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The Tempest

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



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THE TEMPEST

THE TEMPEST

William Shakespeare

Edited by
CEDRIC WATTS



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The Wordsworth Classics' Shakespeare Series, with *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry V* and *The Merchant of Venice* as its inaugural volumes, presents a newly-edited sequence of William Shakespeare's works. Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive paperbacks for students and for the general reader. Each play in the Shakespeare Series is accompanied by a standard apparatus, including an introduction, explanatory notes and a glossary. The textual editing takes account of recent scholarship while giving the material a careful reappraisal. The apparatus is, however, concise rather than elaborate. We hope that the resultant volumes prove to be handy, reliable and helpful. Above all, we hope that, from Shakespeare's works, readers will derive pleasure, wisdom, provocation, challenges, and insights: insights into his culture and ours, and into the era of civilisation to which his writings have made – and continue to make – such potently influential contributions. Shakespeare's eloquence will, undoubtedly, re-echo 'in states unborn and accents yet unknown'.

CEDRIC WATTS
Series Editor

INTRODUCTION

'Imaginary gardens with real toads in them.' ¹

Around 1610, as Shakespeare's great sequence of tragedies came to its end, there emerged a distinctive group of late comedies which has been termed 'the romances'. These late works were: *Pericles* (which is largely though not wholly by Shakespeare), *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale* and, finally, *The Tempest*. Since the seventeenth century, that term 'romances' has been applied to literary works which, in contrast to more realistic writings, offer the far-fetched, strange, peculiar and exotic; often they invoke the supernatural.² These plays fit the definition well. We move in unfamiliar times or regions; the magical and supernatural are prominent; events defy everyday logic; bizarre catastrophes are offset by apparent miracles. Although weak productions of these dramas can make parts of them seem ludicrous and preposterous, good productions can create a sense of mythical resonance, poignancy and profundity. We may find ourselves ambushed by emotion and startled by intuitive recognition.

A technical problem faced by Shakespeare in those four romances is the accommodation of two separate chronological periods, so that in the plot a 'time-gap' (of between twelve and twenty years) is evident. If we ask why there is a need for so lengthy an interim, the answer is thematic. Such a time-gap permits innocent children, representing new hope for the future, to become old enough to fall in love, marry and procreate. Their loving harmony compensates for the hateful discords of the past; and their virtue can be dynamic, continuing into the future and perhaps in their offspring. The passage of time is thus generational, generative and regenerative.

Characteristically in these four late plays, we begin with a world which appears to be tragic: we are shown jealousy, corruption, destruction, storms, suffering, death or apparent death. Eventually, by magic or as if by magic, the supposedly dead (or most of them) are found to be alive after all; and those people whose experience of suffering and loss has induced penitence are, unexpectedly and joyfully, reunited with those whom they had supposed gone for ever. Suffering, penitence, atonement, restoration, reconciliation and marriage are thematic preoccupations of these romances. This quartet of plays completes the pattern of Shakespeare's development as a dramatist: they are the post-tragic coda to his career. After immersion in the realm of tragedy, in which, though there may be therapeutic suffering, there is final emphasis on loss and destruction, what better imaginative transition than to a realm in which, after losses have induced some wisdom, the losses are made good, and the apparently dead are eventually resurrected here on earth?

In *Pericles*, there is a gap of more than thirteen years before Pericles can be reunited with his long-lost daughter and, later, with his wife (who had supposedly died at sea and was cast to the waves). In the sub-plot of *Cymbeline*, roughly twenty years elapse before Cymbeline is reunited with his long-lost sons, Guiderius and Arviragus. *The Winter's Tale* offers an interval specified as both fifteen and sixteen years, after which Leontes is reunited with his daughter, Perdita, and his wife, Hermione, both of whom he had thought dead. In *The Tempest*, twelve years elapse between the time when Prospero and his daughter were abandoned to the sea and the present action on the island when Miranda, whose age is now about fourteen, is old enough to become betrothed to Ferdinand. There were two ways in which Shakespeare could deal with the technical problem generated by the thematically-necessary interval of time. One way was obvious and linear: to depict the past corruption, then to declare a time-gap, and finally to depict the newer phase of discovery and recovery. Such was the way of *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. In the former, the choric figure of Gower enters to usher us across the passing years. In the latter, 'Time, the Chorus' himself appears at the start of Act 4 to do the same job. (Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson, derided such devices, which he deemed clumsy and unrealistic.)³ The second

way of dealing with the problem was, obviously, to begin the action on the later side of the gap, employing retrospective narration to explain what had happened before it. So, in *Cymbeline*, a soliloquy by Belarius explains that many years previously he had kidnapped the young princes and that he has, since then, raised them as his sons in the wilds. In *The Tempest*, Prospero informs Miranda about the events that brought them to the island. This method ensures greater structural tidiness, though it does generate fresh problems. Prospero's retrospective speech is very long, and raises questions of realism: why had he not explained such matters long before? Miranda's own responses are inconsistent. She says: 'More to know / Did never meddle with my thoughts': in other words, she had never sought to know about the events prior to the island-life. A few lines later, however, she says that Prospero had often left her to 'a bootless inquisition': he had often failed to satisfy her curiosity. (The former response explains her present ignorance; the latter response provides a cue for Prospero's narration. Her inconsistency is plot-generated.)

To deal with the time-gap by means of a retrospective account certainly helps to make *The Tempest* structurally tidier than *The Winter's Tale*, though we pay a certain price for such tidiness. The latter play gives a stronger sense of destructive corruption, of bitter loss and the process of ageing. Nevertheless, after the sprawling, widely-dispersed action of *The Winter's Tale*, which roams across the decades and travels from Sicilia to Bohemia and back again, there is an impressive elegance and compactness to *The Tempest*. At times it brings to mind the famous neo-classical 'Unities' of action, place and time. Occasionally these have been wrongly attributed to Aristotle's *Poetics*; but Aristotle had emphasised only the need for a well-organised plot, and did not specify 'The Three Unities'; these were neo-classical conventions, influentially formulated by Lodovico Castelvetro in 1570.⁴ Shakespeare approaches them reasonably closely. 'Unity of action' was the stipulation that any sub-plot should be either excluded or strongly integrated with the main plot. (Jean Racine, in such later plays as *Phèdre* and *Andromaque*, effectively met the stipulation.) In *The Tempest*, it may seem that the comic inter-action of Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo provides a diversionary sub-plot, and certainly it offers some farcical comic relief; but it proves to be

integral with the main sequence. Caliban is Prospero's slave, and the comic trio plans to kill Prospero and take power. What's more, they are thus reprising, albeit in a farcical key, the plan of Antonio and Sebastian to kill Alonso so that Sebastian may become King of Naples; and, in a finely co-ordinating irony, Antonio cites as precedent of such an action his own supposedly successful act of usurpation against Prospero. This, in turn, helps to verify Prospero's narrative to Miranda and to give a stronger sense of the corruption that had prevailed on the mainland in the past. The theme of 'opposing the ruler' sounds throughout the play: it is expressed through Antonio (rebelling against his brother, the Duke), Sebastian (agreeing to conspire against his brother, the King), through Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo (in their futile plot against Prospero), briefly through Ferdinand (in his initial attempt to fight his captor), through Ariel (in his opposition to Sycorax, and in his quest for freedom from Prospero), and even, within the masque, through Venus and Cupid (in their plot to subvert the plans of Juno, Queen of the Olympians). In a minor key, the theme is present even in Prospero, to the extent that he is tempted to stray from the divine precept to be merciful.

Ancient drama treated locations flexibly: the action of Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, for instance, roams between Argos, Delphi and Athens. Accordingly, Aristotle did not commend any 'Unity of Place'; but this, too, emerged with neo-classicism in the late sixteenth century. Eventually, Racine (in his *Andromaque*) would reduce the dramatic location to one chamber in a palace, relying on reportage to deal with events outside it. Just how big the 'one place' of a drama should be was obviously open to debate; but, in contrast to the roaming action of *The Winter's Tale*, it is notable that the events of *The Tempest* are relatively localised: after the first scene, in which a vessel is wrecked on the island's coast, the action is confined to that island, and much of the time we are simply 'before Prospero's cell'. Indeed, confinement itself becomes another theme of the drama. Only at a unique time, when a particular star is in the ascendant, can Prospero's magic take effect; and, if all goes well, he may be able, at last, to escape from confinement on the island to the mainland of Italy. During the play, we are reminded that Ariel was once imprisoned in a cloven

tree by Sycorax; and both Ariel and Caliban are held in the power of Prospero's magic. For a while, too, Alonso, Gonzalo, Sebastian, Antonio, Adrian and Francisco are all held paralysed within the enchanted circle inscribed on the ground by Prospero. The mariners are released after being 'clapped under hatches'. Alonso is eventually freed from the mental shackles of guilt and melancholy. Ariel is liberated, and Caliban can choose his own future. The theme resonates in the drama's epilogue, when the actor of Prospero pleads for the applause which will enable him to escape the confinement of the stage. The theatre itself is another 'enchanted circle' confining the audience during the performance.

The Tempest also approaches the neo-classical 'Unity of Time'. Aristotle had simply remarked that 'tragedy tries as far as possible to keep within a single revolution of the sun, or only slightly to exceed it'.⁵ The neo-classical principle, however, was that the duration of the fictional time should be twelve hours at most, and ideally should approximate the real duration of time in the theatre. The plot of *The Tempest* unfolds between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m., and is twice specified as three hours (at 5.1.186 and 223). In the theatre, the length of the action varies considerably according to the nature of the production, but a matinée performance might well last from 2 p.m. to nearly 5 p.m. Among Shakespeare's plays, the two works which come nearest to being neo-classical in convention are *The Tempest*, his last play (if collaborative dramas be excluded), and one of the earliest plays, *The Comedy of Errors*. That early work has an action beginning in the morning and concluding in the evening of the same day. *The Comedy of Errors* is predominantly farcical: exuberantly expanding Plautus's *Menaechmi*, which exploited just one pair of identical twins, Shakespeare provides two pairs, multiplying the cases of mistaken identity. Nevertheless, to the brisk and lively central action, Shakespeare has added material taken from Gower's *Confessio Amantis*; and that material, in a curious anticipation of the late romances, deals with the sundering of a family at a time of storm at sea. Eventually, old Egeon is poignantly reunited not only with his lost sons but also with his wife, whom he believed to have died many years previously. The four romances, then, which so resonantly offer a post-tragic phase after a decade of great tragedies, have had a brief but telling anticipation in *The Comedy of Errors*,

which may imaginatively have served as a post-tragic response to *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's first tragedy.

In their metaphysical implications, the four romances offer a strange blend of the Christian, the classical, and, at times, modes of lyrical mysticism and scepticism. The Christian quality lies in the emphasis on the human capacity not only for sin but also for penitence and atonement, mercy being granted to the penitent. 'The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance', declares Prospero; and by 'virtue' he here means 'forgiveness'. Repeatedly, there are invocations with Christian implications: 'Heavens thank you', 'O the heavens!', cries Miranda; while Prospero asserts that 'Providence divine' had saved the two of them from the ocean. (We may recall the biblical stories of Noah, of Jonah, or of Jesus when he stilled the storm. The raising of Lazarus provides Christian precedent for the resurrection of an apparently dead person on earth.)

Classical theology describes a multiplicity of deities who not only rule mortals but also mingle with them; and those deities are often associated with the seasonal cycle and the bounty of nature. In *The Tempest*, spirits commanded by Prospero assume the rôles of Ceres, Iris and Juno: Ceres, the goddess of cereal crops, Iris, goddess of the rainbow, and Juno, goddess of marriage and procreation. The masque in which they appear helps to integrate the moral process of Prospero's plot with the benign aspects of nature, and thereby to provide a sensuous enrichment of the process so that it combines human and natural procreative forces. In any case, a play incorporating classical figures and dealing with modes of resurrection will remind us (and be enriched by memories) of such classical myths and legends of resurrection as those of Demeter and Persephone, of Admetus and Alcestis, or of Aphrodite and Adonis. Such material, if remote, is yet familiar, evoking the springtime rebirth of verdure and the perennial replacement of the older generation by the younger.

Early in the action of *The Tempest*, Prospero emphasises the contrast between the malign magic of Sycorax and his own benign magic. Nevertheless, to be a magician at all was then suspect and certainly perilous. One of the distinctive features of Prospero's character is a quality of sternness and even, at times, of harshness. His exile to the island bore a grain of justice, for his absorption in

lonely studies had fostered Antonio's act of usurpation. Now, Prospero's attempt to punish his enemies and their companions runs the risk of becoming vindictive; and an important crux occurs when Ariel, in Act 5, scene 1, says:

Your charm so strongly works 'em
That, if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.

When Prospero says: 'Dost thou think so, spirit?', Ariel replies: 'Mine would sir, were I human.' Then Prospero responds with:

And mine shall.
Hast thou (which art but air) a touch, a feeling
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply
Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art?
Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick,
Yet, with my nobler reason, 'gainst my fury
Do I take part . . .

Here a sprite, a thing of air, reminds Prospero of what it is to be truly human; and the play thereby is confirmed as a comedy rather than as a revenge drama. Nevertheless, the speech in which Prospero proclaims his decision to abandon his magic ('Ye elves of hills . . .': 5.1.33-57) reverberates with proud egotism. In that long invocation, the words 'I' and 'my' re-echo repeatedly, so that an actor may easily give him a tone of almost dictatorial harshness. Furthermore, Shakespeare's main source for that speech (which he found in Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*) was a declamation by Medea, the destructive enchantress; so the contrast between benign and malignant magic is, for a while, eroded. Nevertheless, Prospero does indeed break his staff and drown his book. However gratifying the exercise of supernatural power, he will become a mere mortal among mortals; and, on the mainland, he will meditate on the death which awaits him: the death so poignantly invoked in the play's most moving speech. This comes when (in Act 4, scene 1) Prospero has abruptly dismissed the masque. Ferdinand looks dismayed, and Prospero says:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors
(As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air;
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep. Sir, I am vexed.

It's commonplace to say that nothing lasts for ever; but Prospero's way of expressing the idea transforms the commonplace into the visionary and profound. Prospero, explaining the disappearance of the masque, claims that such magical vanishing-tricks are quite natural, because we are all part of one cosmic vanishing-trick: lofty and splendid buildings must all evaporate, and our very planet must, in time, cease to exist. Indeed, the temporal seems to dissolve into the emptily spatial. As for human beings, they are as insubstantial as dreams, and, after the dream of life, we enter the sleep of death. He does not offer the traditional Christian consolation that we may enter eternal life in heaven. The emphasis is on evanescence, a fading away. He has exalted the status of his magic by demoting the status of the reality within which the magic operates. Perhaps that is another reason, apart from his recollection of the conspiracy, for his being vexed. The speech resonates outwards to the audience, for it suggests that theatrical illusion – and such illusions as *The Tempest* itself – may offer a paradigm of our temporary habitation of a dissolving world: a world which vanishes as each of us meets death.

The almost vertiginous interactions of reality and illusion, and the related sense of ambiguous transformations, extend from beginning to end of the play. The opening scene, in which the ship is beset by storm and starts to sink, seems graphically realistic; yet the next scene assures us that the manifest destruction was largely illusory. At the play's end, the Epilogue blurs the distinction between reality and illusion by letting the speaker be partly Prospero, partly the actor playing Prospero, and partly (to the ears