

William Shakespeare's The Tempest

Author's biography

William Shakespeare, born in April 1564, was an actor and a writer in a successful theatrical company in London, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which performed his plays. He was also part owner of the Globe, an outdoor theatre across the river Thames from London. After Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603, King James I further legitimized the company and changed its name to the King's Men. Shakespeare published most of his work from 1594 to 1613. He wrote *The Tempest* around 1611, which was also the year of its first performance—for King James I. The play is considered by most scholars to be the last play that Shakespeare wrote by himself (he may have contributed to other authors' plays). By the time Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest*, he had written dozens of plays of varying types: histories, comedies, and tragedies. In his later years he wrote a number of works that contained both tragic and comedic features but didn't fully fall into either category, which are now called his "romances," and *The Tempest* was his final one. Many scholars believe that through the character of the magician Prospero in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare gave his own farewell to the theatre. Like Prospero, Shakespeare used the powers of his own art to create other worlds.

Summary

Traveling from Africa to Italy, a ship faces a terrible storm. On-board is Alonso, the king of Naples, who has just married his daughter to the king of Tunis. Although the sailors become frustrated by the interference of the nobles above deck, all are desperate to reach safety.

Meanwhile on the shore of an island, the magician Prospero and his daughter Miranda watch the ship being tossed and turned in the storm. The two have been stranded on the island for 12 years since their escape from Milan when Prospero was deposed by his traitorous brother, Antonio, and forced to leave the city. Prospero reveals that his brother and other enemies who exiled him are the very men on board the ship. It becomes clear Prospero has used his magic to orchestrate the storm and the events that will follow in order to exact revenge. He has Ariel separate those on board into three groups: the nobles, Ferdinand, and the "comics" Trinculo and Stephano.

Prospero has two servants, the first of whom is a spirit named Ariel, who has been promised freedom in two days. The loyal Ariel can also perform magic and is sent to spy on the shipwrecked men. Prospero's other servant, Caliban, is a "monster like" man, the son of a terrible witch, Sycorax, whom Prospero

defeated when he came to the island. Taught language by Prospero, Caliban has used none of his knowledge for good and perpetually curses his master.

Ferdinand, the son of King Alonso, has been saved from the storm, but he reaches the island alone. He is certain the rest of the ship's passengers have drowned. As soon as he and Miranda see each other they fall in love. Although this is part of Prospero's plan, he pretends to be hostile to Ferdinand and orders him to perform hard labour, effectively playing "hard to get" to ensure that Ferdinand remains interested in Miranda.

The rest of the king's party has survived and makes it to shore on a different part of the island. Alonso is certain his son has drowned. Antonio and the king's brother, Sebastian, mock the king's grief, blaming him for the voyage that brought them to this fate. His loyal adviser, **Gonzalo**, admonishes them. Gonzalo is delighted with the beautiful island and considers the utopia he might create if he was in charge—a country without wealth, poverty, wars, slavery, or royalty.

As the others sleep Antonio and Sebastian come up with a plan to kill King Alonso so that Sebastian can become king. Antonio reminds his friend that he did the same thing to his brother, Prospero. Elsewhere on the island Trinculo, the king's jester, stumbles on Caliban, who is sleeping beneath his cloak. He climbs under the cloak as well, only to be discovered by Stephano, the king's butler, who mistakenly believes he has found a four-legged monster. Upon hearing Stephano's voice, Caliban wakes and believes he is seeing a god. He swears to serve this new god, who gives him, wine. Together the men get very drunk and come up with a plan to kill Prospero so that Stephano can become the ruler of the island.

The king and his men search for Ferdinand with no luck. Exhausted and without hope they are startled when a magical banquet appears before them. Just as they prepare to eat, however, everything disappears again. Already vulnerable the men are further startled when Ariel tells them of their sins against Prospero. The king quickly expresses both his guilt and regret. Antonio and Sebastian, however, show no sorrow and are intent on carrying out their plot against the king.

As Ferdinand's love is tested, Prospero is pleased to learn that he is genuine in his devotion to Miranda. He gives his blessing to their union but commands Ferdinand not to sleep with Miranda until after they are married. In honour of the engagement Prospero calls forth a celebratory masque with music and dancing by a host of spirits. Midway through the party Prospero remembers that Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo are coming to kill him, and he ends the celebration.

At Prospero's bidding Ariel has led the three men through briars and thorns and a filthy pond. As they approach Prospero's cell to kill him, glittering garments Ariel has strung outside distract them. Instead of going directly into the cell to carry out their plan, Stephano and Trinculo try on the clothes, pretending to be noblemen. Suddenly dog-shaped spirits drive them off in terror.

The king and his men are terrified of what they have seen and of what might become of them. Realizing he has everyone under his control, Prospero also realizes he does not want to execute revenge but wants to extend mercy instead. He vows to give up his magic after he has brought about restoration. Ariel brings the men, who are under a magic spell, to Prospero, who declares the various crimes that have been committed against him. Then he announces his forgiveness of them all. As Alonso shares his grief over his lost son, Prospero reveals that Ferdinand is alive—and engaged to his daughter Miranda. Alonso is overjoyed at his son's survival and the coming marriage.

The drunken trio of Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo arrives; after naming their sins Prospero forgives them as well, and he claims Caliban as his own subject; Caliban fearfully anticipates being punished and promises to try to please Prospero in the future, admitting he was foolish to worship Trinculo. Announcing a plan to set sail for Naples the following day, Prospero then frees Ariel. Prospero turns to the audience and asks them to free him as well by clapping to show that they have enjoyed the show.

Characters

Prospero- The rightful duke of Milan, after his brother, Antonio seized his title and property, Prospero was exiled with his daughter and eventually found refuge on an island.

Miranda- Prospero's daughter. She has been on the island with her father for 12 years — since she was 3 years old.

Antonio- Prospero's younger brother, who is now the duke of Milan. He had plotted against Prospero years earlier and now convinces Sebastian to murder his brother, the king of Naples.

Ariel- A spirit of the air, he assists Prospero in seeking retribution over his enemies.

Caliban- The offspring of the witch Sycorax and the devil. Prospero has made Caliban his servant or slave, and in response, Caliban plots to murder Prospero.

Ferdinand- The son of the king of Naples. During the storm, he was separated from the rest of the king's party, met Miranda, and fell in love with her.

Alonso- The king of Naples. He believes his son has died and is overjoyed to later find him. Alonso is repentant for the pain he caused Prospero in the past.

Sebastian- Alonso's brother. He is easily led into planning his own brother's (the king's) murder.

Gonzalo- An elderly counsellor who saves Prospero's and Miranda's lives when they are exiled. He provides a sense of hope and optimism when Ferdinand is lost.

Stefano- The king's butler. He arrives on the island drunk and quickly becomes involved in a plot to murder Prospero.

Trinculo- The king's jester. When Stefano arrives with wine, Trinculo joins him in drinking and then agrees to a plot to murder Prospero.

Francisco and Adrian- Two of the king's lords. They try to offer hope and protection to Alonso.

Boatswain- The ship's petty officer. He is in charge of the deck crew, the rigging, and the anchor. He must try to keep the boat afloat during the storm, even when the king's party makes demands upon his time.

Themes

Magic of Theatre

The basic nature of any magic is its ability to change reality in unexpected and inexplicable ways. The obvious magic in the play comes from Prospero and his ability to manipulate the island's spirit and nature. As a magician Prospero controls and manipulates circumstances and people around him, just as Shakespeare as a playwright is able to do the same—eventually bringing restoration and order. Prospero creates a tempest with an ultimate sequence of events in mind—his daughter's marriage to Ferdinand, the restoration of his throne, and the repentance of his enemies—and for the most part things play out exactly as he has plotted, making him seem like a clever author who can create a narrative using real-life characters.

Power and Exploitation

The play explores the role of power and its use in exploiting other people in families and in the social order. In nearly every scene Shakespeare reveals a situation in which power and its exploitation creates a lack of harmony. Antonio exploited the power he was given to help his brother rule, becoming power hungry and driving Prospero into exile. But that is just the beginning. Prospero lands on an island and becomes master of Caliban and Ariel, despite Caliban's claim to the island. Antonio and Sebastian plot to take King Alonso's power for their own. Trinculo and Stephano, aware that they are superior to no one but Caliban, exploit the creature for their own gain.

Revenge, Forgiveness, and Restoration

The controlling energy of much of the play comes from individuals' desire for revenge in pursuit of some form of justice. Prospero is driven by his need to expose what was done to him and regain his rightful place as the duke of Milan. His book learning and magic are focused on correcting the wrongs of the past. Caliban, too, is set on revenging his displacement and the wrongs inflicted on him by Prospero. Almost all of the major characters except Antonio and Sebastian show remorse over some aspect of the past, ultimately asking for forgiveness. Prospero admits he was a bad duke. Caliban regrets serving a new master, and Stephano admits he would be a bad ruler even if he only had one subject. Alonso apologizes and asks for Prospero's pardon. However, it is noticeable that Caliban does not repent having attempted to murder Prospero or rape Miranda, and Stephano and Trinculo do not repent for their part in the murder plot against Prospero.