

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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Themes in Shakespeare

## Prospero (Open)

**Overview** Prospero is 'the right duke of Milan' in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, which is to say that he has been seditiously replaced by his brother Sebastian. Sebastian, profiting from the bookish and withdrawn nature of his brother, has arranged to undermine his brother's rule, and to banish him into exile. As we enter the drama, Prospero and his daughter Miranda, who have been stranded for over ten years on an exile island, gather that a ship is passing, on which ride, among others, Prospero's evil brother and the King of Naples, compliant with the plot to eliminate Prospero. The tempest is the total chaos brought down upon the travelers, as Prospero—an angry and effective sorcerer—calls all hell down onto the passers by.

**Character** Prospero is bookish and a sorcerer—a blend of traits common enough in mediaeval European (and other) mythologies of high personal effectiveness. (One thinks of the whole Faust theme, of Merlin, or of Euripides' Medea.) The books that are his life are, we presume, those which enact a drama of magic chaos on a largely unwitting boatload of travelers. The culmination of Prospero's fantasy is to protect and marry off his lovely daughter, Miranda, who luckily finds her first sight of man in the handsome Fernando, son of the King of Naples. Reclaiming his own usurped power, Prospero nonetheless exercises mercy and reconciliation, in the end, toward the fellow performers in Shakespeare's fantasy.

**Paternal** Prospero's daughter, Miranda, is at the play's opening just entering the life stage, early teens, when she wants to know who she is and where she came from. Prospero explains carefully: 'I have done nothing but in care of thee, my dear one, thee, my daughter, who art ignorant of what thou art, naught knowing of whence I am...' Whereupon, Prospero proceeds to explain his background and banishment, his life in his island cave, the motives behind the tempest, and finally to confirm that her birth was noble. But dad pushes farther, asking Miranda: 'what seest thou else in the dark backward and abysm of time?'

**Resentful** Prospero explains to Miranda the dirty conspiracy launched against him by his brother, Antonio, 'the usurping Duke of Milan.' He points out that the King of Naples, 'being an enemy to me inveterate,' has worked in collusion with Antonio, Prospero's brother, 'to extirpate me and mine out of the dukedom...' The account culminates in a description of 'a treacherous army' levied, which in the dead of night snatched away Prospero 'and thy crying self,' Miranda, in a basic coup d'état kidnapping. Fortunately Prospero was beloved of his people, so that an assassination attempt was out of the question, and the most Antonio could do was to put his victims out to sea in a rickety boat.

**Ceremonial** Though deeply fond of his daughter, Miranda, Prospero agrees to let her wed the first man she has seen, the very Fernando, son of the King of Naples, who has been washed ashore by the tempest, and who has never seen such pure beauty as Miranda herself. The couple are thrilled to have this blessing, but note with care the extreme importance Prospero puts on chastity in marriage: he warns Fernando not to 'break her virgin knot before such sanctimonious ceremonies may with full and holy rite be ministered...' To which Fernando replies that his 'honor will never melt into lust...' 'to take away the edge of that day's celebration.'

**Philosophical** As the play nears its end, Prospero grows more explicit about the kind of world the 'world of the tempest' is and has been. 'Our revels now are ended,' he explains to Fernando and Miranda, and 'these our actors were all spirits, and are melted into air...and shall dissolve and, like this insubstantial pageant faded, leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.' The principal magician folds up his creative carpet of magic, and compares it to art itself, which is both the place where we invest our deepest reality, and a field of insubstantial dreams.

**Parallels** From Medea to Merlin,—a Welsh sorcerer and mage in the 12th century Welsh hinterland, and at the Court of Arthur—the figure who tinkers with black arts has been of consistent interest to high

literature. The imagination required of the artistic creator resembles—in certain surface ways, at least—the prestidigitator required of the sorcerer. Prospero, sorcerer par excellence, is at the same time the supreme artist; ‘we are such stuff as dreams are made on’ is an unsurpassed formulation of the world seen by a great dramatist, who has conjured up a palette of ‘characters’ out of nothing, and revels in their momentary presence.

### **Discussion questions**

Does Prospero eventually overcome his bitterness toward his usurping brother? What kind of harmony does he attempt to use, as a replacement for conflict?

Prospero is very demanding in the pre-marital moral code he requires of Fernando and Miranda. Does this severity fit with other aspects of Prospero’s character?

Is Prospero abusive in his attitude toward Caliban? Is Prospero insensitive to the brutish pathos of Caliban’s condition?