The Winter’s Tale

*The Winter’s Tale* can be dated between 1588, when all the main sources were available, and 1611, when it was described in performance by Simon Forman. The play may even be earlier if Greene’s *Pandosto* is accepted as derived from *The Winter’s Tale*.

**Publication Date**

*The Winter’s Tale* was entered in the Stationers’ Register on 8th November 1623, one of eighteen plays in the First Folio (F1) which had not been registered previously:


*The Winter’s Tale* occupies the fourteenth and final position among the comedies in F1. Chambers describes the printed text as good and believes that the preceding blank page suggests that there was a delay in obtaining a copy for it.

The Stationers’ Register has an entry for 22nd May 1594 for an otherwise unknown play:

> Edward White Entred for his Copie vnder thle hlandes of bothe the wardens a booke entitled a Wynters nightes pastime. vjd

Some commentators, following Malone, have seen *Wynters Nightes Pastime* as an early attempt to publish *The Winter’s Tale*.

**Performance Dates**

The most important is Simon Forman’s record of a performance of ‘*the Winters talle*’ at the Globe on Wednesday, 15 May 1611. Forman gives a summary of the play’s plot, identifying it clearly as *The Winter’s Tale* as it is known today:

> Observe there how Leontes, the King of Sicilia, was overcome with jealousy of his wife with the King of Bohemia his friend, that came to see him; and how he contrived his death and would have had his cupbearer to have poisoned, who gave the King of Bohemia warning thereof and fled with him to Bohemia.

Subsequent performances included those at Court on 5 November 1611, in 1612–13 (as one of the seven Shakespeare plays performed at Whitehall before the marriage of King James’s daughter, Princess Elizabeth, to Frederick, Elector Palatine), in 1618, around 1619, and another at Court on 18 January 1624 (Chambers: *WS*, I, 288–9).

**Sources**

Bullough sees the main source as Greene’s *Pandosto or The Triumph of Time*, published in 1588 and reprinted in 1607 as *Dorastus and Fawonia*. This assumption is reasonable according to the recorded performance dates. However, if the date of composition were substantially earlier,
Bullough’s thesis would need to be reviewed, and the direction of influence would then be reversed. Bullough adds Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (translated by Golding in 1567) which in Book X describes Pygmalion’s statue coming to life. Pafford argues that Autolycus’s skills could have been drawn from Greene’s ‘conny-catching’ leaflets, published 1591–2.²

There is divided opinion as to whether Shakespeare was influenced by the Greek Romances. Samuel Wolff (1912: 432–463) first argued that Shakespeare had used Longus’s second-century romance *Daphnis and Chloe*, a story of children abandoned in the countryside and later found to be of high parentage; he also observes that the hunt during a storm (described by the shepherd in 3.3) is present in *Daphnis* but has no parallel in *Pandosto*.

Carol Gesner observes that the visit of the King and Camillo parallels that of the lord of the manor and his train in *Daphnis and Chloe*, perhaps another example of Shakespeare going directly to Longus (1970: 181). *Daphnis and Chloe*, composed originally in Greek, has been attributed to Longus, c. 200 AD. Although it did not appear in print until 1598, an Italian translation was published by the humanist Annibale Caro (1507–66) and a French translation from a Greek manuscript by Jacques Amyot (1559) appeared as *Les Amours Pastorales de Daphnis et Chloé*. An English translation was published by Angel Day in 1587. Gesner gives further consideration to Shakespeare’s use of the Greek Romances; she proposes a secondary source, that of Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica* (translated by Thomas Underdowne in 1569). In *Aethiopica*, the entire moving force is a king’s jealousy. She also supports the suggestion that Shakespeare took the deathlike swoon of Hermione and her dramatic return to life from Mateo Bandello’s twenty-second tale (1970: 122).³

Chambers suggests that some names were taken from Sidney’s *Arcadia*, ‘Autolycus’ from the *Odyssey* (xix. 394) and ‘Florizel’ from *Amadis de Gaule*, a romance published originally in Spanish in 1524, translated into French in 1551 and eventually into English. *Amadis de Gaule* also describes various statues which come to life. Chambers speculates about whether the statue scene, absent from Greene, was suggested by Lyly’s *Woman in the Moon* (1597), or Marston’s *Pygmalion’s Image* (1598). Sir Sidney Lee proposes that a few lines in Autolycus’s speech – “shall be flayed alive; then ‘nointed over with honey, set on the head of a wasps’ nest” (4.4.784–6) – were drawn from Boccaccio’s story of Ginevra.⁴

Bullough notes that many of the names came from Plutarch, such as Camillus, Antigones, Cleomenes and Dion. He is sure that “our rogue” [Autolycus] came from Golding’s 1567 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Bullough also points out that Vasari’s *Lives of the Painters* (1550) gave two epitaphs on Giulio Romano’s tomb, one of which claimed that Jupiter envied Romano when he saw his “sculpted and painted statues breathe”. Vasari was not translated into English until 1850. These sources indicate Shakespeare’s wide reading in both classical and contemporary European literature.

**Orthodox Date**

Malone (in his *Variorum* of 1778 and his *Attempt to Ascertain the Order in which the plays attributed to Shakespeare were Written*) suggests 1594, since the Stationers’ Register has an entry for 22 May of that year for *a Wynters Nights Pastime*. Malone was uneasy about the date, however, because Meres did not include *The Winter’s Tale* in his list of twelve examples of plays by Shakespeare in *Palladis Tamia* in 1598. Accordingly, Malone wondered whether the date should be 1601 or 1602. Later he suggested 1613, on the grounds that Ben Jonson, in his 1614 *Bartholomew Fair*, alluded to recent plays in his dig at “Tales, Tempests and suchlike Drolleries”.

The vast majority of twentieth-century scholars put forward dates which continue to ignore the matter of the Stationers’ Register entry of 1594. Like Chambers, who suggests early 1611, scholars often opt for a date of composition close to Simon Forman’s recording of a performance: Wells & Taylor, Riverside and Snyder all propose 1610–11; Pafford, early 1611, as does Orgel. Wiggins dates this play to 1611, an absolute date, due to its mention by Simon Forman. However, it is not certain that Forman attended an early performance or that the play was only recently composed.

Eric Sams and Janet Spens are exceptions. Sams notes that several of Shakespeare’s plays exist in two or more very different versions, which is not true of the plays of his contemporaries. “The
simple explanation,” he writes, “now universally overlooked, is that the earlier publications were his first versions.”

Internal Orthodox Evidence

Chambers suggests 1611 on the grounds “that the bear and the dance of satyrs were both inspired by those in Jonson’s Masque of Oberon”, first performed on 1 January 1611, though he goes on to speculate that the idea of the bear came from Mucedorus (1598). Pafford, too, cites Jonson’s masque as “reason to suppose” that the play was written after New Year’s Day 1611 (2002: xxii). More generally, Pafford finds that the play’s theme, language, style and spirit “all point to a late date”, as do “the nature and use of the songs” (2002: xxiii). Again, the direction of influence regarding Jonson is dependent upon the date of Oberon being 1611, and would have to be reconsidered if an earlier date was agreed.6

Spens is one of the few scholars who take into account the so-called “lost years” and the sudden emergence of the very accomplished Venus and Adonis in 1593. She suggests that, previously, Shakespeare had been actively engaged in dramatic work. This leads her to suspect that “all the Romances… were written originally by Shakespeare at the very beginning of his career” (1922: 92).

Walpole, the author of Historic Doubts on the Life and Reign of King Richard III (1768), locates the play’s composition during the lifetime of Elizabeth I – in other words, before 1603:

The Winter’s Tale … was certainly intended (in compliment to Queen Elizabeth) as an indirect apology for her mother, Anne Bolynd. . . . The subject was too delicate to be exhibited on the stage without a veil . . . . The unreasonable nature of Leontes, and his violent conduct in consequence, form a true portrait of Henry VIII. . . . Not only the general plan of the story is most applicable, but several passages . . . touch the real history nearer than the fable. Hermione on her trial says “for honour, ’Tis a derivative from me to mine, And only that I stand for.” This seems to be taken from the very letter of Anne Bolynd to the King before her execution, where she pleads for the infant princess, his daughter. Mamillius . . . dies in his infancy; but it confirms the allusion, as Queen Anne, before Elizabeth, bore a still-born son. But the most striking passage . . . [is] where Paulina, describing the new-born princess, and her likeness to her father, says, “She has the very trick of his frown”.6

Alison Weir, a modern historian and author of The Six Wives of Henry VIII (1991), reinforces Walpole’s view. She describes how, at her trial, Anne sat in the centre of the court and heard her indictment read in all its detail. Anne refuted each charge firmly, “arguing her case with such clarity that her innocence . . . seemed manifest” (1991: 326). Her old nurse gave way to hysteria when the verdict was announced. Anne apparently received the sentence calmly.

External Orthodox Evidence

Forman’s note is the only evidence that the play had been written by 1611.

Oxfordian Date

Both Clark and Holland propose that the play was first written in 1584. Clark’s argument is based primarily on seeing the play in an historical context. The senior Ogburns favour 1586; Ogburn Jr., 1594 (on the basis of the S.R. entry for ‘a Wynters nightes pastime’).

Internal Oxfordian Evidence

Various points arise. Ideas and lines in The Winter’s Tale would have contemporary resonance if the play were Elizabethan. Clark begins with a historical note about the Queen commenting on the “smut” on Raleigh’s nose, on 27 December 1584. This may be paralleled by Mamillius, whose nose is “smutched” (1.2.123). It could further be argued that the Queen’s reluctance to condemn Mary, Queen of Scots, is echoed by Camillo:

If I could find example
Of thousands that had struck anointed kings
And flourish’d after, I’d not do’t. (1.2. 358–60)

Thomas Underdown dedicated his translation of Heliodorus’s Aethiopica to Oxford in 1569, when Oxford was nineteen, with a further edition appearing in 1577 (Nelson, 236–7). This may
indicate the young earl’s taking an early special interest in the genre. It is possible that the germ of the idea of turning the story into drama might have begun at that time. Angel Day, who published his translation of *Daphnis and Chloe* in 1587, had dedicated *The English Secretarie* to Oxford in the previous year, praising the earl as a man “of learned view and insight”, “whose infancy from the beginning was ever sacred to the Muses” (Nelson, 381). Does this establish a link?

Dott. Noemi Magri argues that Oxford, on his travels through Northern Italy in 1575, had seen the remarkable works of Giulio Romano, an artist whose wonderful *trompe l’oeil* murals may still be seen at the Palazzo Te in Mantua. Oxford would also have known that Romano was famed for constructing his statues out of powdered marble (marble proper was a substance hard to obtain in the Mantuan district), and for painting them in an extraordinarily life-like manner. Shakespeare’s claim that Hermione’s statue was

*a piece many years in doing, and now newly performed by that rare Italian master Giulio Romano, who, had he himself eternity and could put breath into his work, would beguile nature of her custom, so perfectly he is her ape.* (5.2.94–9)

would then be not an example of ignorance. It is usually assumed that the claim was an error and that Shakespeare, relatively uneducated as he was, did not know that Romano was a painter, not a sculptor. In fact, Romano’s ability as a sculptor was described by Giorgio Vasari in 1550 in *Le Vite de Più Eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architettori* (but not translated into English until 1850 when it appeared as *Lives of the Artists*).

A similar point pertains to the criticism of Shakespeare’s ignorance of geography which was first mentioned by Jonson in 1619, who said that the dramatist was ignorant that Bohemia was landlocked:

*Thou art perfect then our ship hath touched upon
The deserts of Bohemia?* (3.3. 1–2)

Firstly, it should be noted that Greene’s *Pandosto* gives a coastline to Bohemia:

*Egistus King of Sicilia, who in his youth had bene brought up with Pandosto, desirous to shew that neither tracte of time, nor distance of place could diminish their former friendship, provided a navie of ships, and sayled into Bohemia to visite his old friend and companion. (Pandosto, part 1, para. 3)*

So Shakespeare may have been following Greene as a source (even though in *Pandosto* the King of Sicily is accused of adultery with the Queen of Bohemia). In addition, the dramatist may have been more knowledgeable than his critics: Pafford (2002: 66) points out that Bohemia under Ottakar II (King of Bohemia 1253–78) had a sizeable coast on the Adriatic from modern-day Trieste to the Istritan peninsula (details in *New Cambridge Medieval History*, V, 395; map p. 757). Bohemia regained this foothold in the early sixteenth century under Vladislas II, the King of Bohemia, Dalmatia and Slavonia. Oxford had spent several months in Venice in 1575–6, and the history of the region would have become known to him. Jonson laughed at the ‘error’, but maybe Jonson did not know.

Most of the sources which have been claimed to have been used were available in the 1580s. Certainly Oxford could have read them in Italian or in French (Nelson, 53). These points, along with Walpole’s suggested parallels, do begin to root the play in the second half of Elizabeth’s reign. Regardless of who the playwright was, such allusions give the play a context it lacks for a 1610–11 date. That sense of context intensifies when aspects of Oxford’s personal life are considered. The chief theme of the play is estrangement and then reconciliation between husband, wife and child. Oxford’s separation from his wife, Anne, and his refusal to acknowledge paternity of his first child, led to attempts at reconciliation by several outside parties (Nelson, 141–154). In desperation, the Countess of Suffolk proposed in a letter to Mary de Vere dated December 1577, bringing Oxford’s daughter to him: “. . . we will have some sport with him . . . and whilst my Lord your brother is with you, I will bring the child as though it were some other child of my friends, and we will see how nature works in him to like it, and tell him it is his own after” (Nelson, 176–7).
External Oxfordian Evidence

This play is pertinent to the decade of the 1580s, which features travel, voyages, discoveries, shipwrecks and lost hopes, for example of a North West passage. Holland proposes that Winter’s Tale was first written in 1584. Part of his evidence is that wool prices in England in that year were the same as those quoted in the play (4.3.32–4); his source was Stafford’s A briefe conceipte of English policye. After his time in the Tower and a period of banishment from Court, Oxford was restored to the Queen’s favour in June 1583 (Nelson, 189–90). Thus Walpole’s idea that the play was a compliment to Elizabeth is reinforced.

The Stationers’ Register, 1594, has an entry for a Wynters nightes pastime. That this should refer to The Winter’s Tale must be considered, because it would not be the only play known from records dated well before actual publication (e.g. Macbeth, seen by Simon Forman in 1611, first published 1623), nor the only one to have a change of name (e.g. The Moor of Venice, now known as Othello).

Conclusion

The Winter’s Tale can be dated between c. 1585 and 1611. The orthodox dating of this play as c.1610–11 depends on several assumptions: that it was written close to the time of the first known performance, that it was a play of the ‘mature’ playwright, and that the playwright was born in 1564. Bates points out that a 1610–11 date obviously excludes the authorship of Oxford, because he died in 1604 (1998: 66). However, Simon Forman merely records a performance of the play, not the date of its composition.

The date of 1610–11 ignores the similar title of an earlier play in 1594, and further assumes that the author used a number of sources which mainly date from some 20–30 years earlier. This gives the play little or no historical context. A date of composition in the mid to late 1580s, or even just before the entry in the Stationers’ Register of 1594, resolves those issues, regardless of who the playwright was.

If Oxford were the author, the topical references, the apparent auto-biographical elements, and the closeness to Oxford of the sources and/or their authors, would further support an earlier date for composition, perhaps in the second half of the 1580s.

Notes

Acknowledgement: thanks are due to Robert Detobel, for providing references regarding doubts about which texts derived from which.

1. Pafford notes that a “booke entituled a Wynters nightes pastime” (Arber, Transcript of the Registers, 1875, ii. 307b; 1877, iv) was entered under Edward White in the Stationers’ Register on 22 May 1594 (shortly after two other plays with similar titles to Shakespearean plays: Famous Victories and King Leir). As Pafford notes (2002: xxvi), the word ‘night’ also appears in the title of the play performed on 5th November 1612 (“The Kings Players: The 5th of nouember A play Called ye winters nightes Tayle”; 2002: xxiii). This concurrence has prompted commentators to suggest “there was an early version which Shakespeare revised in 1611” (2002: xxv). The play was entered into the SR again on 29 June 1624.


3. Stuart Gillespie, Shakespeare’s Books (2004) gives a detailed discussion. He asserts that Wolff’s argument about the influence of Daphnis and Chloe is a “now generally discounted suggestion” but that some details in the plays “not anticipated in Shakespeare’s immediate sources are present in the [Greek] Romances themselves”.

4. Lee (1925: 426). In Boccaccio’s story (2nd day, novella ix), the villain Ambrogioolo, after “being bounden to the stake and anointed with honey,” was “to his exceeding torment not only slain but devoured of the flies and wasps and gadflies wherewith that country abounded” (c.f. Decameron, translation by John Payne, 1893, i.164). There is another grisly echo at 4.4.791–2, where the clown’s son is to be beheld “with flies blown to death.”

5. Pafford’s concluding paragraph on this point is considerably confused. He writes: “Shakespeare may have begun to write The Winter’s Tale before the end of 1610 but may not have started it until after the performance of Oberon on 1 January 1611: in any case he had certainly finished the play in time for it to be performed on 15 May 1611.” (2002: xxiii). Pafford’s difficult prose
highlights the consequences of the problems which beset the commentator in discussing the solid identification of the direction of influence on any writer.

6. Walpole, *Historic Doubts* (1768: 114–5). This work has recently been digitised by Oxford University and can be freely accessed (in pdf format) online. This suggestion has been pursued by a modern historian, Eric Ives in *The Life and Death of Anne Boleyn* (2004). Ives argues that Hermione’s speech closely matches Anne Boleyn’s speech in her own defence, that Leontes in his tyrannous jealousy correlates closely to Henry VIII and that one of Henry’s friends, Sir Henry Norreys, was executed for maintaining that the Queen was innocent. According to this view, Perdita corresponds to the banished daughter of Anne & Henry, i.e. Elizabeth herself.

7. In a letter to The Times (of London) on 20 May 1991, Professor Robert Pynsent of the University of London School of Slavonic and East European Studies wrote with reference to Otakar II:

> At various times before and after that thirteenth century king, Bohemia owned various Adriatic and baltic coastal areas. From 1526 until 1918 (Charles I), with one Stuart hiccup, the Hapsburg kings of Bohemia always had coastal possessions. Bohemia became a mythological kingdom only with Oscar Wilde’s Florizel of Bohemia and, a few years later, Mr Chamberlain.

8. *A briefe conceipte of English policye* (STC 23133) was published in 1581 and was attributed to ‘W. S.’ usually identified as William Stafford (1554–1612), but thought by some have been written by John Hales (d. 1571). See Furnivall’s 1876 edition for further discussion.

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