

## THEMES AND ISSUES

### Authority & reconciliation

Family ties & duties; dynastic stability — Innocence & guilt — Art & nature; nature & culture; the “green world” — Truth & lies; hidden secrets & open facts; faith & mistrust; knowledge & ignorance

## COMPOSITION DATE, SOURCES, CONTEXT; GENRE

See Introduction to the Oxford edition.

The story of Autolycus’s origins is told in Ovid. The legend of Pygmalion is also in *Metamorphoses* → See n° 56

The genre of the tragicomedy became particularly successful with Giovanni Battista Guarini’s *Il pastor fido* in 1585. See John Fletcher in *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1608): “A tragic-comedie is not so called in respect of mirth and killing, but in respect it wants deaths, which is enough to make it no tragedy, yet brings some neere it, which is inough to make it no comedie.” That seems to apply quite well for example to *Much Ado About Nothing* (a comedy verging on the tragic, where Hero is wrongly accused of being unchaste, like Hermione), but *WT* can be said to be pure tragedy in Acts 1 to 3 and pure comedy in Act 4. → See n° 1

## THE PASTORAL

Descended primarily from Theocritus’ *Idylls* and Virgil’s *Bucolics*, the pastoral was a popular literary genre at the time: see Edmund Spenser’s *Shepherd’s Calender* (1579) and *The Fairy Queen* (1590), Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1590), or Fletcher’s tragicomedy quoted above. Shakespeare had already parodied the pastoral genre in *As You Like It* (c. 1599). → See n° 4, 47 & 57

One main feature of the pastoral is the innocence and purity of the characters — although this is where the parody appears in Act 4 —, the genre being linked with the myth of the Golden Age, or the Garden of Eden in a Christian perspective, and what Northrop Frye called “the green world”, as opposed to the wickedness or sinfulness of modern urban life. → See n° 11, 29, 39, 41–43

## THE POLITICAL DIMENSION: THE ROYAL LINEAGE & AUTHORITY

The play was performed at a royal wedding in 1613, though it was created earlier. In any case, the context is that of Jacobean England: royal succession was not the thorny issue it had been under Elizabeth, for James had several putative heirs, and the continuation of the dynasty seemed assured. This means that the question of the legitimacy of the sovereign and of his offspring (always an issue in any monarchy) could be addressed in a more relaxed way (compare *Hamlet* e.g.). There were nonetheless disagreements between the King and his son, like there are between Polixenes and Florizel: see Introduction p. 16, 47–8.

The idea that a child is a copy of his parent, and allows him or her to live again, is center to Sonnets

1–17 (the “procreation sonnets”, 1609). Here the public and private spheres come together: this joins the issue of dynastic stability with that of resemblance as a token of legitimate birth, an idea expressed repeatedly in the play, for example 1.2.119–21, 206 or 5.1.123 ff.; see the 1583 portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots and her son James. → *See n° 8, 10, 13 & 40*

Almost a decade after Elizabeth I had died, it was now perhaps possible to reflect on the Tudor dynasty, and the establishment of the English Stuarts and its consequences. Some critics have remarked on the possible parallel between Hermione’s trial and those of Catherine of Aragon (1533), Anne Boleyn (1536), or Mary Stuart (1586). It may be worth noting that at the time Sicily was a part of the kingdom of Aragon (in *Much Ado*, the King of Aragon visits Messina, in Sicily), and both Aragon and Bohemia were ruled by Habsburgs. The union of both kingdoms at the end of the play, with Florizel and Perdita’s wedding, could be compared with the Union of the Crowns of Scotland and England in 1603. The religious question may also transpire if one thinks of a possible opposition between Spanish Catholic Aragon and Protestant but tolerant and liberal Bohemia where freedom of religion reigned (this might be even more relevant if, as Stephen Greenblatt suggested, Shakespeare was a crypto-Catholic). → *See n° 30, 45 & 46*



Portrait of Queen Mary and James, 1583

There is also in the play a reflection on royal authority, with Leontes’ being accused of being a tyrant, his denying it and insisting on having “a just and open trial” (3.1.204), the role played by courtly advisers (especially Camillo), or Polixenes’ ruling his son’s love life. Again, this may have to be seen in the light of James’s court and politics. As in many of Shakespeare’s plays (be they histories, comedies, or tragedies), “something is rotten in the kingdom”: the king’s actions put the country in danger — of having no heir to the crown, of falling into tyranny, of loyalty and honesty not being recognised and rewarded; it being a comedy, order will be re-established at the end through a wedding (or several) and the promised accession of the new generation. This civil danger is reflected (as it is in *Hamlet* e.g.) in the permeating lexical field of disease and cure, and on the dislocation of language, reflecting the dislocation of the state, in the beginning of the play: see 1.2.27, 215, 361 etc. → *See n° 1, 2, 3, 5, 10, 14, 23 & 43*

### THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

The Renaissance and early modern age saw the beginning of the scientific revolution, with Francis Bacon as a prominent name in England. This means that major preoccupations of the time (among educated circles at least) were the status of facts and truth, the possibility of knowing anything, the authority to be given to the senses or to doctrine and faith in determining what is true, and the method for reaching knowledge. This is reflected in many of Shakespeare’s plays, where key moments of the plot rely on characters being deceived or deceiving themselves, not knowing what to believe, wondering what or whom to trust, etc.

One striking feature of *WT* from this perspective is the way Leontes convinces himself — out of “nothing”, not even misled by a Iago as Othello is — that Hermione is unfaithful. More generally, the play is characterized by self-fulfilling prophecies and a kind of performative speech: see e.g. Autolycus in 4.4.725ff, or Leontes in 1.2.281ff. See also Mopsa’s naïve remark in 4.4.258–9: “I love a ballad in print [...] for then we are sure they are true.”

On the other hand, some passages insist on the necessity of faith (“awake your faith” 5.3.95), on the truthfulness of the supernatural (the divine word of the oracle, Hermione’s ghost in 3.3), on the importance of following one’s heart (Florizel and Perdita’s love): though not to be trusted blindly, those may be the only bearings one can find to escape generalised suspicion and mistrust when appearances are deceiving. → *See n° 5–7, 9, 11, 21, 24, 25, 28, 33, 44, 50, 51–53*

### THE POWER OF ART: SUBVERTING NATURE AND SOCIETY?

Among the most famous passages of *WT* are the controversy about nature and art in 4.4, and the stage direction “Exit pursued by a bear” (3.3). If the former, picking up a common debate of the time (see Montaigne and Florio’s translation), remains apparently inconclusive, the latter may provide some form of answer by demonstrating the freedom, and power, of the playwright, as do many other elements: the importance of music, the satyrs’ dance, the living statue, the sixteen-year gap between Acts 3 and 4 (and more: already in 2.3.197–8 “twenty-three days / They have been absent”), and arguably the much-derided coast of Bohemia. The play is indeed a “tale” (others can be called a “dream”): the title itself emphasizes the dimension of artifice, fancy, wonder, and entertainment to be found in the play. This might also be a further way to envision the nature of the play as tragicomedy, a mixed genre exploding the constraints of classical forms.

If disguise — in the characters of Autolycus, but also of Florizel and Perdita — and the whole of the shearing feast scene provide wonderful entertainment, they are also part of the carnivalesque dimension of the play (M. Bakhtin): with them, the foundations of social order are overturned, temporarily — both because they are re-established at the end, and because this happens only within the play, which, like the festival of Carnival, works as a cathartic ceremony. → *See n° 9, 12, 15–18, 21, 22, 27–29, 32–35, 38, 46, 48, 54 & 55*

On this level as on the political and philosophical ones, what matters in the end may be not only the **questioning of authority**, but above all the **final reconciliation** that the play, in a dialectic movement, brings about.

### MISCELLANEOUS ADDITIONAL REMARKS

- About the Bear: Ben Jonson’s masque *Oberon* (Jan. 1611) had a chariot drawn by two real polar bears (or polar-bear cubs): it is not altogether impossible that there was initially a genuine bear on stage, rather than a man in a bear suit; see note to 3.3.57.
- In Greek mythology, Hermione is torn between two men, Orestes and Pyrrhus. This is part of the House of Atreus cycle: their curse disappears with Orestes being formally judged.
- Hamnet Shakespeare died in 1596, i.e. approximately sixteen years before the play.
- Leontes, Polixenes, Autolycus... are Greek names: one has to choose one spelling, and pronunciation, of their genitive forms: Leontes’ or Leontes’s, etc.