

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Shakespeare

MIRANDA (Agreeable)

Overview Prior to the tempest itself, which Prospero creates in order to exercise his sorcery, and to begin reclaiming his 'rightful dukedom,' Prospero and his young daughter Miranda have been the only living mortals on 'the island.' While Prospero is a bookish man, he is fully acquainted with the world and its politics, but Miranda has never had contact with that world, and, as we soon see, still has only a foggy sense of her own identity. She is well aware of her human condition, however, and upon introduction to the first man (male) of her own age, she is blinded by the young man's handsome appearance. Hence the inception of what will be a marriage fruitful for the characters of the entire play.

Character Miranda, a young teen ager at the play's outset, is all about curiosity—of who she is and who her father is, and of their present situation. When asked by her father whether she would like to hear her whole story, she replies: 'your tale, sir, would cure deafness.' She is astounded by what she learns, of her noble lineage—in Naples—of her father's banishment. Just as she is to inquire into the tempest which has shaken the island, Prospero turns his attention to the shipwreck itself, and sends her off to a benign sleep. The next amazement to awaken Miranda will be the first sight she has of a guy—a supremely handsome guy in her unpracticed eyes—her age mate Ferdinand, the son of the King of Naples, who has been complicit in the plot to banish Prospero.

Compassionate When first we meet Prospero and Miranda, we are in the initial shock of the tempest itself. Miranda has no idea that the tempest itself has been an action of sorcery on her father's part, and that in fact no one has been hurt in this fantasy. 'O I have suffered with those that I saw suffer,' she blurts out to her father, who then replies that 'I have done nothing but in care of thee.' What he means, we suppose Miranda cannot imagine. We know that the rescuing of Ferdinand from seeming drowning will be one of the achievements of Prospero, an achievement which will redound to Miranda's benefit.

Apologetic As Prospero unfolds, to Miranda, the story of her birth and childhood, and the account of his own widowhood, Miranda is taken with pity for the labors she has laid on her father. When he recounts the way in which he was thrown out of his dukedom, and escaped with his crying baby, Miranda, she cries 'Alack, for pity! I, not remembering how I cried out then, will cry it over again.' So compassionate is the young lady that she begs forgiveness for the childhood faults she committed—as she sees it—against her father. 'Alack, what trouble was I then to you!'

Defensive When Ferdinand first approaches Prospero, following the magic sounds of Ariel, Prospero mock-threatens Ferdinand with imprisonment as a traitor, and duly notes the sharp defensive tone Miranda takes, in support of this young man she has seen for the first time. 'O dear father, make not too rash a trial of him, for he's gentle and not fearful.' 'Beseech you, father.' Clinging to her father's garments, Miranda begs for clement treatment for this Ferdinand, of whom all she knows is that 'there's nothing ill that dwells in such a temple.' Ferdinand, meanwhile, is firmly bespelled by the magic of Ariel, and cannot protest for himself

Modest Prospero teases the beseeching Miranda, saying that the only two male beings she has seen are Caliban and Ferdinand. He adds, teasingly, that most mortal men are as superior to Ferdinand as Ferdinand is to Caliban. Her response is spot on: 'my affections then most humble. I have no ambition to see a godlier man.' Miranda then addresses Ferdinand himself, assuring him that her father is of a generally genial temper, and surely cannot mean what he is saying at the moment. At that Prospero reassures his daughter, and we feel certain that the love at first sight, which has enfolded the couple, will prevail to the general good.

Parallels In classical literature, especially in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, love at first sight—the love of Miranda for Ferdinand—is common, and easily packaged into the metaphor of cupid's darts, which strike a passionate wound into the lover. This kind of love at first sight can also strike the isolated individual—as with Narcissus, who in Ovid's account falls directly in love with his own mirror image in the water. In the

Renaissance, these ancient conceits were regularly reworked, as by Christopher Marlowe and Shakespeare both of whom formulated the notion 'whoever loved that loved not at first sight?'

Discussion questions

Miranda falls for Ferdinand while she is still in a 'state of nature.' Why does Prospero, when it comes to the marriage of the two youngsters, insist so firmly on chastity and church discipline?

What triggers Miranda's immediate fascination with Ferdinand? Is she simply following human instinct? Or is he of unusual merit and beauty?

Is Prospero a tease, as well as a loving father? Why does he pretend to Miranda that he is taking Ferdinand prisoner?