

How do relationships
succeed or fail in the
winter's tale?



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Examine the relationships of Hermione and Leontes, Paulina and Antigonus, and Perdita and Florizel and the ways in which their relationships work or fail to work. How might a Jacobean audience's view of these relationships differ from that of a modern audience?

One important area in *The Winter's Tale* concerns marital relationships. The marriages and relationships of Hermione and Leontes, Paulina and Antigonus and Perdita and Florizel are central to the development of the plot, and the themes of renewal and rebirth. Structurally, Hermione and Leontes start the play and as their marriage breaks down we see Paulina and Antigonus' relationship; then that of Perdita and Florizel when the first marriage has finally broken completely, and that of the second, ended by the death of Antigonus. Hermione and Leontes finish the play with a successful reunion, Paulina remarries, and Perdita and Florizel are married. We see the play as finally a comedy, but also as a tragedy because there is death (Antigonus, Mamillius, Hermione (temporarily)), hence the usual description of *The Winter's Tale* as a tragicomedy.

Hermione and Leontes' relationship [in 1. 2] appears at first to be good and mutually affectionate - Leontes expects Hermione to speak, to join in, to be part of his court - Tongue-tied, our queen? Speak you. [1. 2. 27]. She respects that, in public, he must appear as the master in the relationship:

I had thought, sir, to have held my peace until

You had drawn oaths from him to stay [1. 2. 28-29]

She expects him to do important things, and a Jacobean audience living in a patriarchal society would view her as a good subservient wife, but we will see that she also has her own opinions. Hermione's words above could be played in a mildly satirical manner, as if she is saying "I won't say anything without your oh so royal permission". She tells Leontes what to say to Polixenes, but she doesn't speak directly to Polixenes [until 1. 2. 38], therefore we see that she does pay attention to Leontes. Leontes is initially happy with this, "Well said, Hermione", [1. 2. 33], and we see Hermione is trying to make the marriage happy. We see Leontes' paranoia has not started yet [as of 1. 2. 86]. Leontes was jolly, encouraging Hermione, but we have nothing to compare Leontes to before the play started – was his language always so blunt? It is clear that Hermione loves Leontes, and she does not quantify her love.

I love thee not a jar o'th'clock behind

What lady she her lord. [1. 2. 43-44]

Leontes says bluntly "Stay your thanks a while, / and pay them when you part." [1. 2. 8-9]. Hermione imitates Leontes, "pay your fees / when you depart" [1. 2. 52-53], but in a playful tone. The playfulness in her tone shows how unsuspecting and unprepared she is for what will follow.

"At my request he would not" [1. 2. 86] could either be quiet, brooding, and emotionally injured, showing Leontes' sudden jealousy, or jovially, showing blossoming jealousy, or demonstrating his blunt manner has been constant, in any mood.

When Hermione is on trial, her choice of words (such as chaste, continent and true) show she is baffled by her marriage's failure.

You, my lord, best know

Whom least will seem to do so, my past life

Hath been continent, as chaste, as true

As I am now unhappy [3. 2. 31-34]

Visual evidence for Hermione's wrongdoing depends on staging. In Terry Hands' 1986 production, Hermione is clearly flirting, even taking Polixenes' hand to her pregnant belly. In the 1981 BBC production, however, the 'flirting' seen by Leontes is politeness between Hermione and Polixenes and the "paddling palms and pinching fingers" [1. 2. 114] is Hermione giving her hand to Polixenes, so this production abides by the text in this respect. I like the BBC staging; any credibility in Leontes' jealousy would distract from another central theme in the play – the health of the Kingdom when the King is mad. We must see Leontes' jealousy as mad. Jacobean would see Hermione and Polixenes' 'flirting' as a guest politely and formally kissing his hostess on the cheek.

Hermione's treatment is the more severe because she is with child, and by the trial scene she is only shortly out of labour, [3. 2. 101]. The audience's sympathy with Hermione might be greater due to the humiliation she suffers – and yet she still retains her dignity. Leontes implies her apparent death to be divine retribution on him for denying the oracle (the extent of Leontes'

reliance of his false beliefs is indicated by his initial refusal to believe the oracle), just as he deems Mamillius' death to be so, [3. 2. 143-144].

Hermione and Leontes are reunited after 16 years. After 16 years, he has greatly changed personally and thus his language is softer, “ for she was as tender / As infancy and grace. “[5. 3. 26-27]. Does Hermione still truly love Leontes and forgives him entirely, or is she just tolerating him for the sake of getting to know Perdita? The 1986 BBC production shows Hermione as immediately walking towards Leontes, as she begins to cry and embrace him (“ she hangs about his neck” [5. 3. 112]). I believe Hermione loves Leontes and has forgiven him for his wrongdoings.

Paulina and Antigonus subvert the traditional Jacobean view of marriage i. e. that of a dominant husband (Antonia Fraser, *The Weaker Vessel*). They provide a (comical) literary stereotype, still recognised today, of a nagging wife and a henpecked husband. Their closeness is shown in Noble's 1992 production, where Antigonus hugs Paulina while she speaks to Leontes, and Paulina and Antigonus play fighting – they really do love each other.

Antigonus allows Paulina her leeway, however, not because he is worn down, but more because he knows she knows what she is doing. There is still an element of allowance from Antigonus, i. e. he will let her run.

When she will take the rein I let her run,

But she'll not stumble. [2. 3. 51-52]

Paulina subverts another stereotype; a servant-master relationship – Leontes is scared of Paulina, almost like a husband fearful of a dominating wife.

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I charged thee that she should not come about me;

I knew she would. [2. 3. 43-44]

Paulina has her own way because she has moral purpose. She does the right thing by her love of Hermione in defending her forcefully, which is why we see Paulina favourably. Also, we have the same idea as in King Lear of service versus servility. In King Lear, Kent and the fool both tell King Lear he is wrong, and Kent is banished for it, while the fool is not taken seriously because he is a mere jester. Kent and the fool were trying to serve their King truly, as does Paulina. Paulina tells Leontes he is wrong for his own good thereby putting herself in danger.

Paulina and Antigonus do not love each other any less even though sparks fly. This is a contrast to Leontes and Hermione, as Leontes is happy with Hermione until she takes, as he sees it, too much liberty.

This contrast of marriages provides an interesting view for a modern audience, on the idea of soul mates. We do not see Hermione and Leontes in a private setting but in public they are quite formal where Paulina and Antigonus are not. The idea of marriage being forever, as marriage is for love can only be corrupted when one of the couple disregards their love for something else. We cannot know if Paulina and Antigonus married for love, as a large proportion of marriages were, in those times political particularly for lords and ladies of the court. Love, may follow later but in terms of Jacobean realism it would be realistic that neither the husband nor wife loved each other. In literary terms and in modern terms marriage is usually for love from the beginning. In the case of Leontes and Hermione, love is disregarded
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for jealousy. Antigonus dies but after 16 years, Paulina hasn't forgotten him – this is true love.

I, an old turtle,

Will wing me to some withered bough, and there

My mate, that's never to be found again,

Lament till I am lost. [5. 3. 132-135]

Paulina wants the revelation of Hermione's survival and also that of Hermione's reunion with Leontes, because Paulina understands Leontes' loss and Hermione's even greater losses.

In the structure of the play, the third marriage we encounter is that of Perdita and Florizel – moving from the winter's court to the summer country. While the other two couples had been united for several years, we see a couple with intention to marry. Their love is not devoid of attraction, but it is not defined by sex:

Their transformations

Were never for a piece of beauty rarer,

Nor in a way so chaste, since my desires

Run not before mine honour, nor my lusts

Burn hotter than my faith [4. 4. 31-35]

Class is a vital component in their relationship, but a modern audience accepts their relationship without this as a major consideration. To Jacobean, a Prince marrying a shepherd's daughter would be unthinkable. However, the audience knows Perdita is royal – an example of comedic dramatic irony. Also, associations with the idea of the Divine Right of Kings are demonstrated through Perdita, and would be very recognisable to Jacobean. There is a quality about Perdita that makes her special – royals are different inherently and not just privileged – as indicted by Wilson Knight (“...stamp[s] her actions with eternal validity, for the crown is always to be understood as a symbol piercing the eternity dimension”). Perdita recognises their class difference [4. 4. 36-37] but Florizel shows that between them, he believes love will conquer all.

I'll be thine, my fair,

Or not my father's. for I cannot be

Mine own nor anything to any if

I be not thine. [4. 4. 42-45]

To Jacobean, this would be terrifying if Perdita wasn't a royal; in the context of what is known between Perdita and Florizel, the audience should be horrified at their continued relationship despite their social difference. To modern spectators, this would reinforce the idea of soulmates but we see their love irrespective of class.

Florizel and, especially, Perdita (“ the play's main symbol of the powers of creation” E. M. W Tillyard) encapsulate nature, rebirth and fertility,
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represented by the many natural and beautiful images they use which associate them with spring and summer - sun, cottage, beauty, faith. They were not brought together for a political marriage - they found each other by accident (Florizel's falcon flew over the old shepherd's land) and so their love is natural. There are no politics within their love (except that Florizel will love Perdita despite his father's wrath). Their love complements the other relationships showing that love can continue and relationships can work despite difficulties.

Some fault is in their relationship, all the same. Florizel uses deception in the form of disguising himself and lies when they first arrive in Bohemia. Perdita (reluctantly) goes along with this. Perdita says that their affection is not overcome by their mind's shame of deception, perhaps implying that suffering strengthens us. In all three relationships, women suffer because of the negative qualities of men. Leontes is obviously the worst, but Antigonus thinks when he leaves the baby that Hermione might be actually guilty. Florizel uses deception to see Perdita in public but he does so because he wants to spend time with her and within her community, so as a modern audience we tend to forgive him. The women in the relationships are stronger in general.

For a Jacobean audience, there would be key differences in how the relationships in the play are viewed to the reactions of a modern audience, but there would also be key similarities. As a modern audience, we know and understand previous views (and the context in which the play was first presented) and can hence incorporate these into our enjoyment of the play.

The great messages and themes, therefore, are the same as they would have been 400 years ago.