

The Winter's Tale

INTRODUCTION

THE astrologer Simon Forman saw *The Winter's Tale* at the Globe on 15 May 1611. Just how much earlier the play was written is not certainly known. During the sheep-shearing feast in Act 4, twelve countrymen perform a satyrs' dance that three of them are said to have already 'danced before the King'. This is not necessarily a topical reference, but satyrs danced in Ben Jonson's *Masque of Oberon*, performed before King James on 1 January 1611. It seems likely that this dance was incorporated in *The Winter's Tale* (just as, later, another masque dance seems to have been transferred to *The Two Noble Kinsmen*). But it occurs in a self-contained passage that may well have been added after Shakespeare wrote the play itself. *The Winter's Tale*, first printed in the 1623 Folio, is usually thought to have been written after *Cymbeline*, but stylistic evidence places it before that play, perhaps in 1609±10.

A mid sixteenth-century book classes 'winter tales' along with 'old wives' tales'; Shakespeare's title prepared his audiences for a tale of romantic improbability, one to be wondered at rather than believed; and within the play itself characters compare its events to 'an old tale' (5.2.61; 5.3.118). The comparison is just: Shakespeare is dramatizing a story by his old rival Robert Greene, published as *Pandosto: The Triumph of Time* in or before 1588. This gave Shakespeare his plot outline, of a king (Leontes) who believes his wife (Hermione) to have committed adultery with another king (Polixenes), his boyhood friend, and who casts off his new-born daughter (Perdita±the lost one) in the belief that she is his friend's bastard. In both versions the baby is brought up as a shepherdess, falls in love with her supposed father's son (Florizel in the play), and returns to her real father's court where she is at last recognized as his daughter. In both versions, too, the wife's innocence is demonstrated by the pronouncement of the Delphic oracle, and her husband passes the period of his daughter's absence in penitence; but Shakespeare alters the ending of his source story, bringing it into line with the conventions of romance. He adopts

Greene's tripartite structure, but greatly develops it, adding for instance Leontes' steward Antigonus and his redoubtable wife Paulina, along with the comic rogue Autolycus, 'snapper-up of unconsidered trifles'.

The intensity of poetic suffering with which Leontes expresses his irrational jealousy is matched by the lyrical rapture of the love episodes between Florizel and Perdita. In both verse and prose *The Winter's Tale* shows Shakespeare's verbal powers at their greatest, and his theatrical mastery is apparent in, for example, Hermione's trial (3.1) and the daring final scene in which time brings about its triumph.