

THE
CONNELL GUIDE
TO SHAKESPEARE'S



THE
TEMPEST

“The perfect introduction to *The Tempest*”
SIR PETER HALL, FOUNDER OF THE
ROYAL SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by *Graham Bradshaw*

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The Tempest

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Introduction

In the 400 years since *The Tempest* was first staged, millions of words have been written about it. Critics, directors and actors have interpreted it in widely different ways and developed theories ranging from the more-or-less plausible to the eccentric and the completely outlandish.

It is undoubtedly one of Shakespeare's greatest plays, and as well as its bewitching music, its hallucinatory quality and its enchanted island setting, it contains some of Shakespeare's most beautiful poetry and most famous lines. From Caliban's "The isle is full of noises" to Prospero's "We are such stuff/As dreams are made on", *The Tempest* haunts our collective imagination.

But what is it actually about? Is it about British colonialism, as so many modern critics, especially modern American critics, firmly maintain? Is it a Christian play? Or is it, as Sir Peter Hall believes, the "most blasphemous play Shakespeare wrote", about a "man on an island who's allowed to play God and who doesn't just dabble in witchcraft but actually performs it"?

Is it an anti-feminist play, as some feminist critics believe? Or does it, on the contrary – in common with Shakespeare's late plays – present a softer, more feminised view of the world than his earlier works? And what does *The Tempest*, the last play Shakespeare wrote on his own, tell us



This short guide sets out to answer these and other questions. Its aim is to illuminate the text, as clearly and concisely as possible, and to show what an extraordinary work of art *The Tempest* is. It draws on and discusses the most interesting and arresting criticisms of the play, explains the issues which have perplexed and divided scholars through the ages, and, most importantly, offers a bold, incisive and authoritative view of its own.

THE CHARACTERS

PROSPERO, *the rightful Duke of Milan*

MIRANDA, *a daughter to Prospero*

ANTONIO, *his brother, the usurping Duke of Milan*

ALONSO, *King of Naples*

SEBASTIAN, *his brother*

FERDINAND, *Alonso's son*

GONZALO, *an honest old Councillor of Naples*

ADRIAN and FRANCISCO, *Lords*

ARIEL, *an airy spirit*

CALIBAN, *a savage and deformed slave of Prospero's*

TRINCULO, *a jester*

STEPHANO, *a drunken butler*

MASTER *of a ship*

BOATSWAIN

MARINERS

Spirits appearing as Iris, Ceres, Juno, nymphs and reapers

A summary of the plot

Act One

In a fiercely realistic first scene, a terrible tempest batters a ship returning from Tunis to Naples. Aboard are Alonso, King of Naples, his brother, Sebastian, and son Ferdinand, Antonio, Duke of Milan, and Gonzalo, an old and trusted councillor. Shipwrecked, they are cast ashore on a strange and apparently deserted island, unaware that the tempest has been caused by the magic of Prospero, the former Duke of Milan, who now lives on the island with his daughter, Miranda.

Questioned by Miranda, Prospero relates how they arrived on the island twelve years earlier: as Duke of Milan, he had handed some duties to his brother Antonio who, gaining a taste for power, usurped Prospero with the aid of Alonso. Cast adrift in a small boat, Prospero and the young Miranda eventually landed on the island, where they found the half-human, half-savage Caliban and the spirit Ariel. Prospero made Ariel his servant and Caliban his slave. Now, told by Ariel that he at last has his enemies where he wants them, Prospero the magician moves to the next stage of his plan. He lures Ferdinand into his presence and encourages him and Miranda to fall in love, while pretending to disapprove.

Act Two

Alonso and his companions are searching for Ferdinand. Ariel, who remains invisible, sends everyone to sleep except Antonio, the usurping Duke of Milan, and Sebastian, Alonso's brother. The two men plot to murder Alonso and the courtier Gonzalo while they lie asleep, but Ariel prevents this by waking everyone up just in time. On another part of the island, Trinculo, the jester, comes across Caliban, to their mutual surprise; when the drunken butler, Stephano, arrives, Caliban thinks he must be a god and offers to serve him in the hope of escaping Prospero's control.

Act Three

Prospero has enslaved Ferdinand and made him carry logs, but Ferdinand does so willingly in order to serve his beloved Miranda. Watched secretly by a delighted Prospero, the two pledge to marry each other. Caliban tells Trinculo and Stephano that he is Prospero's slave; he proposes that they murder the magician, and that Stephano marry Miranda and rule in Prospero's stead. Alonso and his party, meanwhile, have given up hope of finding Ferdinand when, to the sound of strange music, spirits materialise in front of them and produce a banquet. Before they can eat, however, Ariel appears, and makes the banquet vanish. Ariel then taunts Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian for their part in trying to kill "good Prosper" and his "innocent daughter".

Act Four

Prospero admits that the tasks he set Ferdinand were to test his love for Miranda, and he now blesses their marriage with a masque performed by spirits. Then he suddenly remembers Caliban's plot against his life, angrily halts the performance and calls Ariel to him. He despatches Ariel to fetch the hapless Caliban and his accomplices. They are brought to Prospero's cell, where they are then chased by spirits disguised as hunting dogs. Prospero rejoices that all of his enemies are finally at his mercy, promising Ariel he will soon be free.

Act Five

Ariel reports that Alonso and the other Neapolitans are broken men, and Prospero tells Ariel to fetch them. Alone, he promises to give up his magic powers. When the chastened group arrive, they are amazed to find Prospero, who fiercely reprimands the "three men of sin" who conspired to exile him. Prospero then reveals Ferdinand and Miranda, playing chess, to Alonso's great joy. Prospero forgives his enemies, releases Ariel, acknowledges Caliban as "my own" and announces that they will all return to Naples where he will resume his role as Duke.

What is *The Tempest* about?

The Tempest has often been described as Shakespeare's most elusive play. The director Peter Brook calls it "an enigma", while the critic Anne Barton describes it as "an extraordinarily obliging work of art that will lend itself to almost any interpretation". Certainly, it has been read and staged in widely different ways over the years.

Many critics have seen it as a "serene" play about Christian forgiveness, with Prospero as a kind of Christ-figure who – like Duke Vincentio in the final scene of *Measure for Measure* – refuses to punish his enemies. There are difficulties with this Christian reading. Christianity does not have a monopoly on mercy and forgiveness, and Prospero does not decide to be merciful until the final scene. It never occurred to earlier, great and profoundly Christian critics like Dr Johnson or Coleridge that they should be regarding Prospero – or Duke Vincentio – as Christ-figures. Finally, there is no reference to Christianity in the play.

There have been many other allegorical readings, which explain the play as an account of survival after death, or even as an allegory of the history of the Church. The more familiar idea that Prospero is Shakespeare and that *The Tempest* represents Shakespeare's farewell to his art is also allegorical, as well as Romantic, and was first propounded by Thomas Campbell in 1838; it was most elaborately

developed by Montégut in his argument that the play presents an “account, feature by feature, of the English theatre and transformation to which Shakespeare subjected it”. Rather surprisingly, Montégut’s thesis was further elaborated in 1991 by the distinguished critic René Girard. There were many passionate readers of allegory in Shakespeare’s lifetime, but we have no record that any of his contemporaries thought any of Shakespeare’s plays were allegorical. A. D. Nuttall, whose study, *Two Concepts of Allegory*, thoroughly explores the question of whether *The Tempest* is allegorical, concludes that it is not. As the American scholar Professor Harold Bloom succinctly puts it: “Allegory was not a Shakespearean mode.”

More recently, the teaching of Shakespeare in university English departments has been powerfully influenced by so-called American “New Historicist” and British “cultural materialist” critics.* These critics have been most concerned with the political significance of *The Tempest* as a colonialist text, in which Prospero is the grasping colonial invader and Caliban the innocent native victim. They have also revived the 19th-century idea that *The*

* New Historicism is a school of literary theory developed in the 1980s, primarily through the work of the critic Stephen Greenblatt: it aims to understand works through their historical context, and cultural and intellectual history through literature. Cultural materialism, a similar movement, traces its origins to the British critic Raymond Williams. The term was coined by him to describe a theoretical blending of Leftist culturalism and Marxist analysis.

Tempest is a play about the New World.

This way of reading *The Tempest* is now very influential, and is perhaps still dominant. These critics frequently and sometimes effectively draw on the extraordinarily rich and suggestive range of “native” African, West Indian, and Latin American responses to *The Tempest*. But inevitably they are preoccupied with the relationship between Prospero and Caliban. They barely discuss Ariel, and, in their obsession with the political “message”, often treat Shakespeare’s poetic drama as though it were – or might as well have been – written in prose.

In fact, as the play’s second scene shows, the relationship between Prospero and Caliban is just one of a whole web of different familial, master-servant and political relationships in the play. At the centre of the web, of course, is Prospero. We first see him with his daughter Miranda, who is deeply worried about whether – to put it simply – her magician-father is a good man. We then see Prospero with the spirit Ariel, who is forced to carry out his commands, then with the enslaved Caliban, and finally with Prince Ferdinand. We see him becoming enraged with all of them, even with Miranda, when she attempts to defend Ferdinand.

All of these different relationships are power relationships – as Prospero’s rages confirm. So, if we are attending to this whole web or nexus of relationships when we ask what this play is about, it makes good sense to suppose that it is about