

TEMPEST

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The Tempest by Shakespeare

Story *The Tempest*, composed in 1610-11, is the last play composed by Shakespeare alone, and moves into new waters—a kind of metaphysical comedy—which take the author into visionary imagination.

It is a magician, Prospero, who becomes the central figure, isolated and exiled as he is, due to the machinations of his jealous brother. He is accompanied with his at the time 3-year old daughter, Miranda, some fine linens, and books. On the island he finds only two beings, the sprite Ariel, whom Prospero releases from a tree—his evil witch mom, Sycorax, had imprisoned him there—and a brutish monster, Caliban, the son of the witch Sycorax. Caliban was given an elementary education by Prospero and Miranda, while he in return taught Prospero how to survive on the island. Gradually a dynamic builds on the island: Caliban grows to resent Prospero, as a usurper. Something has to happen, to break the tension.

It happens. Prospero, with his magical insight, divines that a ship, carrying his treacherous brother, is passing along the coast, and he creates the illusion of a tempest, so powerful that the passengers on board ship feel they have been shipwrecked and abandoned. Alonso, friend to Prospero's brother, and Ferdinand, Alonso's son, are separated, neither knowing where the other is.

From this point on, the play splits into three parts, all of which will, of course, be poetically bound together at the end, when Antonio and his fellow plotters are pardoned for have plotted to take the island from Prospero, when love has brought Ferdinand and Miranda together, and when Caliban has been pardoned for drunken friendships and plots of various kinds. In other words, we are working toward a complex resolution, in which Prospero, who dominates the play, decides to abandon his magic and to tell the story of his life. He has in bringing about this resolution made what is still quite a magical, wrap-up of complexities.

Scrutinizing those three 'complexities' shines a light on the intelligence Shakespeare's imagination brings to working out his plays. Shakespeare knows what to do with the problems he invents. Caliban, the brute, has to do his thing, try to overthrow Prospero, be chastened and then led partway to civilization. Antonio, Prospero's evil brother, and two other 'shipwrecked' malfeasants, attempt to overthrow Prospero, but are thwarted and tamed by Ariel, acting at Prospero's command. And, the richest element in the wrap-up, Ferdinand and Miranda are brought fascinatingly together, weaving between them the most meaningful theme of the play, which is of course partly involved with the split between magic and reality.

Love at first sight is part of the miracle of the meeting of these two youngsters. Miranda, who has been raised since infancy by a mysterious old magician, her dad Prospero, has never before seen anything like a living guy, and Shakespeare devotes his highest brilliance to portraying the immediate feelings of Miranda for this masculine radiance. (The feelings are mutual; Miranda exceeds, for Ferdinand, anything he has ever seen in feminine innocence.) Ariel, himself magical, mysterious, and mischievous, is deputed by Prospero to tame the ocean weathers, so that the once shipwrecked vessel can make it safely back to Naples, where Ferdinand and Miranda will be married. With this wrap up the gauzy tale, spun from the imagination, vanishes in and of itself, in thin air and the audience's applause.

Characters

Prospero is a quixotic old magician, with great fidelity to his beloved daughter, lasting scorn for his treacherous brother, and a great sense of showmanship. It is he, we have to think, who has imagined the whole tale about his own magical imagination.

Miranda is Prospero's daughter, who has been with him on the island since she was three years old. She sees her first real human when her father creates the tempest-shipwreck; she is overwhelmed by the beauty of Ferdinand. Of course all she has seen, to that date, is her Father, Ariel, and the beastly Caliban.

Caliban is the half human half monster, suppressed by Prospero—once the beast had tried to rape Miranda—who knows not only brutishness, but the magical sounds of silence and bird cries on the island.

Themes

Reality The play's chief theme is the split between imagination and magic, on the one hand, and reality, the reality of Caliban, Antonio, or even Ferdinand, on the other. Prospero is the showman of the play, and determines its direction, by his magical actions. Inside the magic, and Shakespeare speaks to us here, is the reality, often rough, which calls on magic to elevate it.