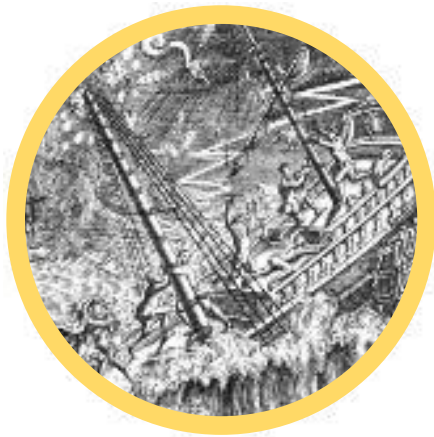


**A Guide to  
THE TEMPEST**

*by William Shakespeare*



Alistair McCallum

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## **Setting the scene**

Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* during the period 1610–11. He was in his late forties, and had been one of England's foremost dramatists for the past twenty years. He was a member and shareholder of the King's Men, the country's most prestigious theatre company. The company's chief patron was King James I, a great lover of the theatre, and they gave frequent performances at court.

*The Tempest* was Shakespeare's last play written single-handedly; after this time, he worked in collaboration with younger playwrights, and he seems to have retired from the theatre altogether a few years later.

It is difficult to classify *The Tempest*. The four plays written towards the end of Shakespeare's career – *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest* – are variously referred to as the Late Comedies, the Tragicomedies, or the Romances. These plays share a number of themes: long, arduous journeys; potentially tragic situations that are resolved happily; elements of magic and the supernatural; the reuniting of long-separated family members; and eventual homecoming, reconciliation, and redemption. *The Tempest* is generally regarded as the greatest of these four late plays.

This enigmatic, strangely powerful play has served as the inspiration for countless other works of art, including operas, orchestral works, songs, novels, poetry and painting. Films based on *The Tempest* range from silent versions of the early 20th century to *Forbidden Planet* and *Prospero's Books* later in the century.

Exactly why Shakespeare turned away from tragedy and towards more mystical themes at this stage of his life is not known. The results, however, were every bit as compelling as anything that had come before:

*"After progressively more successful attempts – in Pericles, Cymbeline and The Winter's Tale – at mingling elements of tragedy and comedy within a framework of magic and exoticism taken from literary romances, the playwright created in The Tempest a stunning theatrical entertainment that is also a moral allegory of great beauty and emotional power."*

Charles Boyce, *Shakespeare A to Z*

## **Danger at sea**

A fleet of ships, heading home across the Mediterranean Sea to Naples, has been caught in a sudden storm. On board one of the vessels is Alonso, King of Naples.

The passengers on Alonso's ship include his brother Sebastian, his son Ferdinand, and various members of the King's court. Also travelling with the royal party is Antonio, Duke of Milan.

The storm is getting more and more violent with every passing minute.



**Curtain up**

## Disaster is imminent

I, i

On board the King's ship, amidst the howling winds and mountainous waves, the crew are desperately trying to keep control and prevent the ship from crashing on the shore of a nearby island.

The King himself is on deck, along with his companions, including Duke Antonio. The King and the Duke both insist on talking to the ship's master: but the boatswain, busy attending to the master's orders, and shouting commands in turn to the mariners, has no time for his passengers' demands. He tells them, bluntly, to go down to their cabins.

Gonzalo, the King's adviser, tries to calm the boatswain's temper, but his words are brushed aside:

*Antonio:* Where is the master, boatswain?

*Boatswain:* Do you not hear him? You mar our labour. Keep your cabins! You do assist the storm.

*Gonzalo:* Nay, good,<sup>1</sup> be patient.

*Boatswain:* When the sea is! Hence. What cares these roarers<sup>2</sup> for the name of king? To cabin! Silence! Trouble us not.

*Gonzalo:* Good, yet remember whom thou hast aboard.

*Boatswain:* None that I more love than myself. You are a councillor; if you can command these elements to silence and work<sup>3</sup> the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more. Use your authority! If you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long and make yourself ready in your cabin for the mischance of the hour, if it so hap ... Out of our way, I say!

<sup>1</sup> *good man*

<sup>2</sup> *roaring, violent waves*

<sup>3</sup> *achieve, bring about*

As the boatswain hurries away, Gonzalo remarks sardonically that the man's lack of respect may be a good omen: his destiny is clearly to be hanged, not drowned.



The boatswain returns, still bellowing orders to the crew. He is exasperated to find some of the passengers still on deck. The King's brother Sebastian and the Duke, infuriated by the man's lack of respect, hurl insults at him:

*Boatswain:* Yet again? What do you here? Shall we give o'er and drown? Have you a mind to sink?

*Sebastian:* A pox o'your throat, you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog.

*Boatswain:* Work you, then.

*Antonio:* Hang, cur! Hang, you whoreson, insolent noise-maker! We are less afraid to be drowned than thou art.

At this point some mariners rush in: there is no hope of saving the ship, they tell the boatswain. The only thing left to do is to pray. From within the ship, screams and cries for help are heard. Still cursing at the boatswain, Sebastian and Antonio go down to join the King and his son, who are praying in their cabin.

Gonzalo reflects that this is not the death he would have chosen:

*Gonzalo:* Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground ... The wills above be done, but I would fain<sup>1</sup> die a dry death.

<sup>1</sup> *willingly*

## A revelation

I, ii

A young woman, Miranda, has been watching the terrible storm and shipwreck from the safety of the island. She is dismayed at the ferocity of the tempest and the suffering of the victims.

Also watching the scene is Miranda's father Prospero, wearing the robes of a magician. Aware of her father's potent magical powers, Miranda is anxious that, if he created the storm for some reason, he should bring it to an end at once:

*Miranda:* If by your art,<sup>1</sup> my dearest father, you have  
Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them.  
... O, I have suffered  
With those that I saw suffer – a brave vessel  
(Who had no doubt some noble creature in her)  
Dashed all to pieces. O, the cry did knock  
Against my very heart! Poor souls, they perished.

<sup>1</sup> *magic*

Prospero reassures his tearful daughter that no one has come to any harm. In fact, the storm they have witnessed is part of a plan created with her in mind.

*“There are parallels between Prospero’s art of magic and the art of the theater ... We think we are in the middle of a ‘real’ storm, but the next scene reveals that this was a theatrical illusion, magicked up by Prospero from the island to bring his enemies into his power. The seafarers were never in danger: the events looked believable but were created out of a few props and a believable script. As in a play, events happen, controlled by an unseen dramatist, to further a yet unknown plot. Throughout the play Prospero controls the other characters like a playwright ...”*

Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith, *30 Great Myths about Shakespeare*, 2013

Prospero admits to his daughter that he has kept her in ignorance of her background. Who she is, who Prospero is, how and why they came to settle on this remote island; none of this has been explained to Miranda. The time has now come, decides Prospero, for her to learn the truth. Removing his magician's robe, he asks her to sit down, and questions her about her early memories:

*Prospero:* Canst thou remember  
A time before we came unto this cell?<sup>1</sup>  
I do not think thou canst, for then thou wast not  
Out<sup>2</sup> three years old.

<sup>1</sup> *simple dwelling-place*

<sup>2</sup> *not yet*

To Prospero's surprise, Miranda claims she can remember something of her life before coming to the island. She has a hazy recollection, she says, of being cared for by a group of four or five women. Prospero is curious to know what else she remembers:

*Prospero:* But how is it  
That this lives in thy mind? What seest thou else  
In the dark backward and abysm of time?

But Miranda can remember nothing more of her earliest years, or of their journey to the island. Prospero now breaks some momentous news to her:

*Prospero:* Twelve year since,<sup>1</sup> Miranda, twelve year since,  
Thy father was the Duke of Milan and  
A prince of power.

<sup>1</sup> *ago*

Miranda is confused; surely Prospero, sitting in front of her, is her father? It is the truth, says Prospero: he was the Duke, and Miranda, his only child, his rightful heir. It was treachery that brought about their exile from Milan, but fortune treated them kindly in delivering them to their new home:

*Miranda:* O, the heavens!  
What foul play had we that we came from thence?  
Or blessed was't we did?

*Prospero:* Both, both, my girl.  
By foul play, as thou sayst, were we heaved thence,  
But blessedly help hither.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *helped on our way here*

## The overthrow of the rightful Duke

Instructing Miranda to listen carefully, Prospero now describes the events that brought him and his infant daughter to the island that was to become their home.

He recalls that Milan was the greatest of the Italian city-states and that he, as Duke, was renowned for his learning. In fact, his pursuit of knowledge was so consuming that he eventually left the business of government to his beloved brother Antonio:

*Prospero:* Through all the signories<sup>1</sup> it was the first,  
And Prospero the prime Duke, being so reputed  
In dignity, and for the liberal arts  
Without a parallel; those being all my study,  
The government I cast upon my brother  
And to my state grew stranger, being transported  
And rapt in secret studies.

<sup>1</sup> *republics, city-states*

*... to my state grew stranger, being transported  
And rapt in secret studies.*

Prospero's description of his downfall could be seen as a tribute to King James I, patron of the theatre company of which Shakespeare had been a member for many years.

In a book written originally for his son, the King gives advice for becoming a just, benevolent and efficient monarch. At one point he provides a warning which would have been valuable to Shakespeare's Duke of Milan:

*"... it is necessarie yee delight in reading, and seeking the knowledge of all lawfull things; but with these two restrictions: first, that ye choose idle houres for it, not interrupting therewith the discharge of your office: and next, that yee studie not for knowledge nakedly, but that your principall ende be, to make you able thereby to use your office."*

King James I, *Basilikon Doron*, 1603

Prospero's brother proved to be an adept, cunning politician, and soon exploited his power to ensure that Prospero's followers became loyal – through fear or greed – to Antonio. Eventually Prospero was rendered virtually powerless:

*Prospero:* Being once perfected how to grant suits,<sup>1</sup>  
How to deny them, who t'advance and who  
To trash for overtopping,<sup>2</sup> new created  
The creatures that were mine<sup>3</sup> ...  
... now he was  
The ivy which had hid my princely trunk  
And sucked my verdure<sup>4</sup> out on't.

<sup>1</sup> *requests for favours*

<sup>2</sup> *to suppress for being over-ambitious*

<sup>3</sup> *gained the loyalty of those who owed their success to me*

<sup>4</sup> *vitality, vigour*



Miranda, remembering nothing of the events, tries to imagine her father's suffering:

*Prospero:* ... they prepared  
A rotten carcass of a butt,<sup>1</sup> not rigged,  
Nor tackle, sail, nor mast – the very rats  
Instinctively have quit it. There they hoist us  
To cry to th' sea that roared to us ...

*Miranda:* Alack, what trouble  
Was I then to you?

*Prospero:* O, a cherubin  
Thou wast that did preserve me. Thou didst smile,  
Infused with a fortitude from heaven ...

<sup>1</sup> *tub, cask*

The man given the task of taking Prospero and his daughter out to sea was one of the King's advisers, a man named Gonzalo. Prospero recalls that, although he did his duty, he showed great kindness, making sure that the castaway pair had a supply of food, fresh water and clothes. Most importantly, he remembered Prospero's love of learning:

*Prospero:* ... of his gentleness,  
Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me  
From mine own library with volumes that  
I prize above my dukedom.

So it was, concludes Prospero, that the two of them came to be on this remote island. Miranda has one more question for her father: why did he create the dreadful storm that she has just witnessed? Prospero hints that fate has been kind to him:

*Prospero:* ... By accident most strange, bountiful fortune  
(Now my dear lady) hath mine enemies  
Brought to this shore ...

The two men who conspired against him, his brother and the King of Naples, are now on the island, and under his power. An opportunity to right the wrongs of the past has arisen; Prospero must seize it.

## A successful mission

The story has come to an end and, at her father's command, Miranda falls into a deep sleep.

Prospero now calls for his servant Ariel, an airy spirit being who can take on an infinite variety of shapes and disguises:

*Prospero:* I am ready now.  
Approach, my Ariel. Come.  
*Ariel:* 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.

Ariel confirms that, as commanded, he created a terrifying storm around King Alonso's ship. He reassures his master that no one has been harmed; the passengers, who all jumped into the sea in their panic, have been brought safely to various parts of the island, while the crew are sleeping soundly below decks. The ship itself is anchored securely in one of the island's coves:

*Ariel:* Safely in harbour  
Is the King's ship, in the deep nook where once  
Thou called'st me up at midnight to fetch dew  
From the still-vexed<sup>1</sup> Bermudas; there she's hid,  
The mariners all under hatches stowed ...

<sup>1</sup> *constantly wild and stormy*

The other ships in the fleet, scattered by the storm, have regrouped. Having witnessed the disaster that struck King Alonso's ship, which no one could be expected to survive, they have continued on their journey, taking the sad news of the King's death to Naples.



... the still-vexed Bermudas ...

In 1609, the *Sea Venture* was sent by the Virginia Company of London to carry supplies across the Atlantic to the newly-established colony of Jamestown. The ship was caught in a terrible storm, and attempted to take refuge near an island, as one of the passengers, William Strachey, later recounted:

*“For foure and twenty houres the storme in a restlesse tumult, had blown so exceedingly, as we could not apprehend in our imaginations any possibility of greater violence, yet wee did still finde it ... we were inforced to runne her ashoare, as neere the land as we could ... We found it to be the dangerous and dreaded Iland, or rather Ilands of the Bermuda ... because they be so terrible to all that ever touched on them, and such tempests, thunders, and other fearfull objects are seene and heard about them, that they be called commonly, The Devil’s Ilands, and are feared and avoyded of all sea travellers alive, above any other place in the world.”*

Eventually the captain was forced to run the ship aground on the island’s rocky coast. Astonishingly, all 150 people on board – and even the ship’s dog – were landed safely. They spent several months on the island while new ships were constructed, and eventually completed their journey to Virginia. Contrary to its notorious reputation, Bermuda was found to be pleasant, temperate and fertile.

Back in London, news of the crew’s survival created great excitement. An unpublished draft of Strachey’s report reached London in 1610, and was almost certainly seen by Shakespeare, some of whose acquaintances were involved in the Virginia Company. The story clearly caught his imagination, and provided material for the opening scenes of *The Tempest*; indeed, it may have been the inspiration for the entire play.

## Ariel is reminded of his past

Prospero tells Ariel that, with the ship's passengers safely on shore, there is a lot to do in the next few hours. Ariel protests, and his master in turn becomes angry:

*Ariel:* Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains,  
Let me remember<sup>1</sup> thee what thou hast promised,  
Which is not yet performed me.

*Prospero:* How now? Moody?  
What is't thou canst demand?

*Ariel:* My liberty.

<sup>1</sup> *remind*

One day, Prospero has promised, Ariel will be set free, and will no longer have a master to obey. That time has not yet come, he insists. Ariel reminds him that, in return for his honest, willing service, Prospero had agreed to shorten his period of servitude. In response, Prospero angrily reminds Ariel of the events of the past, and the dreadful suffering from which the spirit was rescued.

An evil witch named Sycorax was banished from Algiers for her malicious activities; she was pregnant, and the authorities did not put her to death, abandoning her instead on this remote, uninhabited island. She made Ariel her servant, but the spirit refused to take part in her wicked schemes. He was punished severely for his disobedience:

*Prospero:* ... thou wast a spirit too delicate  
To act her earthy and abhorred commands,  
Refusing her grand hests<sup>1</sup> – she did confine thee,  
By help of her more potent ministers  
And in her most unmitigable rage,  
Into a cloven pine,<sup>2</sup> within which rift  
Imprisoned thou didst painfully remain  
A dozen years ...

<sup>1</sup> *imperious orders*

<sup>2</sup> *a pine tree that she had split open*



## An unwilling helper

Prospero calls again for Caliban. When he finally arrives, the mutual loathing between them is immediately apparent:

*Prospero:* Thou poisonous slave, got<sup>1</sup> by the devil himself  
Upon thy wicked dam;<sup>2</sup> come forth!

*Caliban:* As wicked dew as ere my mother brushed  
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen<sup>3</sup>  
Drop on you both.

<sup>1</sup> *conceived*

<sup>2</sup> *mother*

<sup>3</sup> *swamp*

Prospero warns Caliban that he will be punished for his hostility and his laziness with aches, cramps and stings all night.

Caliban replies that the island is rightfully his, inherited from his mother; he should not be obliged to serve Prospero. He remembers how different things were when Prospero first arrived:

*Caliban:* ... This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first  
Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me  
Water with berries in't, and teach me how  
To name the bigger light and how the less  
That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee  
And showed thee all the qualities o'th' isle:  
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.  
Cursed be I that did so!

