poison Othello's mind about Desdemona and Cassio. Othello is first verbally and physically abusive to the bewildered Desdemona, and then smothers her to death, only to find out the villainy of Iago when it is too late.

In The Winter's Tale, Leontes's jealousy is self-induced, quick to erupt, and volatile. Where Othello seeks proof of infidelity, Leontes needs none, “but I do see't, and feel't” (2.1.152). His “proof” is that his wife, Hermione, has succeeded in convincing the Bohemian King Polixenes to prolong his visit to their castle in Sicilia; Leontes himself had been unsuccessful in his earlier attempt to extend his hospitality to his boyhood friend. In the length of a brief soliloquy, Leontes moves from the gracious host to the raving, wild-eyed husband who seeks the death of both his lifelong friend and his faithful wife. Whereas it takes five acts for Othello's doubt to turn to rage and then to murderously jealous, it takes Leontes a little more than two acts to order Polixenes's death and the death by exposure of his newborn; in despair, his son dies and Hermione “dies” on hearing the news. Leontes, who has defied even the oracle's proclamation of Hermione's innocence, is crushed: “Upon them shall / The causes of their [his wife and son’s] death appear / Unto our shame perpetual” (3.2.236-8).

The difference in the two plays is that The Winter's Tale has only just begun; for Othello the
light, Desdemona, is out, and there is no possibility of rekindling it. In The Winter’s Tale, however, Time, as a character intervenes (4.1), and we are swept to Bohemia some sixteen years later, where Perdita (literally the “lost girl”), who as an infant was taken from her mother Hermoine and ordered by her father, Leontes, to be left to die by exposure, has grown up in the household of the shepherd who found her and raised her as his own. Florizel, the son of Polixenes, has fallen in love with the shepherd girl.

As preparation for the annual sheep shearing festival begins, the tone of The Winter’s Tale changes; from the middle of act 3 until the end of the play, the world of the stage transforms from one of anger and grief to one of spectacle, song, music, dance, and trickery. It is a world of youthful love and of nature, the natural. The characters—Perdita herself, Florizel, the shepherd, his son the clown, shepherds and shepherdesses, and the trickster Autolycus—imbue the play with a sense of wonder. It is spring; the winter’s tale is past, but fulfillment is yet to come. Perdita herself is the very emblem of renewal; her disdain of cross-bred flowers, which she voices in the process of distributing flowers to her guests, sparks a response from the disguised Polixenes (who has come to spy on his son), who describes the kind of horticultural grafting that creates strength and vitality: “You see sweet maid, we marry / A gentler scion to the wildest stock, / And make conceive a bark of baser kind / By bud of nobler race“ (4.4.93-96). Perdita herself has the strength that comes of grafting art to nature; high-born, she is nurtured in the “wildest [natural] stock,” the result of which is a young woman whose beauty, dignity, grace, and self-possession make her remarkable to everyone who sees her.

Although there are still obstacles to overcome, the younger generation, as well as the women, triumph over the older, male behaviors that create the tragedies. Fleeing Polixenes, who has forbidden the love affair between them, Perdita and Florizel run head-on into their fate, in the form of Leontes. Unlike the tragedy of Oedipus (from whom we understand the nature of tragedy), the fulfilling of the prophecy from the oracle brings renewal and redemption.

The recognition scene in which the penitent Leontes is reconciled with the daughter he abandoned is narrated to the audience by the messenger. Why, we wonder, is this most important scene narrated rather than acted? Typical of the later romances, Shakespeare’s movement away from drama to the narrative reporting of events suggests that it is this form that offers the refinement of experience. Moreover, the recognition and reconciliation merely point to the greater miracle of the play: the revival of Hermoine.

Led by Paulina, the strong moral and visionary voice of the play, Leontes and Perdita view the statue of their wife and mother. As they do so, the statue comes to life, the prophecy of the oracle at Delphi is fulfilled: “For thou shalt hear that I, / Knowing by Paulina that the oracle / Gave hope thou [Perdita] wast in being, have preserv’d / Myself to see the issue“ (5.3.125-28). Perdita, then, is the instrument of life. In the romantic reversals characteristic of the “old tale,” the possibilities for goodness are unravelled. Those who were lost are found, the dead revived. Leontes has a second chance and will get it right this time. Although not without price—Hermoine and Leontes have lost a son and Paulina a husband—the world is renewed.

Such is said in this play about knowing; visions, dreams, and especially prophecies—the non-rational modes—speak to a higher law at work, one that will revoke the narrow, vengeful orders of human rulers and establish a harmony that transcends the villainy of control.
The Winter’s Tale:
Spring Always Comes After Winter

By Olga A. Pilkington
From Insights, 2004

Shakespeare’s romance The Winter’s Tale tells the story of two countries: Sicilia—the country of spring, rightfully possessing a sea coast—and Bohemia—a country of winter, granted one by Shakespeare for the purposes of his plot. Leontes, the jealous and tyrannous king of Sicilia, causes the deaths of his son, Mamillius, and his wife, Hermione, and orders that his baby daughter, Perdita, be abandoned in the wilderness. Leontes has brought winter into his wonderful spring kingdom. Happiness will not return to Sicilia until “that which is lost” is “found.” So proclaims the “oracle.”

Some critics argue as Kenneth Muir does that “Shakespeare’s advancing years” resulted in his showing in the late romances “events through the eyes of the parents and not, as in the earlier comedies and in Romeo and Juliet, through the eyes of the children” (“Introduction,” Shakespeare The Winter’s Tale: A Casebook [London: The Macmillan Press Ltd, 1983], 12). However, as always, Shakespeare is more complex than his critics. Even if in The Winter’s Tale we see the action from the perspective of adults, it is the child Mamillius who starts telling the story of a man who “dwelt by a churchyard,” a story which resembles that of his own father. And it is Perdita and Florizel who revive Sicilia, bringing back hope and forgiveness.

Another example of Shakespeare’s complexity (and entertainment value) is his use of history and contemporary events to add a gloss of reality to his fictions. Though The Winter’s Tale might seem pure fancy, it mirrors the events of its time. Moreover, “as Shakespeare composed his romance for staging in 1611, winter and Muscovy were in fashion” (Daryl Palmer, “Jacobean Muscovites: Winter, Tyranny, and Knowledge in The Winter’s Tale,” Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol.46, No.3 [Autumn, 1995], 323 339; p. 328).

The use of winter in the title and the fact that Leontes’ queen Hermione can lawfully claim “The Emperor of Russia was my father” (The Signet Classic Shakespeare, ed., Frank Kermode [New York: The New American Library, Inc.,1963], 3:2.117) allows us to see parallels with the history of this so-called Country of Winter and to argue that Hermione’s heritage is not merely an exotic detail, but an integral element of the play. When she says of her father, “Oh that he were alive, and here beholding / His daughter’s trial!” (3.2.118-19), she can mean no one but Ivan IV, Ivan the Terrible (Grozniy). He was the first of Russia’s rulers “to visualize himself as . . . Tsar” (Harold Lamb, The March of Muscovy: Ivan the Terrible and the Growth of the Russian Empire [Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948], 130) or emperor, and he was certainly well known to Shakespeare and his contemporaries.

In 1553, the English government backed an expedition by the Muscovy Company of Merchant Adventurers that went in search of a northeast passage. The survivors spent the winter in what was to become Archangel, “and in the spring pushed overland to the court of Ivan the Terrible” (Winston Churchill, The New World [New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1959], 94). The resulting connection between England and Ivan’s court, which was to last until his death, was of vital importance. As Norman Jones says, “Need for new markets and sources of foreign exchange drove English merchants into the world in a way undreamt of by their fathers” (The Birth of the Elizabethan Age: England in the 1560s [Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993], 227). The English not only established what were sometimes exclusive trading rights with Russia, they also traveled overland in Ivan’s large and expanding country and set up trading stations, opening yet other markets. Anthony Jenkinson, searching for trade routes for the Muscovy Company and reporting also
to Ivan himself, drew the “First coherent map of Russia” in 1562 (Lamb, 182). Arthur Edwards reached the court of the Shah of Persia in 1569 (Jones, 227).

In addition to the glory of the adventures and the value of the trade goods, there was also a more personal connection between Ivan the Terrible’s Russia and Shakespeare’s England. Ivan asked for Queen Elizabeth’s hand in marriage and “he required that Elizabeth sign a secret agreement to claim sanctuary in his court, as well as he in hers” (Lamb, 187). Elizabeth offered Ivan sanctuary whenever he felt the need of it, but she refused the other two requests as tactfully as possible. Though he was angered by the refusal, Ivan clung to the notion of escaping to England and to the idea of marrying Elizabeth, or failing that, one of her kinswomen, for the rest of his life. In a 1584 meeting with Jeremy Bowes, the English ambassador, Ivan declared “that he was so determined to marry one of Queen Elizabeth’s kinswomen that he had come to the conclusion that he must himself go to England and claim his bride” (Robert Payne and Nikita Romanoff, Ivan the Terrible [New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002], 415). “England . . . shone like a vision of paradise for him” (Payne, 415), but unfortunately, Ivan died a few weeks after that conversation. Ivan the Terrible’s affection for England had been such that upon his death, the Russian “chancellor appeared in the apartments of Jeremy Bowes . . . to say with malice, ‘The English Emperor is Dead’” (Lamb 19798).

Many English merchants and diplomats of the time saw the Empire of Ivan Groznii as “an imperfect analog to England”(Palmer 326). And many of Ivan’s character traits and experiences are echoed in The Winter’s Tale. To an audience (such as the one at James’s court in 1613) with proper background information, the play unveils additional meanings and shows Shakespeare’s alternative scenario for the flow of history.

Jacobean England (and James himself) had a special interest in Russia, Ivan the Terrible, and rulers who might succeed him. Following the deaths of Ivan Groznii and his successor Boris Godunov, Russia was experiencing a great crisis, later given the name of “Time of Troubles.” After 1605, it became “a shaken nation which proved unable to unite behind a successor for fifteen years” (James Billington, The Icon and the Axe, an Interpretive History of Russian Culture [New York: Vintage Books, 1970], 102). And for some time King James I was considering the possibility to become “the politique father” for Russia (Palmer, 327). In 1612, “John Merrick, chief agent for the Muscovy Company . . . was proposing that the king [James I] make Russia a protectorate” (Palmer 327).

So we can suppose that the audience of the time welcomed the references to the country of Ivan Groznii. To make these references more plentiful and meaningful, Shakespeare had to shift some of the characters’ connections in his original source—Greene’s Pandosto. “In Greene’s story, that is, the Russian connection is to the Polixenes character and matters incidentally” (Palmer 324). Following the fashion of the time, Shakespeare increased the Russian elements in his play. It is not only Hermione’s reference to her father that sends the minds of the audience to Russia to take a close look, it is the whole kingdom of Sicilia that resembles the Empire of Snow. And King Leontes himself is no one but Ivan Groznii. Thus, in The Winter’s Tale we see a clear parallel of Sicilian kingdom and Russian empire. One of Shakespeare’s contemporaries, George Turberville, describes the Russia of the time as “savage soyle, where lawes doe beare no sway / But all is at the King his will, / to save or els to slay” (cited in Palmer, 329). Doesn’t this description apply to the kingdom of Leontes? What laws, what regulations does he follow in carrying out the tyrannous punishment of his wife? Does the oracle possess any authority for Leontes? Nothing has the power to control or stop this “jealous tyrant.” Like Ivan Groznii, he easily accuses and discards a wife, distrusts his subjects, and causes the death of his own son.

It seems as though Shakespeare is deliberately trying to make Leontes as much like Ivan Groznii as possible. For example, “Ivan’s temper . . . always grew more violent in winter” (Payne, 204). “Ivan lost two of his daughters by Anastasia in infancy” (Payne, 205). And Anastasia herself, who
was Ivan's first and most beloved wife, was described by the English ambassador Jerome Horsey in words that make her sound very much like Hermione, “This empress became wise and of such holiness, virtue, and government, as she was honored, beloved, and feared of all her subjects” (Payne, 174). “Her death threw Ivan into paroxysms of grief” (Payne, 173). Ivan's recreations, as reported by Giles Fletcher in Of the Russe Commonwealth in Russia at the Close of the Sixteenth Century, included watching men fight bears (cited in Palmer, 332).

Often, the man's fate was the same as that of Antigonus. One of Ivan's courtiers did what Camillo would not. His name was Bomelius, he had a degree in medicine from Cambridge University, and he “was a superb poisoner” who varied the time it would take the poison to act according to the Tsar's instructions (Payne, 316).

It is interesting to look at Hermione's position in the play. On the one hand, she is the daughter of “the Emperor of Russia” and, on the other hand, she is married to him. Right before the oracle is read, Hermione says, referring to the Russian emperor, “Oh that he were alive, and here beholding / His daughter's trial! That he did but see / The flatness of my misery; yet with eyes / Of pity, not revenge! (3.2.117 121 ).

In this speech the Sicilian queen suggests that even Ivan the Terrible would have pitied her. But does she realize that Leontes is the incarnation of the Russian emperor? Probably not, and only the audience having the appropriate historical background information can predict the outcome of the trial. Shakespeare puts Hermione in a double position relating her twice to the same person. This allows him to show two perspectives on the then-popular Russian ruler. For some his terrible temperament and aggression brought horror and distraction; for others, the Tsar's favorites at the moment, the name meant protection and intimidation of the enemy. And Hermione mentions her father at the moment when her life is under a mortal threat.

It is worth noting that the queen's words are not commented on by Leontes. Right after Hermione's lines end, there is a shift in the action, and the oracle is brought by Cleomenes and Dion, who “have been both at Delphos.” Shakespeare sets it up so Leontes doesn't have to answer Hermione's warnings and accusations. Of course, it would have been pretty hard for him to do so, since he is himself Ivan Groznii to an extent.

Looking at The Winter's Tale from the perspective of historical events at that time, its Russian references become clearer and easier to recognize. Also, the play reveals many more parallels and linkages with Russia than it might at first seem.

But Shakespeare's goal in writing The Winter's Tale was not to present the history of another country in iambic pentameter. He set out to create a world of romance, where there is always a place for a second chance, and forgiveness is granted on request, without any hesitation. Making Leontes resemble Ivan Groznii and providing the happy ending for the play, Shakespeare suggests that another historical scenario was possible for Russia.

Even though The Winter's Tale starts out as a play about adults and their affairs, it is children who stop the winter storm and let the spring in. Shakespeare shows the troubled kingdom of Leontes, and thus of Ivan Groznii, and that such troubles can be cured by the power of youth. Unfortunately for the real Ivan, who murdered his son, such a cure was no longer available. But Shakespeare shows his belief in the triumph of youth and forgiveness. In The Winter's Tale he pictures a battle between the Old and the Young, between winter and spring. And this is why the bear, which “carries symbolic and cultural associations; ideas of winter and tyranny” (Palmer, 332) eats Antigonus (representative of the Old) and leaves Perdita (hope of the Young). The play suggests that spring always comes after winter. The change of seasons is inevitable; hope and happiness replace the misery of distrust and accusation. Spring comes back to Sicilia, and “a sad tale” which is “best for winter” (2:1.25) is no longer told in the kingdom of Leontes.