

Themes in Shakespeare

ARIEL (in *Tempest*) (Agreeable)

Overview Ariel serves as a cheerful, earthy, volatile factotum for Prospero, the banished Duke in charge of the island on which Shakespeare's *The Tempest* takes place. The backstory is that Ariel was initially imprisoned in a tree, on the island of *The Tempest*, by the foul mom of Caliban, Sycorax. (Thus, an elegant and volatile sprite, boxed in by a clumsy and brutal dam). Ariel is released from this imprisonment by Prospero, who is shipwrecked on the island, and exercises his magic powers on all the elements of this new domain. Ariel becomes the principal aide and spiritual stimulant to Prospero, as he copes with his domain.

Character Ariel is a sprightly earth figure volatile as the air, and forever there to intercede—in Shakespeare's play—on behalf of his less dexterous master, Prospero. Having been entombed in a tree, prior to being freed by Prospero, Ariel shimmers with energy on his release, and is forever popping up where he can assist his master. Interestingly enough, though, that assistance is capricious, as is Ariel; and keeps Prospero himself on his toes. Ariel brings his fanciful surprising presence in the forms of music and fluttering proximity, somewhere, one might say, between a butterfly and a humming bird.

Hurrah! In Act I, scene ii, Ariel greets his master for the first time in the play. 'All hail, great master. Grave sir, hail! I come to answer thy best pleasure, be't to fly, to swim, to dive into the fire, to ride on the curled clouds, to thy strong bidding task Ariel and all his quality.' One sees what a polymorphous form Ariel is, and how much more a sprite than a human she is. The inherent gift for magic, in Prospero himself, makes him a god-born kin to the carrier out of magic impulses, which Ariel is.

Chaos Immediately after the introductory passage, above (I, ii) Prospero asks Ariel whether he has carried out his commission, to create the tempest with which the play opens. Ariel then proceeds to a very graphic description of the chaos he brought down on the ship he turned topsy turvy: 'I flamed amazement; sometimes I'd divide and burn in many places, to the topmast, the yards and bowsprit, ' and make the seas swell with turmoil. Neptune's 'dread trident' shook in the uproar of the chaos. Which elicits Prospero's praise, for a confusion which would 'infect' anyone's reason.

Wordsmith In Act 2, expostulating with Prospero, Ariel deploys his wonderful word and music power, to lead and trick Fernando, the son of the Duke of Naples, who has been separated from his shipmates in the course of the great shipwreck. 'Weeping again the king my father's death, this music crept by me upon the waters,' murmurs Fernando, responding to the musical magic of the hovering and flitting Ariel. Of Fernando's father, drowned for all the young man knows, Ariel plays 'full fathom five thy father lies, of his bones are coral made, those are pearls that were his eyes...' and onward into volleys of enchanted song that bewilder the hearer.

Policeman Three varlets, a drunken butler, a jester, flotsam from the shipwrecked boat; all these wlfie, deposited on Prospero's once enchanted isle, but the de facto Ruler of the Isle turns to Ariel to discombobulate these nobodies. Ariel carries out the police assignment with gusto. 'So I charmed their ears, that, calflike they my lowing followed through toothed briers, sharp furzes, pricking goss, and thorns which entered their frail shins.' In the end, Ariel deposited the team of varlet in a filthy pool, wretched scum lodged not far from Prospero's cell. Dainty, frilly, musical, Ariel is at the same time a strongman who can enforce the toughest needs his boss can invent.

Parallels Ariel serves as a symbol sprite for Milton and perhaps, far earlier, for the Biblical writers of the book of Enoch, and for Gnostic spiritual writers. (One sees the volatile spirituality of this half-human creature, at various points in the early mythography of Judeo-Christian thought). In contemporary thought, Ariel has functioned vigorously in Latin American dramas by Jose Rodo (*Ariel*, 1900) and Fernando Retamar (*Caliban*, 1971). Both writers consider, though from complex and varying angles, the meaning of Ariel as a prisoner of Colonialism—Ariel was imprisoned in a tree, then, on different conditions, promised

freedom by Prospero. The argument of anti-colonialism, and its Latin American twist, is eloquently spun by reflections on the nature and fate of Ariel.

Discussion questions

Does Ariel represent some kind of joyful and effective release from constraint—the constraint he will have been trapped in as the prisoner of a tree?

Does Prospero deal as a conqueror or a friend with Ariel? How does Prospero dangle the promise of 'freedom' over Ariel?

Is Ariel above all a musician? How does Ariel describe the effects of music, in discussing the varlets he beguiled in Act. 4, sc. i; ll.175-180)?