

From Privilege to Necessity: The Dual Nature of Mobility in The Winter's Tale and Today

Barbora Šedivá

► **To cite this version:**

Barbora Šedivá. From Privilege to Necessity: The Dual Nature of Mobility in The Winter's Tale and Today. 2019. halshs-02324738

HAL Id: halshs-02324738

<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-02324738>

Submitted on 22 Oct 2019

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

From Privilege to Necessity: The Dual Nature of Mobility in *The Winter's Tale* and Today

Barbora Šedivá, Charles University, Prague

The twenty-first century might be described as the age of mobility. If we approach the term in its literal meaning as a geographical displacement, we will observe that the members of our society are constantly on the move. However, there are different kinds of mobility and not all people travel for the same reasons. Generally speaking, there are two kinds of mobility – one driven by interest, the other by compulsion. While some people travel in order to visit exotic places and learn about distant cultures, others are driven on the road to escape from danger and to save their lives. The first kind of mobility is enabled by privilege and freedom of movement, the second by necessity and the lack of freedom. The former focuses on arrival, the latter on departure. People with the desire and the means to travel do so with the vision of eventually returning back home. Those, who run away from their homes for salvation, can only hope to find a new home somewhere else.

Both of these kinds of mobility are represented in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*. Although the conditions of traveling are vastly different from our own, the characters in this play experience similar reasons for mobility as we might encounter today. Polixenes, the King of Bohemia, travels to Sicilia in order to pay a visit to his friend King Leontes. Due to a sudden change of circumstances, his visit ends prematurely and Polixenes needs to escape the country in order to save his life. Similarly, but contrariwise, his son Florizel is driven from Bohemia in order to save his marriage and, through a sudden revelation of some hidden facts, his refuge in Sicilia turns into a pleasant visit. In this way, the contrary movements of these two characters reflect the two kinds of mobility present in our own age. It is, therefore, still relevant to read Shakespeare, for his plays often provide a valuable commentary on

contemporary issues. In this particular case, I am going to show how *The Winter's Tale* presents the way in which a simple change of circumstances might result in the transformation of mobility from something pleasant to something imperative, from privilege to necessity.

In his lecture entitled “Des Espaces Autres”¹ (Of Other Spaces) delivered in March 1967, the French philosopher Michel Foucault suggested that as opposed to the nineteenth century, which had been marked by its obsession with history, the subject of the present age would be space. While before, the emphasis was on the development of events on a temporal scale, today we are more interested in the spatial experience of reality. However, what we need to be focusing on is the combination of these two dimensions, for there is an inevitable link between them. As Foucault observed, “space itself has a history in Western experience, and it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space.”² In this essay, I will observe the role of this intersection and its representation through the theme of mobility in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale*.

As a spatial transformation enabled by temporal progression, mobility might serve as one of the most vital expressions of the intersection of the time and space. Over the course of its plot, *The Winter’s Tale* observes many mobile developments that propel the action and influence the timespan. It is precisely through movement that most of the events in the play are initiated and the plot moves forward. This strategy is not, of course, exclusive to this particular play, as it was often employed by previous literary texts. In fact, the merging of

¹ This text, entitled “Des Espaces Autres,” and published by the French journal *Architecture Mouvement Continuité* in October, 1984, was the basis of a lecture given by Michel Foucault in March 1967. Although not reviewed for publication by the author and thus not part of the official corpus of his work, the manuscript was released into the public domain for an exhibition in Berlin shortly before Michel Foucault’s death. Translated from the French by Jay Miskowiec.

² Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22, Foucault.info <<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>> 22 July 2019.

time and space and its reflection in movement was used both as a theme and as a vehicle of plot development in literature ever since ancient times.

This representation was most famously described by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin. By observing the intersection of time and space in its fictional representation, Bakhtin opened up a field of research that has been considered relevant in our discourse ever since. He applied the term “chronotope” (from the Russian *хроноτοп*, a portmanteau of the Greek words *χρόνος*, meaning “time,” and *τόπος*, “space”) to refer to “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature.”³ According to Bakhtin, the chronotope plays a significant role in the definition of literary genres; it is, in fact, the main defining factor in generic distinctions. He recognizes several different types of chronotopes, among which the one involving the act of taking to the road could be considered the paramount one. “The importance of the chronotope of the road in literature is immense,” Bakhtin asserts, “it is a rare work that does not contain a variation of this motif, and many words are directly constructed on the road chronotope, and on road meetings and adventures.”⁴

The Winter’s Tale is precisely one of these works of literature that incorporates the chronotope of the road as the main driving force of the plot. Whether physical or imaginary, the theme of journey and movement seem to govern this play. While the two chief locations, Sicilia and Bohemia, are hardly described with any degree of geographical accuracy, they function more as symbolic spaces endowed with exotic quality and characterized by spatial separation and cultural estrangement. It is the ceaseless movement between these two spaces that propels the action of the plot. This is not, however, any haphazard kind of movement. In

³ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel,” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981) 84.

⁴ Bakhtin 98.

fact, most of the geographical displacements undertaken by the characters in the play have their own designs and they acquire certain significance within the plot. It is for this reason that we describe the present kind of motion as mobility rather than a simple movement, employing the distinction introduced by Tim Cresswell in his influential study of mobility in the modern west.

According to Cresswell, “mobility is central to what it is to be human. It is a fundamental geographical facet of existence.”⁵ Considering this prominence of mobility in our culture, it is quite baffling that the term itself should have been present in critical discourse for so long without being properly defined. It was only a decade ago, in 2006, that Cresswell’s influential study provided the definition of mobility as it is understood in contemporary theory. According to his now-familiar formula, mobility is the realization of movement equipped with meaning and power. In other words, the difference between simple movement and mobility is that the latter has “been given meaning within contexts of social and cultural power.”⁶ Since there is no inherent value in movement, it is only through society and culture that it becomes mobility; “its meaning is created in a constant process of cultural give and take.”⁷

This is precisely the case with all the geographical dislocations in *The Winter’s Tale*. Since the movement between Sicilia and Bohemia is always driven by certain purpose and endowed by cultural or social significance, it should be understood as mobility in our present comprehension of the term as suggested by Cresswell. The play itself begins with a situation brought about by such mobility. It is the trip of king Polixenes to the kingdom of his friend

⁵ Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006) 1.

⁶ Cresswell 2.

⁷ Tim Cresswell, “Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac’s *On the Road*,” *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 18.2 (1993): 253, JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/622366>> 12 Feb 2019.

Leontes, which takes place before the play's opening scene and which sets in motion the dynamics of the plot. The social function of this trip has many layers. It is not only a friendly visit paid by the king of Bohemia to his lifelong acquaintance, the king of Sicilia, but also the performance and consolidation of a relationship between the two kingdoms. In this sense, the figure of the head of the nation serves as a metonymy for the nation as a whole. This is demonstrated in the official quality of the language used by the two kings, as well as in the way they are referenced in the speech of others.

The short opening scene witnesses this kind of reference in the dialogue between Camillo, a lord of Sicilia, and Archidamus, a lord of Bohemia. When talking about the kings, Camillo makes the following observation: "Sicilia cannot show *himself* over-kind to Bohemia... [emphasis mine]."⁸ The use of the highlighted pronoun "himself" betrays the actual referent of "Sicilia," which is not the country as such but rather the king. At the same time, the body of the king serves as a representation of the whole nation and all of his acts are to be interpreted on a national level. The mobility of king Polixenes from Bohemia to Sicilia thus acquires even a greater degree of significance precisely for it is to be understood as a symbolic movement of the kingdom as a whole.

The peaceful visit is suddenly interrupted by mobility of a different kind. It is the inner motion of thought in king Leontes's mind that gives way to a new series of incidents leading up to Polixenes' eventual departure from Sicilia. The internal movement thus becomes reflected in the external dynamics of the play. Although it remains unclear what gave Leontes the reason for his abrupt change of thought, this spiritual kind of mobility nevertheless plays an important role in the development of the plot. The result of this inner motion is the presumed infidelity of Leontes's wife and Polixenes' alleged betrayal. The

⁸ *The Winter's Tale* I, i, 20–21.

friendly status of the relationship between the two kingdoms is disrupted and Polixenes' own life is put in danger. In this way, the pleasant visit turns into a troubling situation, the only solution of which is another mobility, a physical one this time – a flight.

Polixenes' departure from Sicilia is followed by yet another, less observed, kind of mobility. It is the removal of Leontes's newborn daughter, who is deemed to be his wife's illegitimate child and whose presence at the court is thus seen as undesirable. This occurrence concludes the first half of the play and sets the stage for the events of the second one. These will come to mirror the incidents of the first half, especially as regards mobility. The two parts are separated by a passage of time, sixteen years to be precise, during which period the mobility between the two kingdoms is halted along with any significant events shaping the plot. The second half of *The Winter's Tale* begins with happenings that soon call for another mobility.

Although physical movement has been on pause for sixteen years, there was yet another kind of mobility that took place during this passage of time. It was the motion of growth and personal development, especially in the case of Perdita, the daughter of king Leontes. Brought up far from her birthplace – in a shepherd's house in the land of Bohemia – Perdita grew up to be a beautiful young woman, whose evolution as a human being had a profound effect on the subsequent events in the play. As Florizel, the prince of Bohemia, finds himself in love with the young princess, whose royal status is yet unknown, his father Polixenes is faced with a new challenge – how to deal with a situation that might result in his son marrying bellow his social class?

When Polixenes finds out about his son's objective of marrying Perdita, a similar kind of inner motion takes place in his mind that characterized the previous change of thought in king Leontes. Although this transformation is much more justified and understandable than

the former one, the result is virtually the same: another need for physical mobility, again in the form of a flight. Similar to Polixenes himself in the first half of the play, Florizel is now forced to leave the country in order to save what is dear to him – the prospect of his marriage with the love of his life. Interestingly enough, Florizel finds refuge where, many years before, his father found a threat to his life – at the court of king Leontes. The distressing conditions of Florizel's parting with Polixenes and the escape to the kingdom of Sicilia are, fortunately, not to last long.

Soon after their arrival to Sicilia, Florizel and his bride are delivered from their predicament by the revelation of Perdita's real origin and social status. After many years of hostility between the two kingdoms, Leontes's error is brought to light and the friendly relation between Sicilia and Bohemia is allowed to resume. The marriage of Florizel and Perdita serves to foster this relationship and secure its positive future course. In order to give this event a proper share of attention and celebrate the happy conclusion of all events, the last instance of mobility brings king Polixenes and Camillo on the scene, and the reunion of the two kingdoms is thus complete. The end of the play brings us to the same geographical location where we started and the joyous meeting of the two kings is again described through the words of secondary characters rather than being displayed directly on stage. Polixenes and Leontes are again referred to as representatives of their kingdoms and their encounter is depicted by one of the witnesses as the happiest of all occurrences.

In my analyses of the theme of mobility in *The Winter's Tale*, I have shown the way in which movement, both physical and spiritual, acquires social and cultural significance within the play and contributes to the development of the plot. What I am going to argue in the following section of the present study is that not only does movement acquire meaning in the

context of the play's dynamics but this meaning also rises in importance when perceived in relation to our contemporary age.

Mobility has been an essential part of western culture for centuries. In order to emphasize this relevance, I am going to borrow from Ingrid Horrocks, who, in her observance of literary texts at the turn of the nineteenth century, distinguished the traveler as “the emblematic modern subject.”⁹ With the contemporary, tourism-driven nature of our society, the importance of traveling and mobility seems only to have increased. However, it is not only the touristic endeavors that provoke movements in the twenty-first century. Just as I have described in the introduction, the current migrant crises in Europe shows that there are, in fact, other kinds of motivations for mobility. These are not, however, exclusive to our present age. Although the migrant crises might be described as a contemporary issue, mobility as a means of escape and salvation was always present in our society. This might be demonstrated by the use of *if* as a theme in many works of literature, including Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

In the following discussion of the play's events in relation to the present age, I will desist from comparing the situation of Shakespeare's characters to that of the modern refugees, for that would not only be historically inaccurate but also gravely disrespectful and underestimating in terms of the latter's situation. Instead, I am going to point out some of the instances within the play that might make the modern reader aware of the thin line between mobility as a privilege and as a necessity. As the play shows, the need to take to the road for the purpose of refuge does not necessarily befall people in distressful economic or social situations. In fact, it is the members of the royal family itself that experience the need to escape their predicaments in *The Winter's Tale*.

⁹ Ingrid Horrocks, *Women Wanderers and the Writing of Mobility, 1784–1814* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) 67.

The beginning of the play witnesses the king of Bohemia enjoying his visit in a distant land, a situation one might perceive in terms of his royal privilege. However, a slight change of circumstances soon drives even the king himself back on the road. While his trip to Sicilia was endowed with positive prospects of his stay abroad, the expeditious return home acquires the character of an escape one would hardly associate with a king. The situation of his son in the second half of the play is different in that Florizel has no home to escape *to*. Instead, he needs to escape *from* home if he wants to remain true to his principles. In this way, although he is the prince of Bohemia and his domestic situation is thus hardly in danger, Florizel finds his own concerns that challenge the peaceful quality of his dwelling in Bohemia and drive the young prince into exile. Neither the king's nor his son's relationship to home or the road should be thus taken for granted. The nature of their mobility is constantly affected and shaped by the physical and imaginary movements of others around them and the privileges afforded by their social status are not always sufficient in determining their motivation for traveling.

If social conditions were not ample to secure a stable role of mobility in one's life already in the Early Modern period, nor should they be considered so today – in an age defined by a much greater degree of uncertainty and transience. What I am trying to achieve in this study is to point out the volatile status of our present approach to mobility and to reemphasize the need for compassion with those who do not possess the same privileges in this field as we do. Whereas mobility remains an attractive option for the majority in the modern western world, there are many subjects throughout Europe, as well as the rest of the world, for whom physical displacement and permanent departure from home forms an unavoidable condition of survival. The first step towards assisting these people in their struggles is the ability to understand their situation and sympathize with their hardships.

While reading Shakespeare's plays will not by itself solve the migrant crises that Europe is currently facing, it might raise awareness of the conditions surrounding mobility in general as well as the unstable nature of our own relationship to movement.

Mobility is an issue, the significance of which in our culture has been constantly on the rise. Instead of promoting the freedom of movement for certain segments of society while denying it to others, we should interrogate the motives behind global migration and consider the fragile relationship between mobility as a privilege and as a necessity. Reading the works of the Early Modern period might prove extremely helpful in this endeavor, for it gives us different perspectives on this issue and forces us to reconsider our own standpoint. If reading is an exercise in critical thinking, as it is commonly deemed to be today, and mobility a pervasive thematic concern in literature, as it has been ever since its earliest manifestations, then approaching texts such as *The Winter's Tale* can only bear fruit. Through the analyses of the meaning and function of movement in this particular play, I have shown that the status of mobility in the lives of individuals is rather unstable. What we might learn from the overseas voyages of king Polixenes and his son is that the privilege of voluntary mobility enjoyed by the majority of the modern western world is not to be taken for granted, for all our trips might at any point turn into flights.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

Cresswell, Tim. "Mobility as Resistance: A Geographical Reading of Kerouac's *On the Road*." *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 18.2 (1993): 249–262. JSTOR <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/622366>> Accessed 12 Feb 2019.



New Faces essay collection, Barbora Šedivá, September 2019

_____. *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World*. New York and London: Routledge, 2006.

Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces." Translated by Jay Miskowiec. *Diacritics* 16 (1986): 22–7. Foucault.info <<http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>> Accessed 22 July 2019.

Horrocks, Ingrid. *Women Wanderers and the Writing of Mobility, 1784–1814*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Shakespeare, William. *The Winter's Tale* (1623). The Arden Shakespeare. Edited by J. H. P. Pafford. London: Routledge, 2000.