

GCSE

THE TEMPEST

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INTRODUCTION

The Tempest was written around 1610 and the first recorded performance occurred on 1st November 1611, in front of King James. It is listed in the First Folio as a comedy, but the plot shows greater depth and complexity than that categorization might suggest. It is widely considered to be the last play that Shakespeare wrote alone. It is:

“...a final, highly personal, even visionary utterance concerned at least in part with the relationship between life and art, and having at its centre a figure who has often been regarded as Shakespeare’s shadowing forth of himself.”



The play opens with ‘a tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning’, with a ship wrecked in a storm. On board the ship were Alonso, the King of Naples, along with his brother, son, and the Duke of Milan (amongst others). These passengers end up on different parts of an island. Prospero, the former Duke of Milan, and his daughter, Miranda, watch the shipwreck and he tells her how he first came to the island. There are subplots of romance (Miranda and the King’s son, Ferdinand fall in love), treachery (Sebastian and Antonio plot to kill the King) and freedom (both Ariel and Caliban seek their freedom from Prospero). The various plot threads are, in relation to Shakespeare’s other plays, relatively straightforwardly linked but they are written in some of his best poetic language.

However, the play has been described as ‘...curiously resistant to successful theatrical realisation’ but these challenges have provided directors with plenty of scope for different interpretations. Many great actors, such as John Gielgud, Patrick Stewart and Helen Mirren have all played the part of Prospero during their careers.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE PLAY

The play consists of five acts and an epilogue, with all but the opening scene taking place on different locations on the island. Below is an overview of each scene, and dramatis personae for each.

Act One		Act Two	
Scene One	Scene Two	Scene One	Scene Two
On a ship at sea	The island Before Prospero's cell	Another part of the island	Another part of the island
Ship-Master Boatswain Mariners Alonso Sebastian Antonio Ferdinand Gonzalo	Prospero Miranda Ariel Caliban Ferdinand	Alonso Sebastian Antonio Gonzalo Adrian Francisco Ariel	Caliban Trinculo Stephano

Act Three			Act Four
Scene One	Scene Two	Scene Three	Scene One
Before Prospero's cell	Another part of the island	Another part of the island	Before Prospero's cell
Ferdinand Miranda Prospero	Caliban Stephano Trinculo Ariel	Alonso Sebastian Antonio Gonzalo Adrian Francisco Prospero Ariel	Prospero Ferdinand Miranda Ariel Iris Juno Ceres Nymphs & Reapers Caliban Stephano Trinculo

Act Five	Epilogue
<i>Scene Five</i>	
Before Prospero's cell	Before Prospero's cell
All	Prospero

THE MAIN CHARACTERS

PROSPERO

Prospero was once the Duke of Milan, but was usurped by his brother twelve years ago, partly due to his dedication for study (*'My library was dukedom large enough'*). He was sent out to sea on 'a rotten carcass of a boat' but was given food, and 'rich garments, linens, stuff and necessities' to make their way safely to the island.

He conjures up the storm at the start of the play, to right the wrongs of the past. While he initially appears quite cruel in his dealings with Ariel and Caliban, with a short temper in his initial interactions with both, ultimately he is a good man, who cares greatly for his daughter. In turn, this is a challenging role for an actor to play, as the character is so complex. As the central character of the play he drives all of the events of the play.

By the end of the play, he appears more sympathetic, as he forgives his enemies for their past actions and blesses Miranda in her love for Ferdinand. In the epilogue, he speaks directly to the audience, asking for their blessing to set him free; it is this speech that some scholars suggest that Prospero, is a stand-in for Shakespeare, talking about his own writing.

MIRANDA

Miranda is Prospero's young daughter, about fifteen years of age, and has been on the island for most of her life. It is only at the beginning of the play that she finds out from her father how they came to live on the island. Having not seen any humans, she does not know what to make of Ferdinand when she first lays eyes on him:

*What is't? a spirit?
Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir,
It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit.*

She is by fascinated, and quickly infatuated by his form:

*I might call him
A thing divine, for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble.*

She lets Ferdinand know and, in turn, the audience, that Prospero is not as cruel as he first appears:

*Be of comfort;
My father's of a better nature, sir,
Than he appears by speech: this is unwonted
Which now came from him.*

She is a romantic sort, having lived in an isolated world of sprites and magic, and is beguiled by the new world of possibilities seeing Ferdinand brings.

ARIEL

Ariel is a sprite who performs tasks at Prospero's request and is, predominantly, only visible to him. Historically, both men and women have played the character. The role requires some level of agility as he goes through various transformations, to fulfil his tasks, throughout 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 curl'd clouds, to thy strong bidding task
Ariel and all his quality.*

He is cheeky, playful and is determined to get his freedom from Prospero (which will be granted 'after two days').

CALIBAN

Caliban is a native of the island. He is the son of Sycorax who ruled the island before Prospero came. He has been presented in many ways throughout the play's stage history. Early depictions presented him purely as a monster and a savage. An actor playing Caliban needs to greatly consider his body language; what would be appropriate to show his uncivilised and savage-like nature?

He speaks coarsely, cursing:

*As wicked dew as e'er my mother brush'd
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen
Drop on you both!*

David Suchet suggested that:

Shakespeare wrote the character of Caliban as a mixture of different types of native, (and showed his audience the native whose land has been taken away).

Productions from the 1980s onwards have emphasised Caliban as an outsider (he has been a punk, a Native American, a black slave in various productions). In doing so, the audience has come to be more sympathetic to his plight for freedom

ALONSO

Alonso is the King of Naples. Antonio was only able to usurp Prospero as the Duke with the King's help. On arriving on the island, he believes his son, Ferdinand, is dead and is clearly stricken with grief. As he sleeps, his brother plots to kill him, but he is awoken due to Ariel's interventions.

ANTONIO

Antonio is Prospero's brother. He was jealous of Prospero's power and took his Dukedom. He only has his own interests at heart; it is he that encourages Sebastian to kill the king.

SEBASTIAN

Sebastian is the brother of the King of Naples and is easily manipulated in plotting to kill his brother.

FERDINAND

Ferdinand is the King's son. He arrives on the island alone and believes that his father is dead. He falls in love with Miranda, and to prove that his intentions are honourable, he promises to complete a task for Prospero. He is the romantic lead; youthful and honest. In the following exchange, he is seen a cavalier gentleman, but Miranda more than holds her own:

FERDINAND

O most dear mistress,

The sun will set before I shall discharge

What I must strive to do.

MIRANDA

*If you'll sit down,
I'll bear your logs the while: pray, give me that;
I'll carry it to the pile.*

FERDINAND

*No, precious creature;
I had rather crack my sinews, break my back,
Than you should such dishonour undergo,
While I sit lazy by.*

MIRANDA

*It would become me
As well as it does you: and I should do it
With much more ease; for my good will is to it,
And yours it is against.*

GONZALO

Gonzalo is an elderly courtier who washes up on the island with the King. It is he that helped Prospero when he was pushed out to sea.

TRINCULO is the King's jester and **STEPHANO** is the King's drunk butler. These two provide much of the comedy of the play in the attempts to help Caliban. Their comic buffoonery is in stark contrast with the other events happening on the island. Actors playing these roles can have a lot of fun with facial expressions and gestures. Learners should experiment with the most effective ways to vocalize their witty repartee, as in the following exchange:

TRINCULO

*Swum ashore. man, like a duck: I can swim like a
duck, I'll be sworn.*

STEPHANO

Here, kiss the book. Though thou canst swim like a duck, thou art made like a goose.

TRINCULO

O Stephano. hast any more of this?

STEPHANO

The whole butt, man: my cellar is in a rock by the sea-side where my wine is hid. How now, moon-calf! how does thine ague?



THEMES AND ISSUES

In Robert B. Pierce's *Understanding "The Tempest"*, there is an opinion that the island is where "*whatever evil remains is impotent, and goodness returns to action [...] there is a re-birth, a return to life, a heightened, almost symbolic, awareness of the beauty of normal humanity*"



JUSTICE AND FORGIVENESS

The play is ultimately a tale of 'righting a wrong'. Prospero wishes to undo his brother's actions and so, manipulates, a storm to put things right. He has a strong sense of 'fairness' – while an audience may question his morals for enslaving Ariel, this is explained away as suitable payment for having rescued Ariel from the witch Sycorax. As the play continues, most plot threads come to a positive outcome, and Prospero's enemies are forgiven and Ariel is freed.

THE THEATRE

There are many references to theatre throughout the play. The storm itself was created through Prospero's magic and the actions of Ariel. The masque in Act Four, Scene One is a spectacle that involves music, dance, singing and acting. In the epilogue, Prospero talks directly to the audience, indicating their applause will set him free.

COLONISATION

Modern interpretations of the play make much of the theme of colonization. Having arrived on the island, Prospero makes a slave of Caliban and attempts to educate him in the ways and language of his own country. Parallels can be made here to European settlers and their dealings with native people all over the world, e.g. native Americans, the Aboriginal peoples of

Australia etc. Indeed, this may show Prospero as not being any better than his brother, despite his obsession with knowledge, with his desire to rule.

STAGING THE PLAY

It is believed that Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* with an indoor playing stage in mind, such as the Blackfriars Hall. This is a much more intimate stage space than The Globe. Learners should therefore consider what aspects of the play would benefit from a closer actor-audience relationship. They should also bear in mind that theatre in Shakespeare's day did not rely on set or props, with the focus being on the dialogue of the play.

With the exception of the opening scene, all of the action takes place on different locations on an island, which can be presented in a number of different theatrical styles. Of course, with modern technology, the opening scene can be very dramatic with the use of effective sound design and real rain, but this is not necessarily required to make an engaging opening sequence.

The Tempest is quite frequently produced with some recent productions including the 2016 production at the Royal Shakespeare Company which will use new technology to create Ariel as an avatar.

Other recent RSC productions include the David Farr-directed version in 2012 and Rupert Goold's version in 2006 both of which were done in modern-dress, the latter of which starred Patrick Stewart as Prospero.



The play was most recently performed in the Sam Wanamaker Playhouse (at The Globe) in early 2016. Starring Tim McMullan as Prospero, this was a rare opportunity to see it performed in a candle-lit, Jacobean theatre.

In 2013, a well-received production directed by Jeremy Herrin was performed at The Globe starring Roger Allam as Prospero, Jessie Buckley as Miranda and Colin Morgan as Ariel. This production was performed in period clothing.

There was a co-production of Thomas Ade's opera version between Robert Lepage-Ex Machina / Huron-Wendat Nation in 2011 which featured a mixed White and First Nations cast.

Occasionally the part of Prospero has been played by a woman such as Vanessa Redgrave in The Globe's 2000 version and Helen Mirren in Julie Taymor's 2010 film version.



More information about the play's stage history can be found at the following link:
<https://www.rsc.org.uk/the-tempest/stage-history>



One central question for any staging of a Shakespearean play, is deciding upon the era in which to set the production. The magical nature of this play means that is ripe for different interpretations. Set designer, Giles Cadle, described his reason behind staging the play in modern dress:

“ ... ‘My view on period costumes or period settings is that sometimes I find them a distraction, they don’t let you into the play. I don’t mean that you have to update the play just for the sake of it but you need to have some understanding of why people are doing things or what their actions are and not see it as some kind of museum piece. ”

Costuming can be used to show the different class and status of the characters. For example, Alonso and Ferdinand's costumes should denote their wealth and high status, regardless of which era a production is being set in. Prospero, on the other hand, is of the same social class but has been on the island for over twelve years; what difference would this make to his costume?

The most challenging character to costume is Ariel. Ariel has four costumes suggested in the text: the first is not specified, but he re-enters Act One, Scene Two (at Prospero's command dressed as a water-nymph. In Act Three, Scene Three he appears as a 'flying harpy' and takes on the role of Ceres in Act Four, Scene One. Indeed, apart from on these latter two occasions, he is not seen by the other characters. His costumes should sense indicate a sense of otherworldliness.

There is much scope for dramatic possibilities with the staging of The Tempest. This play, with its blend of romance, comedy and action is, as Shakespeare writes, "*...such stuff as dreams are made on*".

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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