

Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

November 2010

These study materials are produced for use with the
Classic Players production of *The Tempest*.

smart

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Shakespeare's Ideas and Accomplishments in *The Tempest*

The Tempest is the final play written in its entirety by Shakespeare. In many ways it is also the culmination of his art, an original and polished work which conveys the mellow wisdom of age.

Underneath a surface shimmering with magic and music, the playwright offers his audience a deep pool of poetry, themes and character relationships.

The play dates from 1611, just before Shakespeare's retirement from the London theater and return to his native village of Stratford-upon-Avon. His work during the preceding two decades represents perhaps the greatest creative achievement by an individual in all human history.

The Tempest was produced at court on November 1, 1611, and again in February 1613 as part of the festivities surrounding the royal wedding of King James' daughter Elizabeth and Prince Frederick V of Germany, both of them sixteen-year-olds.

The tone and themes of *The Tempest* make it an especially fitting statement from a man about to leave the public arena once and for all. Like Prospero in the play's final scene, Shakespeare surrenders his power to enchant when he gives up the magic of the theater.

The world view reflected in the play is at once realistic and optimistic. Shakespeare depicts evil, tragedy and suffering as part of a supernaturally ordained plan that culminates in repentance, forgiveness, love and recovery of that which was lost.

One major way in which Shakespeare conveys this positive view of life is through references to Providential design. Divine direction accounts for the events that produce the play's happy ending. Both Prospero and Alonso lose in order to gain something better.

Without violating a 1606 ordinance forbidding the use of God's name onstage in any way that could be construed as profane, Shakespeare alludes to a personal, benevolent deity in *The Tempest* as Providence.



Emily Arcuri as Miranda and Ron Pyle as Prospero, Classic Players, 2010

The playwright likely drew the idea for linking allusions to Providence with the paradox of loss and restitution from a well-known incident of his own day. Several important elements of the play reflect his familiarity with contemporary accounts of an actual 1609 shipwreck.

A fleet of nine vessels carrying over 500 colonists from Plymouth, England, to Virginia, was caught in a tempest off the Bermudas. The flagship, *The Sea-Venture*, split and was forced aground on the coast of Bermuda, where its passengers spent the winter awaiting its repair.

The pamphlets recounting their plight emphasize Providential care and direction. The accounts also furnished Shakespeare with information about sea voyages, tempests, shipwrecks and exotic New World landscapes.

William Strachey, who recorded the events in a 1610 letter, describes the island as a place "feared and avoided [by] all sea travelers alive above any other place in the world." He continues, "Yet it pleased our merciful God to make even this hideous and hated place both the place of our safety and means of our deliverance."

Shakespeare's beautifully positive ending in *The Tempest* goes beyond the deliverance which produced a happy ending to the real-life catastrophe described by Strachey.

By extolling love and forgiveness as transcendent virtues in a world so evil that brother would kill brother, Shakespeare reveals profound insight into both human nature and the universe at large.

Above all, however, *The Tempest* is a marvelous story set in a landscape governed by magic and pervaded with music. It is little wonder that this play has been greatly loved by audiences for its appeal to the mind and the imagination as well as the heart. 🌿

The Plot: The Short of It

Prospero, the Duke of Milan, has for twelve years lived in exile on an obscure island with his daughter Miranda. His realm and title were seized by his ambitious brother Antonio with the help of Alonso, king of Naples.

When Prospero learns that his betrayers are on board a ship that will pass close to his island, he uses his magical powers to raise a tempest that wrecks the ship and separates the royal party, which includes Antonio, Alonso and his son Ferdinand, Alonso's brother Sebastian, and their attendants.

While the survivors from the shipwreck wander about various parts of the island, Prospero tells Miranda about the scheme which his enemies mounted against him long ago. Had it not been for the kindness of the king's counselor Gonzalo in giving them some provisions to take along, Miranda and Prospero would have died in the leaky boat in which they were abandoned at sea.

Father and daughter at last reached a far-off island, where the two have since lived by Prospero's skills in white magic derived from books Gonzalo sent with them.

There they found an airy spirit named Ariel, whom the dead witch Sycorax had imprisoned in the body of a pine tree because he did not wish to carry out her wicked commands. Prospero freed Ariel, and the gentle spirit along with hosts of other powerful spirits of the island is now obedient to Prospero's every command.

The island's only other inhabitant is a deformed creature named Caliban, the witch's son whom Prospero has also employed and attempted to civilize. Caliban became so wicked, however, that Prospero has been forced to treat him as a captive slave.

As soon as Prospero has completely unfolded the story of the past, Ferdinand is led by Ariel's music to Miranda and Prospero.

There the young prince instantly falls in love with Miranda. Prospero determines that this love should be tested, so he makes Ferdinand a servant, assigning him difficult menial tasks.

On another part of the island, King Alonso believes that his son Ferdinand has drowned. Antonio convinces the king's brother Sebastian that he should murder Alonso and seize his power, but Ariel arrives in an invisible state just in time to awaken the sleeping king and save his life.

The drunken butler Stephano and the king's jester Trinculo give Caliban liquor and then join him in a conspiracy aimed at taking Prospero's island and his life.

Ariel visits the distraught royal party disguised as a harpy. He charms Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian and then confronts them with their crimes against Prospero. In a state of distraction they scatter.

Ariel also leads Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo astray as they pursue the plot against Prospero.

Prospero agrees to the betrothal of Miranda and Ferdinand, and Ariel secures the blessings of Juno and Ceres upon the union, guiding the goddesses and other spirits in a *masque*, or elaborate pageant, in honor of the couple.

Believing that his adversaries have suffered long enough in the aftermath of the tempest, Prospero decides to bring them all together again, publicly forgive his enemies and give up his magic books once and for all.

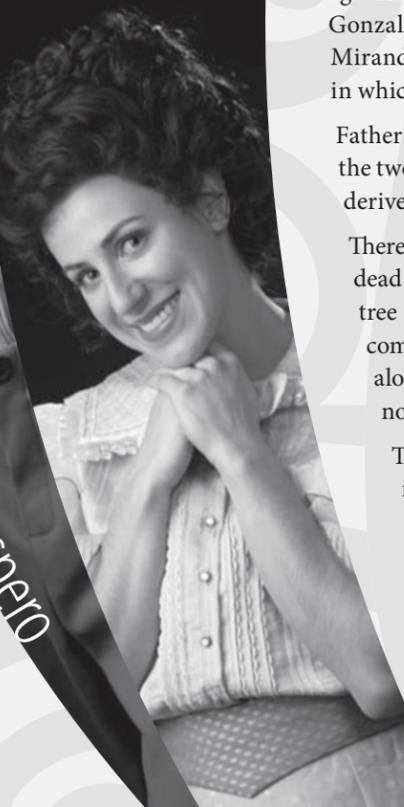
Alonso repents, and Prospero reveals that Ferdinand has survived the shipwreck and is, in fact, betrothed to his own daughter, Miranda. Thus through the union of their offspring the old enemies are once and for all reconciled.

Prospero also recovers his dukedom from his brother Antonio.

Prospero sets Ariel free and prepares to return with the other characters to Italy. He speaks a nostalgic epilogue before setting sail for home.



Prospero



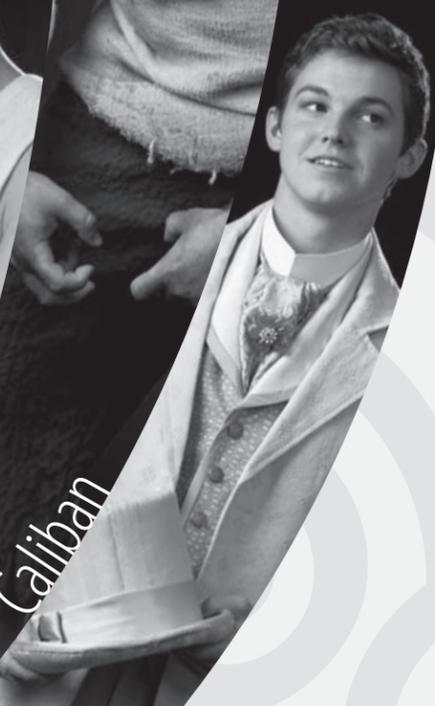
Miranda



Caliban



Ariel



Ferdinand

Gender Bending in Shakespeare Performance

Before 1660 women were not allowed to appear in stage productions in England. Thus in Shakespeare's company women's roles were by necessity played by boys wearing dresses and wigs. Because of this theater practice, Shakespeare created relatively few roles for women. The cast of *Julius Caesar*, for example, includes 34 men's roles and only two women's roles. In comedies with extensive female roles—such as *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*—Shakespeare's plots feature young female characters who disguise themselves as adolescent boys. Audiences saw boys appearing onstage as young women who, in turn, disguised themselves as adolescent boys. Viola in *Twelfth Night*, disguised as a young man named Cesario, quips, "I am not that I play." In the final analysis these boy actors "were" boys onstage for a large part of the play. Such stage conventions highlighted Shakespeare's theme of role-playing, accommodated mistaken identity and intensified the wit of the plot.

In the past few decades theater producers and directors have experimented with untraditional gender casting choices. Some companies perform Shakespeare's plays with either all male or all female casts. In most cases the men who play women's roles in these performances are costumed as women, and the reverse is true of casts consisting exclusively of females. The effect such switching creates, however, cannot be compared to Shakespeare's casting of boys, not men, in female roles. Another type of gender bending in theater today occurs when a director chooses to change the gender of a character created by Shakespeare. For the 2010 Classic Players production of *The Tempest*, Jeffrey Stegall has re-fashioned Alonso, king of Naples, as Alonsa, queen of Naples, and emended the acting script accordingly.

The current Classic Players production represents the company's ninth mounting of the play since 1937. In seven of these productions the character Ariel has been played by a woman although the role was created by Shakespeare for a man. In 2010, as in 1942, Ariel is played by a man. 🌀



DeWitt Jones as Alonso, 1989, and Rebekah Rudie as Alonsa, 2010



Lea Seigny as Ariel, 1989, and David Schwingle as Ariel, 2010



Tempests Past

Bob Jones Jr. as Prospero and Fannie Mae Holmes as Miranda, Classic Players, 1937

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