

The role of women in 'the winters tale' essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Women play a very important part in the play, without being obvious they have control over the men. Women then, didn't have any power and so achieved their goals by being cunning. They were able to be superior by using their intelligence to outwit the men.

Hermione is established as a confident and friendly character early in the play. When Polixenes says he must return to Bohemia, Leontes tries in vain to make him stay. He asks for Hermione's opinion.

" Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you?"

He instinctively relies on her and trusts in her influence as a hostess. He values her opinion highly.

Hermione feels happy and secure in her position and is able to speak her mind. She tells Leontes she was going to keep quiet until he " had drawn oaths from him not to stay". She speaks in a tone of warmth and friendliness and tells Polixenes he will stay whether it is as her ' prisoner' or ' guest'.

" Your guest, then, madam"

Hermione continues to joke with Polixenes about sexual " sin"

" Th' offences we have made you do we'll answer,

If you first sinned with us, and that with us

You did continue fault, and that you slipped not

With any but us."

Hermione's use of "we" in "your queen and I" could be misinterpreted by Leontes as the royal we, and implying that she has sinned with Polixenes. This happens in Act 2 sc 1 when Leontes takes Mamilius away from Hermione, she asks, "what is this? Sport?" Leontes takes it to have a more sinister meaning.

In Act 2 Sc1 We see how Hermione is able to tune into other people and speak whichever language is appropriate. When Mamilius says he has a story to tell of "sprites and goblins", Hermione knows how to make him feel important, "you're powerful at it". She gives him her undivided attention.

When Hermione is being accused of adultery by Leontes, we see her strong and self-reliant character.

"I am not prone to weeping, as our sex commonly are"

This is not typical behaviour for a woman of this time. This strength is shown, when she tells her "women" not to cry for her because there is "no cause". They should only cry for her when she has done something wrong. This shows her great sense of honour.

Everyone believes Hermione is innocent apart from Leontes.

After Hermione and her 'women' have left, the Lords try to defend Hermione's honour "the queen is spotless". Antigonus declares that he shall 'geld' his own daughters if she is 'honourflawed'.

Act 3 scene 2 sees Hermione being put on trial for alleged adultery. In this scene Hermione delivers three powerful speeches. In the first, she uses very simple and clear words protesting her innocence.

The sentence structure at the beginning of the speech is very complex. She uses long sentences, which suggests she has prepared what she is going to say during the trial.

" Since what I am to say must be but that

Which contradicts my accusation."

She uses the language of negotiation throughout the speech.

During the scene she remains calm and collected. Everything focuses on her and she has complete control over the scene.

Amazingly in the second speech she remains strong the whole time, even though she is being publicly humiliated, and is more concerned about her honour and reputation than her life.

She uses fairly complex language in trying not to provoke Leontes. She continues to insist that the most important thing to her is his love.

When Leontes says she should " look for no less than death", she insists that she is not afraid and would rather die for she has lost everything she cared about.

" The bug which you would fright me with, I seek".

In this speech, Hermione is very angry "sir spare your threats". The fact that she trivialises his threats shows courage. The use of clear direct language and monosyllables gives the effect of unemotional language. "But yet hear this", "mistake me not", the verb being used at the beginning of the sentence makes what she says very powerful and strong, giving her complete control of the situation. Her anger is directed at Leontes, as he is the source of all her pain. She says she has lost Leontes love, "the crown and comfort" of her life, she is "barred" from Mamilius like one "infectious" and she has lost her newborn baby.

The focus of the play transfers to the oracle and its contents. The oracle is read and it is revealed that Hermione is innocent, however Leontes disbelieves the oracle. Hermione lets out a cry of rejoicing, but her happiness is short lived, as the news is broken that Mamilius is dead.

Hermione faints at the news, as any mother would and especially after the torment that she has gone through. However this could have been a deliberate move. Before the oracle was read, Hermione was the main focus of the play and had power over the audience, as she made sure her say was heard. The attention then shifted to the oracle and what it had to say and this was Shakespeare's attempt at focussing the attention again on Hermione. We see this happen again at the end of the play. The supposed climax and focus of the play was the reuniting of Leontes and his lost daughter Perdita, however it is revealed that Hermione is alive and so we see the attention of the play shift to Hermione and she regains control of the play.

Paulina is a loyal friend and confidante to Hermione and like Hermione is very confident and forthright.

After Hermione's given birth, Paulina wants to show Leontes the baby to convince him that the child is his.

" The silence often of pure innocence persuades when speaking fails"

She intends to tell Leontes what she thinks of him. Many people in her position would not even think of addressing the King in such a way, for fear of the consequences

" If I prove honey-mouthed, let my tongue blister,

And never to my read-looked anger be

The trumpet anymore".

Like Hermione, Paulina has the power to influence other people. Paulina wants to take the child and show it to Leontes, but the Gaoler will not let her go because he has no authority to do so.

" I know not what I shall incur to pass it".

Paulina manages to persuade the Gaoler to let them go and see Leontes by stating that:

" This child was prisoner to the womb, and is

By law and process of great nature thence

Freed and enfranchised”

She is resourceful and firm in her sense of right and with these characteristics combined manages to outwit the Gaoler and gain control over the situation.

Paulina enters the palace with the infant, but the servant, her husband and the Lords try to prevent her “ You must not enter”. Paulina believes she is able to “ purge him of that humour” and expects the support of her husband and the Lords “ be second to me”. Paulina is very persistent and believes she has the power to make Leontes come to his senses. Although she uses the language of power, the reality let’s her down that she has no power and it is inevitable that her plan will not succeed.

Her first words to Leontes are telling him they need to discuss who the godparents are going to be “ About some gossips for your highness”. This shows Paulina as being tactless but she is trying to invoke a positive response from him. Whatever her intentions are it’s not the correct way to handle things in view of Leontes mental state.

Throughout Act 2 scene 3 we see the strong side of Paulina as she quarrels with Leontes. We also see how Antigonus is unable to control his wife “ I told her so, she should not visit you”, showing how Paulina is very strong minded, nobody is going to stop her do or say what she wants.

Paulina is not civil towards Leontes, in fact she is quite sarcastic. She doesn’t give Leontes the respect he requires.

Paulina says it is a shame he cannot be forced to change his mind.

“ For, as the case now stands, it is a curse

He cannot be compelled to't”

In Act 3 scene 2, we see Paulina take control of the scene. When Hermione faints, Paulina immediately implies that Hermione is dying “ see what death is doing”. The fact that she jumps to conclusions, suggests that she has a plan brewing to get revenge on Leontes and has the power to do this by saying that Hermione is dead. However Paulina is angry, suggesting that she believes that Hermione is dead and so resulting in her out pour of emotions towards Leontes. She gives a very bitter speech reminding Leontes what he has done to his family and friends. She has the power to tell him exactly what she thinks of him and he sits back and lets her because he now realises that he was wrong. He has become weak and so allowing Paulina to become more dominant.

“ The queen, the queen, the sweet'st, dear'st creature's dead”

She asks what he has in store for her, “ wheels, racks, fires?”

She goes on to list all of Leontes wicked actions, which includes betraying Polixenes, “ poison'd good Camillo's honour to have him kill a king”, “ the casting forth to crows thy baby daughter” and “ the death of the young prince”, however nothing compares to his final tyranny, which was him causing Hermione's death.

However later on she feels guilty and asks for Leontes forgiveness "forgive a foolish woman". However her plea sounds insincere, it sounds almost sarcastic. She goes on to say "I'll speak of her no more, nor of her children", again emphasising what he has lost.

Leontes situation can be compared to Hermione's because when she had lost everything, she remained calm and in control over the situation. Whereas, Leontes breaks down. He can't handle what he has done and we see sixteen years later that he is still grieving for his losses, and reinforcing that women may not be physically strong, but they do have control over certain aspects which bring out their strengths.

Act 5 scene 1 we see sixteen years later that Paulina has stuck by Leontes to make sure that he will never forget what he did. She uses harsh words such as "she you killed" to remind him of his responsibility for Hermione's death.

We find out at the end of the play that Hermione is alive and has been at Paulina's house for the past sixteen years. Paulina has known this and could have ended Leontes heartache earlier. The fact that she didn't, suggests that she wanted Leontes to suffer. Another reason could be that's she was testing him to see if he really was sorry for what he had done. She gains power over Leontes by taking advantage of his state of mind and so being able to influence him.

"Will you swear never to marry?"

We see a completely different side to Leontes, compared to the beginning of the play. He has become completely dependant on Paulina.

“ My true Paulina, we shall not marry, till thou bidst us”.

Act 4 scene 4 sees the introduction of Perdita, Leontes lost daughter, but she doesn't know this and has grown up as a shepherdess. However she acts and looks like someone of much higher status. Polixenes notes this.

“ But smacks of something greater than herself”

She is scared and uncomfortable about her relationship with Florizel, son of Polixenes.

“ To me the difference forges dread”.

She is realistic about their relationship. She knows that they cannot be together

“ Your resolution cannot hold when 'tis opposed”

Whereas Florizel is more naive and insists they will be together.

She acknowledges their differences, such as status, that would make it impossible for them to have a relationship. She refers to him as “ The gracious mark o'th land” whereas she refers to herself as the “ poor lowly maid”.

Perdita is very much like Hermione. She is determined and kind at heart.

When Polixenes threatens the shepherd and Florizel, she cares more about

the safety of others than her own. This can relate to Hermione and the trial scene, as she didn't care about her life, only her honour. Also like Hermione she uses the language of negotiation.

This courage is shown when Perdita is threatened by Polixenes

" I will devise a death as cruel for thee as thou art tender"

She replies that, " I was not much afraid"

She is not going to let him scare her even though he is someone of greater authority and power than her. This also mirrors Act 3 scene 2 when Hermione said she was not afraid of Leontes threats.

Perdita is a very attractive looking woman and both Polixenes and Camillo admire her.

" This is the prettiest low-born lass that ever an on grassward"

She is more confident than most women. She doesn't need compliments to reassure her of the way she looks, " Your praises are too large". She is suggesting that she doesn't need to rely on other people, especially men.

Not all women in the play are represented as being intelligent. Dorcas and Mopsa are country girls and would be uneducated. They do not behave as respectable young women. They act like this because they have not been brought up like ladies. We see them quarrelling like children to the dismay of the Clown.

“ Is there no manners left among maids?”

They are more worried about men and love.

Their purpose in the play is to provide an excuse for comedy. They illustrate the differences in attitude towards sex, between the two courts. Sex is discussed more openly in the Country of Bohemia, whereas in the Court of Sicilia, Leontes sees sex as a disease.

The role of women in ' The Winter's Tale' is a very important one. Although they are not obviously prominent, they manage to stand up for themselves.

They do something that isn't expected for the time, which is, they end up being more powerful than the men.

They do this by using their intelligence to influence, manipulate and outwit the men. The women in the play are not typical women for the time and they do not want to be portrayed as typical women, because women are seen as weak.