

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Themes in Shakespeare

FERDINAND (in *Tempest*) (Open)

Overview Ferdinand is son to the King of Naples in Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and is thus by implication on the side which is plotting against Prospero, to remove him from his rightful Dukedom. Significantly, however, Ferdinand himself becomes simple collateral damage to the tempest and shipwreck which Prospero works on the passing crew and sailing party. When the surviving boating party assembles, ragged and beat up on the shore of Prospero's island, Ferdinand staggers away from the wreck, and sets off the benign events by which he discovers and finally marries the lovely Miranda, Prospero's daughter. Ferdinand is open to the new, in all its glory.

Character Ferdinand comes on shipwrecked and dazed, from the start, for he has been lost from the other victims of Prospero's storm, is presumed dead, and has no idea (of course) of what kind of act of prestidigitation has just hit him. It is in this dazed condition that he comes on Miranda—to whom his initial words are 'O you wonder! If you be maid nor no?' Miranda shyly helps Fernando to self-orient, and the tale of love is opened which will lead by play's end to a beautiful marriage of the two young people, a marriage which includes within it the rejoining of the fractured conflicts of the Kingdom of Naples. Ferdinand himself is all about youth and the discovery of the beauty woman brings into the world.

Bewildered Survivor of a dreadful shipwreck—or so the tempest seemed to its victims—Ferdinand wanders over Prospero's island in search of clues and humanity. On this search he comes first on Prospero's daughter, Miranda. He addresses her with amazement. Do you live on this island, he asks her, and then, 'if you be maid or no.' He is in an Adamic state, as if rediscovering the world he has so nearly lost. This is a dominant mode for Ferdinand, throughout the play—a discoverer, open to the world.

Enchanted Following his confusion across the island, Ferdinand is enchanted by the music of Ariel, the sprite employed by Prospero to manipulate the living puppets of his sorcery. 'Where should this music be? In the air or the earth?' expostulates Ferdinand, as the sprite leads the potentially lovestruck young man toward Prospero's cave. So bespelled is Ferdinand that he knows not whether he is being led or is following. In another part of the island, of course, the remainder of the shipwrecked victims are already bemoaning what they take to be the premature drowning of the heir to Naples' throne.

Lovestruck All his confusion, his panic and uncertainty, seem to Ferdinand light burdens, 'might I but through my prison once a day behold this maid.' In other words, he is struck by a super case of love at first sight! He is imprisoned in the view of such loveliness. 'All corners else o the earth let liberty make use of, space enough have I in such a prison.' In the background we hear Prospero chuckling with pleasure, at the successful development of the love-matching plan he is unfolding with his sorcery. As for Ferdinand, he is in the bliss of first love, and couldn't care less.

Confessional At the opening of Act 3, Miranda has made clear to Ferdinand that she is totally lovestruck by him. The hyperbole of his reaction is unsurpassed. 'The very instant that I saw you did my heart fly to your service, there resides, to make me slave to it...' 'I beyond all limit of what else i the world, do love, prize, honor you...' We read this as the ultimate in love at first sight, but also as the geopolitical trick Prospero is playing on his own personal history, weaving together through sorcery a plan to bring himself once again into his rightful place as Duke of Naples.

Parallels The beautiful and beguiled male lover is nowhere more fatally described than in Euripides' *Hippolytus*. While it is true that Hippolytus is drawn to guys, he seems destined to be drawn into the fatal orbits of female passion, and to have been led, as fatefully as Ferdinand by Ariel's tunes, toward an inescapable entanglement with the female. Dante, in the *Vita Nuova* describing the passion which drew him to the pre-pubertal Beatrice, portrays the male psyche helplessly enraptured by the carnal spirituality of the female—a bewildering infatuation, in this instance, which interweaves female beauty with the sublimely seductive vision of the (pre-pubertal) Virgin Mary, who irradiates the entire *Commedia* from her post at the summit of *Paradiso*.

Discussion questions

Has Ferdinand a distinctive character of his own, or is he simply an archetype of the love struck stripling?

What is Prospero's attitude toward the Ferdinand he is ordering Ariel to lead across the island, to the headquarters cave? Is Prospero himself fascinated? Vengeful?

What draws Ferdinand to Miranda? While she is seeing her first man, and is understandably astonished, he admits to having been fascinated by other women. What is so special about Miranda?