Prospero

The play’s protagonist, and father of Miranda. Twelve years before the events of the play, Prospero was the duke of Milan. His brother, Antonio, in concert with Alonso, king of Naples, usurped him, forcing him to flee in a boat with his daughter. The honest lord Gonzalo aided Prospero in his escape. Prospero has spent his twelve years on the island refining the magic that gives him the power he needs to punish and forgive his enemies.

Prospero is one of Shakespeare’s more enigmatic protagonists. He is a sympathetic character in that he was wronged by his usurping brother, but his absolute power over the other characters and his overwrought speeches make him difficult to like. In our first glimpse of him, he appears puffed up and self-important, and his repeated insistence that Miranda pay attention suggest that his story is boring her. Once Prospero moves on to a subject other than his absorption in the pursuit of knowledge, Miranda’s attention is riveted.

The pursuit of knowledge gets Prospero into trouble in the first place. By neglecting everyday matters when he was duke, he gave his brother a chance to rise up against him. His possession and use of magical knowledge renders him extremely powerful and not entirely sympathetic. His punishments of Caliban are petty and vindictive, as he calls upon his spirits to pinch Caliban when he curses. He is defensively autocratic with Ariel. For example, when Ariel reminds his master of his promise to relieve him of his duties early if he performs them willingly, Prospero bursts into fury and threatens to return him to his former imprisonment and torment. He is similarly unpleasant in his
treatment of Ferdinand, leading him to his daughter and then imprisoning and enslaving him.

Despite his shortcomings as a man, however, Prospero is central to *The Tempest*’s narrative. Prospero generates the plot of the play almost single-handedly, as his various schemes, spells, and manipulations all work as part of his grand design to achieve the play’s happy ending. Watching Prospero work through *The Tempest* is like watching a dramatist create a play, building a story from material at hand and developing his plot so that the resolution brings the world into line with his idea of goodness and justice. Many critics and readers of the play have interpreted Prospero as a surrogate for Shakespeare, enabling the audience to explore first hand the ambiguities and ultimate wonder of the creative endeavour.

Prospero’s final speech, in which he likens himself to a playwright by asking the audience for applause, strengthens this reading of the play, and makes the play’s final scene function as a moving celebration of creativity, humanity, and art. Prospero emerges as a more likable and sympathetic figure in the final two acts of the play. In these acts, his love for Miranda, his forgiveness of his enemies, and the legitimately happy ending his scheme creates all work to mitigate some of the undesirable means he has used to achieve his happy ending. If Prospero sometimes seems autocratic, he ultimately manages to persuade the audience to share his understanding of the world—an achievement that is, after all, the final goal of every author and every play.

**Miranda**

*The daughter of Prospero, Miranda was brought to the island at an early age and has never seen any men other than her father and Caliban, though she dimly remembers being cared for by female servants as an infant. Because she has been sealed off from the world for so long, Miranda’s perceptions of other people tend to be naïve and non-judgmental. She is compassionate, generous, and loyal to her father.*
Just under fifteen years old, Miranda is a gentle and compassionate, but also relatively passive, heroine. From her very first lines she displays a meek and emotional nature. “O, I have suffered / With those that I saw suffer!” she says of the shipwreck (I.ii.5–6), and hearing Prospero’s tale of their narrow escape from Milan, she says “I, not rememb’ring how I cried out then, / Will cry it o’er again” (I.ii.133–134). Miranda does not choose her own husband. Instead, while she sleeps, Prospero sends Ariel to fetch Ferdinand, and arranges things so that the two will come to love one another. After Prospero has given the lovers his blessing, he and Ferdinand talk with surprising frankness about her virginity and the pleasures of the marriage bed while she stands quietly by. Prospero tells Ferdinand to be sure not to “break her virgin-knot” before the wedding night (IV.i.15), and Ferdinand replies with no small anticipation that lust shall never take away “the edge of that day’s celebration” (IV.i.29). In the play’s final scene, Miranda is presented, with Ferdinand, almost as a prop or piece of the scenery as Prospero draws aside a curtain to reveal the pair playing chess. But while Miranda is passive in many ways, she has at least two moments of surprising forthrightness and strength that complicate the reader’s impressions of her as a naïve young girl. The first such moment is in Act I, scene ii, in which she and Prospero converse with Caliban. Prospero alludes to the fact that Caliban once tried to rape Miranda. When Caliban rudely agrees that he intended to violate her, Miranda responds with impressive vehemence, clearly appalled at Caliban’s light attitude toward his attempted rape. She goes on to scold him for being ungrateful for her attempts to educate him: “When thou didst not, savage, / Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like / A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes / With words that made them known” (358–361). These lines are so surprising coming from the mouth of Miranda that many editors have amended the text and given it to Prospero. This reattribution seems to give Miranda too little credit. In Act III, scene i comes the second surprising moment—Miranda’s marriage proposal to Ferdinand: “I am your wife, if you will marry me; / If not, I’ll die your maid” (III.i.83–84). Her proposal comes shortly after Miranda has
told herself to remember her “father’s precepts” (III.i.58) forbidding conversation with Ferdinand. As the reader can see in her speech to Caliban in Act I, scene ii, Miranda is willing to speak up for herself about her sexuality.

Ariel

Prospero’s spirit helper. Ariel is referred to throughout this and in most criticism as “he,” but his gender and physical form are ambiguous. Rescued by Prospero from a long imprisonment at the hands of the witch Sycorax, Ariel is Prospero’s servant until Prospero decides to release him. He is mischievous and ubiquitous, able to traverse the length of the island in an instant and to change shapes at will. He carries out virtually every task that Prospero needs accomplished in the play.

Ariel is a spirit who works in Prospero’s service. Prospero first encountered Ariel soon after landing on the island. He found Ariel trapped in a cloven pine tree and freed the spirit from his prison. In return, Ariel promised to serve Prospero faithfully for a year, after which time Prospero would give Ariel back his freedom. We don’t know how long Ariel has already worked for Prospero when the play begins. Prospero has been on the island for twelve years, so Ariel might have been in his service for many more years than their agreement required. Then again, possibly Prospero freed Ariel from the tree only a year prior to the events of the play. Either way, Prospero’s unwillingness to set Ariel free stems from the fact that Ariel possesses immense power. As the spirit explains in his first lines in the play, not only does he have an impressive range of abilities, but he also commands a host of lesser spirits. Given Ariel’s extraordinary magical abilities, Prospero leans heavily on him to execute his complex revenge plot. Ariel has spent a lot of time around humans and he learned a thing or two about them. In Act V, for example, he appears to take pity on the castaways. He tells Prospero that if he were human his “affections” would be “tender,” convinces Prospero to stop using magic and reconcile with his enemies. Ariel effectively manipulates Prospero by appealing to his humanity, and in doing so he ushers himself closer to freedom.
Caliban

Another of Prospero’s servants. Caliban, the son of the now-deceased witch Sycorax, acquainted Prospero with the island when Prospero arrived. Caliban believes that the island rightfully belongs to him and has been stolen by Prospero. His speech and behavior is sometimes coarse and brutal, as in his drunken scenes with Stephano and Trinculo (II.ii, IV.i), and sometimes eloquent and sensitive, as in his rebukes of Prospero in Act I, scene ii, and in his description of the eerie beauty of the island in Act III, scene ii (III.ii.130-138).

Prospero’s dark, earthy slave, frequently referred to as a monster by the other characters, Caliban is the son of a witch-hag and the only real native of the island to appear in the play. He is an extremely complex figure, and he mirrors or parodies several other characters in the play. In his first speech to Prospero, Caliban insists that Prospero stole the island from him. Through this speech, Caliban suggests that his situation is much the same as Prospero’s, whose brother usurped his dukedom. On the other hand, Caliban’s desire for sovereignty of the island mirrors the lust for power that led Antonio to overthrow Prospero. Caliban’s conspiracy with Stephano and Trinculo to murder Prospero mirrors Antonio and Sebastian’s plot against Alonso, as well as Antonio and Alonso’s original conspiracy against Prospero.

Caliban both mirrors and contrasts with Prospero’s other servant, Ariel. While Ariel is “an airy spirit,” Caliban is of the earth, his speeches turning to “springs, brine pits” (I.ii.341), “bogs, fens, flats” (II.ii.2), or crabapples and pignuts (II.ii.159–160). While Ariel maintains his dignity and his freedom by serving Prospero willingly, Caliban achieves a different kind of dignity by refusing, if only sporadically, to bow before Prospero’s intimidation.

Surprisingly, Caliban also mirrors and contrasts with Ferdinand in certain ways. In Act II, scene ii Caliban enters “with a burden of wood,” and Ferdinand enters in Act III, scene i “bearing a log.” Both Caliban and Ferdinand profess an interest in untying Miranda’s
“virgin knot.” Ferdinand plans to marry her, while Caliban has attempted to rape her. The glorified, romantic, almost ethereal love of Ferdinand for Miranda starkly contrasts with Caliban’s desire to impregnate Miranda and people the island with Calibans.

Finally, and most tragically, Caliban becomes a parody of himself. In his first speech to Prospero, he regretfully reminds the magician of how he showed him all the ins and outs of the island when Prospero first arrived. Only a few scenes later, however, we see Caliban drunk and fawning before a new magical being in his life: Stephano and his bottle of liquor. Soon, Caliban begs to show Stephano the island and even asks to lick his shoe. Caliban repeats the mistakes he claims to curse. In his final act of rebellion, he is once more entirely subdued by Prospero in the most petty way—he is dunked in a stinking bog and ordered to clean up Prospero’s cell in preparation for dinner.

Despite his savage demeanor and grotesque appearance, however, Caliban has a nobler, more sensitive side that the audience is only allowed to glimpse briefly, and which Prospero and Miranda do not acknowledge at all. His beautiful speeches about his island home provide some of the most affecting imagery in the play, reminding the audience that Caliban really did occupy the island before Prospero came, and that he may be right in thinking his enslavement to be monstrously unjust. Caliban’s swarthy appearance, his forced servitude, and his native status on the island have led many readers to interpret him as a symbol of the native cultures occupied and suppressed by European colonial societies, which are represented by the power of Prospero. Whether or not one accepts this allegory, Caliban remains one of the most intriguing and ambiguous minor characters in all of Shakespeare, a sensitive monster who allows himself to be transformed into a fool.
**Ferdinand**
Son and heir of Alonso. Ferdinand seems in some ways to be as pure and naïve as Miranda. He falls in love with her upon first sight and happily submits to servitude in order to win her father’s approval.

**Alonso**
King of Naples and father of Ferdinand. Alonso aided Antonio in unseating Prospero as Duke of Milan twelve years before. As he appears in the play, however, he is acutely aware of the consequences of all his actions. He blames his decision to marry his daughter to the Prince of Tunis on the apparent death of his son. In addition, after the magical banquet, he regrets his role in the usurping of Prospero.

**Antonio**
Prospero’s brother. Antonio quickly demonstrates that he is power-hungry and foolish. In Act II, scene i, he persuades Sebastian to kill the sleeping Alonso. He then goes along with Sebastian’s absurd story about fending off lions when Gonzalo wakes up and catches Antonio and Sebastian with their swords drawn.

**Sebastian**
Alonso’s brother. Like Antonio, he is both aggressive and cowardly. He is easily persuaded to kill his brother in Act II, scene i, and he initiates the ridiculous story about lions when Gonzalo catches him with his sword drawn.

**Gonzalo**
An old, honest lord, Gonzalo helped Prospero and Miranda to escape after Antonio usurped Prospero’s title. Gonzalo’s speeches provide an important commentary on the events of the play, as he remarks on the beauty of the island when the stranded party first lands, then on the desperation of Alonso after the magic banquet, and on the miracle of the reconciliation in Act V, scene i.
Gonzalo is among the men cast ashore during the tempest that opens the play. He serves as a counselor to Alonso, the King of Naples, though he once worked in Prospero’s service, back when he was Duke of Milan. In fact, Gonzalo helped Prospero and Miranda escape Milan. He filled their shabby boat with food, clothing, and prized books on the magic arts from Prospero’s library. The care he took to ensure Prospero and Miranda’s survival indicates an innate kindness and compassion that he continues to embody throughout the play. Gonzalo attempts to get other characters to act kindly toward one another. In Act II, for instance, Gonzalo chastises Sebastian for blaming the shipwreck on Alonso. “My lord Sebastian,” he says: “The truth you speak doth lack some gentleness / And time to speak it in. You rub the sore / When you should bring the plaster” (II.i.). With these lines, Gonzalo articulates his philosophy that kindness is always more productive than harshness.

For all that Gonzalo represents a beacon of kindness, he’s also somewhat naïve. For instance, when he tries to cheer Alonso up at the top of Act II, his words only offer cold comfort: “Beseech you, sir, be merry. You have cause, / So have we all, of joy, for our escape / Is much beyond our loss” (II.i.). Alonso, who believes he’s just lost his son to the sea, doesn’t find Gonzalo’s cheerful words very consoling, despite their good intentions. Gonzalo’s naïveté also provides a source of amusement for Antonio and Sebastian, who talk circles around him and laugh at his expense. Yet Gonzalo may not be as naïve as these two cynics believe. He knows he’s an object of ridicule, but he remains steadfast in the face of their inconstancy. At one point, when Antonio tells him not to get upset on account of their jokes, Gonzalo responds maturely: “No, I warrant you, I will not adventure my discretion so weakly” (II.i.). Ultimately, with the reconciliation that concludes the play, Gonzalo’s kindness wins out over his companions’ cynicism.
Trinculo & Stephano

Trinculo, a jester, and Stephano, a drunken butler, are two minor members of the shipwrecked party. They provide a comic foil to the other, more powerful pairs of Prospero and Alonso and Antonio and Sebastian. Their drunken boasting and petty greed reflect and deflate the quarrels and power struggles of Prospero and the other noblemen.

Boatswain

Appearing only in the first and last scenes, the Boatswain is vigorously good-natured. He seems competent and almost cheerful in the shipwreck scene, demanding practical help rather than weeping and praying. And he seems surprised but not stunned when he awakens from a long sleep at the end of the play.