Summary & Analysis

Act I, scene i

Summary

A violent storm rages around a small ship at sea. The master of the ship calls for his boatswain to rouse the mariners to action and prevent the ship from being run aground by the tempest. Chaos ensues. Some mariners enter, followed by a group of nobles comprised of Alonso, King of Naples, Sebastian, his brother, Antonio, Gonzalo, and others. We do not learn these men's names in this scene, nor do we learn (as we finally do in Act II, scene i) that they have just come from Tunis, in Africa, where Alonso's daughter, Claribel, has been married to the prince. As the Boatswain and his crew take in the topsail and the topmast, Alonso and his party are merely underfoot, and the Boatswain tells them to get below-decks. Gonzalo reminds the Boatswain that one of the passengers is of some importance, but the Boatswain is unmoved. He will do what he has to in order to save the ship, regardless of who is aboard.

The lords go belowdecks, and then, adding to the chaos of the scene, three of them—Sebastian, Antonio, and Gonzalo—enter again only four lines later. Sebastian and Antonio curse the Boatswain in his labours, masking their fear with profanity. Some mariners enter wet and crying, and only at this point does the audience learn the identity of the passengers on-board. Gonzalo orders the mariners to pray for the king and the prince. There is a strange noise—perhaps the sound of thunder, splitting wood, or roaring water—and the cry of mariners. Antonio, Sebastian, and Gonzalo, preparing to sink to a watery grave, go in search of the king.

Analysis

Even for a Shakespeare play, The Tempest is remarkable for its extraordinary breadth of imaginative vision. The play is steeped in magic and illusion. As a result, the play
contains a tremendous amount of spectacle, yet things are often not as they seem. This opening scene certainly contains spectacle, in the form of the howling storm (the “tempest” of the play’s title) tossing the little ship about and threatening to kill the characters before the play has even begun. In terms of stagecraft, it was a significant gamble for Shakespeare to open his play with this spectacular natural event, given that, in the early seventeenth century when the play was written, special effects were largely left to the audience’s imagination.

Shakespeare’s stage would have been almost entirely bare, without many physical signs that the actors were supposed to be on a ship, much less a ship in the midst of a lashing storm. As a result, the audience sees Shakespeare calling on all the resources of his theatre to establish a certain level of realism. For example, the play begins with a “noise of thunder and lightning” (stage direction). The first word, “Boatswain!” immediately indicates that the scene is the deck of a ship. In addition, characters rush frantically in and out, often with no purpose—as when Sebastian, Antonio, and Gonzalo exit at line 29 and re-enter at 33, indicating the general level of chaos and confusion. Cries from off-stage create the illusion of a space below-decks.

But in addition to this spectacle, the play also uses its first scene to hint at some of the illusions and deceptions it will contain. Most plays of this era, by Shakespeare and others, use the introductory scene to present the main characters and hint at the general narrative to come—so Othello begins with Iago’s jealousy, and King Lear begins with Lear’s decision to abdicate his throne. But The Tempest begins toward the end of the actual story, late in Prospero’s exile. Its opening scene is devoted to what appears to be an unexplained natural phenomenon, in which characters who are never named rush about frantically in service of no apparent plot. In fact, the confusion of the opening is itself misleading, for as we will learn later, the storm is not a natural phenomenon at all, but a deliberate magical conjuring by Prospero, designed to bring the ship to the island. The tempest is, in fact, central to the plot.
But there is more going on in this scene than initially meets the eye. The apparently chaotic exchanges of the characters introduce the important motif of master-servant relationships. The characters on the boat are divided into nobles, such as Antonio and Gonzalo, and servants or professionals, such as the Boatswain. The mortal danger of the storm upsets the usual balance between these two groups, and the Boatswain, attempting to save the ship, comes into direct conflict with the hapless nobles, who, despite their helplessness, are extremely irritated at being rudely spoken to by a commoner. The characters in the scene are never named outright; they are only referred to in terms that indicate their social stations: “Boatswain,” “Master,” “King,” and “Prince.” As the scene progresses, the characters speak less about the storm than about the class conflict underlying their attempts to survive it—a conflict between masters and servants that, as the story progresses, becomes perhaps the major motif of the play.

Gonzalo, for instance, jokes that the ship is safe because the uppity Boatswain was surely born to be hanged, not drowned in a storm: “I have great comfort from this fellow: methinks he hath no drowning mark upon him; his complexion is perfect gallows” (I.i.25–27). For his part, the Boatswain observes that social hierarchies are flimsy and unimportant in the face of nature’s wrath. “What cares these roarers,” he asks, referring to the booming thunder, “for the name of king?” (I.i.15–16). The irony here, of course, is that, unbeknownst to the occupants of the ship, and to the audience, the storm is not natural at all, but is in fact a product of another kind power: Prospero’s magic.

**Act I, scene ii**

**Summary**

Prospero and Miranda stand on the shore of the island, having just witnessed the shipwreck. Miranda entreats her father to see that no one on-board comes to any harm. Prospero assures her that no one was harmed and tells her that it’s time she learned
who she is and where she comes from. Miranda seems curious, noting that Prospero has often started to tell her about herself but always stopped. However, once Prospero begins telling his tale, he asks her three times if she is listening to him. He tells her that he was once Duke of Milan and famous for his great intelligence.

Prospero explains that he gradually grew uninterested in politics, however, and turned his attention more and more to his studies, neglecting his duties as duke. This gave his brother Antonio an opportunity to act on his ambition. Working in concert with the King of Naples, Antonio usurped Prospero of his dukedom. Antonio arranged for the King of Naples to pay him an annual tribute and do him homage as duke. Later, the King of Naples helped Antonio raise an army to march on Milan, driving Prospero out. Prospero tells how he and Miranda escaped from death at the hands of the army in a barely-seaworthy boat prepared for them by his loyal subjects. Gonzalo, an honest Neapolitan, provided them with food and clothing, as well as books from Prospero’s library.

Having brought Miranda up to date on how she arrived at their current home, Prospero explains that sheer good luck has brought his former enemies to the island. Miranda suddenly grows very sleepy, perhaps because Prospero charms her with his magic. When she is asleep, Prospero calls forth his spirit, Ariel. In his conversation with Ariel, we learn that Prospero and the spirit were responsible for the storm of Act I, scene i. Flying about the ship, Ariel acted as the wind, the thunder, and the lightning. When everyone except the crew had abandoned the ship, Ariel made sure, as Prospero had requested, that all were brought safely to shore but dispersed around the island. Ariel reports that the king’s son is alone. He also tells Prospero that the mariners and Boatswain have been charmed to sleep in the ship, which has been brought safely to harbor. The rest of the fleet that was with the ship, believing it to have been destroyed by the storm, has headed safely back to Naples.
Prospero thanks Ariel for his service, and Ariel takes this moment to remind Prospero of his promise to take one year off of his agreed time of servitude if Ariel performs his services without complaint. Prospero does not take well to being reminded of his promises, and he chastises Ariel for his impudence. He reminds Ariel of where he came from and how Prospero rescued him. Ariel had been a servant of Sycorax, a witch banished from Algiers (Algeria) and sent to the island long ago. Ariel was too delicate a spirit to perform her horrible commands, so she imprisoned him in a “cloven pine” (I.ii.279). She did not free him before she died, and he might have remained imprisoned forever had not Prospero arrived and rescued him. Reminding Ariel of this, Prospero threatens to imprison him for twelve years if he does not stop complaining. Ariel promises to be more polite. Prospero then gives him a new command: he must go make himself like a nymph of the sea and be invisible to all but Prospero. Ariel goes to do so, and Prospero, turning to Miranda’s sleeping form, calls upon his daughter to awaken. She opens her eyes and, not realizing that she has been enchanted, says that the “strangeness” of Prospero’s story caused her to fall asleep.

**Analysis**

Act I, scene ii opens with the revelation that it was Prospero’s magic, and not simply a hostile nature, that raised the storm that caused the shipwreck. From there, the scene moves into a long sequence devoted largely to telling the play’s background story while introducing the major characters on the island. The first part of the scene is devoted to two long histories, both told by Prospero, one to Miranda and one to Ariel. If The Tempest is a play about power in various forms (as we observed in the previous scene, when the power of the storm disrupted the power relations between nobles and servants), then Prospero is the center of power, controlling events throughout the play through magic and manipulation. Prospero’s retellings of past events to Miranda and Ariel do more than simply fill the audience in on the story so far. They also illustrate how
Prospero maintains his power, exploring the old man’s meticulous methods of controlling those around him through magic, charisma, and rhetoric.

Prospero’s rhetoric is particularly important to observe in this section, especially in his confrontation with Ariel. Of all the characters in the play, Prospero alone seems to understand that controlling history enables one to control the present—that is, that one can control others by controlling how they understand the past. Prospero thus tells his story with a highly rhetorical emphasis on his own good deeds, the bad deeds of others toward him, and the ingratitude of those he has protected from the evils of others. For example, when he speaks to Miranda, he calls his brother “perfidious,” then immediately says that he loved his brother better than anyone in the world except Miranda (I.ii.68). He repeatedly asks Miranda, “Dost thou attend me?” Through his questioning, he commands her attention almost hypnotically as he tells her his one-sided version of the story. Prospero himself does not seem blameless. While his brother did betray him, he also failed in his responsibilities as a ruler by giving up control of the government so that he could study. He contrasts his popularity as a leader—“the love my people bore me” (I.ii.141)—with his brother’s “evil nature” (I.ii.).

When he speaks to Ariel, a magical creature over whom his mastery is less certain than over his doting daughter, Prospero goes to even greater lengths to justify himself. He treats Ariel as a combination of a pet, whom he can praise and blame as he chooses, and a pupil, demanding that the spirit recite answers to questions about the past that Prospero has taught him. Though Ariel must know the story well, Prospero says that he must “once in a month” recount Ariel’s history with Sycorax, simply to ensure that his servant’s fickle nature does not cause him to become disloyal. Every time he retells Ariel’s history, we feel, he must increase both the persuasiveness of his own story and his control over Ariel. This is why he now chooses to claim that Ariel is behaving badly—so that he can justify a retelling of the history, even though Ariel is perfectly respectful. He forces Ariel to recall the misery he suffered while trapped in the pine tree (“thy groans / Did make wolves howl,” I.ii.289–290). He then positions himself as the
good savior who overthrew Sycorax’s evil. However, he immediately follows this with a
forceful display of his own magical power, threatening to trap Ariel in an oak just as the
“evil” Sycorax had trapped him in a pine. In this way, Prospero exercises control both
intellectually and physically. By controlling the way Ariel and Miranda think about their
lives, he makes it difficult for them to imagine that challenging his authority would be a
good thing to do, and by threatening Ariel (and, shortly thereafter, Caliban) with magical
torture, he sets very high stakes for any such rebellion. For his part, Ariel promises to
“do my spiriting gently” from now on.

Act I, scene ii (continued)

Summary
After Miranda is fully awake, Prospero suggests that they converse with their servant
Caliban, the son of Sycorax. Caliban appears at Prospero’s call and begins cursing.
Prospero promises to punish him by giving him cramps at night, and Caliban responds
by chiding Prospero for imprisoning him on the island that once belonged to him alone.
He reminds Prospero that he showed him around when he first arrived. Prospero
accuses Caliban of being ungrateful for all that he has taught and given him. He calls
him a “lying slave” and reminds him of the effort he made to educate him (I.ii.347).
Caliban’s hereditary nature, he continues, makes him unfit to live among civilized
people and earns him his isolation on the island. Caliban, though, cleverly notes that he
knows how to curse only because Prospero and Miranda taught him to speak. Prospero
then sends him away, telling him to fetch more firewood and threatening him with more
cramps and aches if he refuses. Caliban obeys him.
Ariel, playing music and singing, enters and leads in Ferdinand. Prospero tells Miranda
to look upon Ferdinand, and Miranda, who has seen no humans in her life other than
Prospero and Caliban, immediately falls in love. Ferdinand is similarly smitten and
reveals his identity as the prince of Naples. Prospero is pleased that they are so taken
with each other but decides that the two must not fall in love too quickly, and so he
accuses Ferdinand of merely pretending to be the prince of Naples. When he tells
Ferdinand he is going to imprison him, Ferdinand draws his sword, but Prospero charms him so that he cannot move. Miranda attempts to persuade her father to have mercy, but he silences her harshly. This man, he tells her, is a mere Caliban compared to other men. He explains that she simply doesn’t know any better because she has never seen any others. Prospero leads the charmed and helpless Ferdinand to his imprisonment. Secretly, he thanks the invisible Ariel for his help, sends him on another mysterious errand, and promises to free him soon.

**Analysis**

*You taught me language, and my profit on’t
Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language!* (I.ii.366–368)

The introduction of Caliban at the start of this section gives Prospero yet another chance to retell the history of one of the island’s denizens, simultaneously filling the audience in on the background of Sycorax’s unfortunate son and reasserting his power over the dour Caliban. Unlike Ariel and Miranda, however, Caliban attempts to use language as a weapon against Prospero just as Prospero uses it against Caliban. Caliban admits that he once tried to rape Miranda, but rather than showing contrition, he says that he wishes he would have been able to finish the deed, so that he could have “peopled . . . / This isle with Calibans” (I.ii.353–354). He insists that the island is his but that Prospero took it from him by flattering Caliban into teaching him about the island and then betraying and enslaving him. Prospero lists Caliban’s shortcomings and describes his own good treatment of him, but Caliban answers with curses. We sense that there is more at stake here than a mere shouting-match. If words and histories are a source of power, then Prospero’s control over Caliban rests on his ability to master him through words, and the closer Caliban comes to outdoing Prospero in their cursing-match, the closer Caliban comes to achieving his freedom. In the end, Caliban only relents because he fears Prospero’s magic, which, he says, is so powerful that it would make a slave of his witch-mother’s god, Setebos.
The re-entrance of Ariel creates an immediate and powerful contrast between Prospero’s two servants. Where Caliban is coarse, resentful, and brutish, described as a “[h]ag-seed” (I.ii.368), a “poisonous” (I.ii.322) and “most lying slave” (I.ii.347) and as “earth” (I.ii.317), Ariel is delicate, refined, and gracious, described in the Dramatis personae as an “airy spirit.” Ariel is indeed a spirit of air and fire, while Caliban is a creature of earth. Though the two are both Prospero’s servants, Ariel serves the magician somewhat willingly, in return for his freeing him from the pine, while Caliban resists serving him at all costs. In a sense, upon arriving on the island, Prospero enslaved Caliban and freed Ariel, imprisoning the dark, earthy “monster” and releasing the bright, airy spirit. Readers who interpret The Tempest as an allegory about European colonial practices generally deem Prospero’s treatment of Ariel, and especially of Caliban, to represent the disruptive effect of European colonization on native societies. Prospero’s colonization has left Caliban, the original owner of the island, subject to enslavement and hatred on account of his dark countenance and—in the eyes of Prospero, a European—rough appearance.

Prospero’s treatment of Ferdinand at the end of this scene re-emphasizes his power and his willingness to manipulate others to achieve his own ends. Though he is pleased by his daughter’s obvious attraction to the powerful young man, Prospero does not want their love to get ahead of his plans. As a result, he has no qualms about enchanting Ferdinand and lying to Miranda about Ferdinand’s unworthiness. This willingness to deceive even his beloved daughter draws attention to the moral and psychological ambiguities surrounding Shakespeare’s depiction of Prospero’s character.

Though many readers view The Tempest as an allegory about creativity, in which Prospero and his magic work as metaphors for Shakespeare and his art, others find Prospero’s apparently narcissistic moral sense disturbing. Prospero seems to think that his own sense of justice and goodness is so well-honed and accurate that, if any other character disagrees with him, that character is wrong simply by virtue of the disagreement. He also seems to think that his objective in restoring his political power is
so important that it justifies any means he chooses to use—hence his lying, his manipulations, his cursing, and the violence of his magic. Perhaps the most troubling part of all this is that Shakespeare gives us little reason to believe he disagrees with Prospero: for better or worse, Prospero is the hero of the play.

**Act II, scene i**

**Summary**

While Ferdinand is falling in love with Miranda, Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo, and other shipwrecked lords search for him on another part of the island. Alonso is quite despondent and unreceptive to the good-natured Gonzalo’s attempts to cheer him up. Gonzalo meets resistance from Antonio and Sebastian as well. These two childishly mock Gonzalo’s suggestion that the island is a good place to be and that they are all lucky to have survived. Alonso finally brings the repartee to a halt when he bursts out at Gonzalo and openly expresses regret at having married away his daughter in Tunis. Francisco, a minor lord, pipes up at this point that he saw Ferdinand swimming valiantly after the wreck, but this does not comfort Alonso. Sebastian and Antonio continue to provide little help. Sebastian tells his brother that he is indeed to blame for Ferdinand’s death—if he had not married his daughter to an African (rather than a European), none of this would have happened.

Gonzalo tells the lords that they are only making the situation worse and attempts to change the subject, discussing what he might do if he were the lord of the island. Antonio and Sebastian mock his utopian vision. Ariel then enters, playing “solemn music” (II.i.182, stage direction), and gradually all but Sebastian and Antonio fall asleep. Seeing the vulnerability of his sleeping companions, Antonio tries to persuade Sebastian to kill his brother. He rationalizes this scheme by explaining that Claribel, who is now Queen of Tunis, is too far from Naples to inherit the kingdom should her father
die, and as a result, Sebastian would be the heir to the throne. Sebastian begins to warm to the idea, especially after Antonio tells him that usurping Prospero’s dukedom was the best move he ever made. Sebastian wonders aloud whether he will be afflicted by conscience, but Antonio dismisses this out of hand. Sebastian is at last convinced, and the two men draw their swords. Sebastian, however, seems to have second thoughts at the last moment and stops. While he and Antonio confer, Ariel enters with music, singing in Gonzalo’s ear that a conspiracy is under way and that he should “Awake, awake!” (II.i.301). Gonzalo wakes and shouts “Preserve the King!” His exclamation wakes everyone else (II.i.303). Sebastian quickly concocts a story about hearing a loud noise that caused him and Antonio to draw their swords. Gonzalo is obviously suspicious but does not challenge the lords. The group continues its search for Ferdinand.

**Analysis**

As in the storm scene in Act I, scene i, Shakespeare emphasizes and undercuts the capacity of the bare stage to create a convincing illusion throughout Act II, scene i. As the shipwrecked mariners look around the island, they describe it in poetry of great imagistic richness, giving the audience an imaginary picture of the setting of the play. Even so, they disagree about what they see, and even argue over what the island actually looks like. Adrian finds it to be of “subtle, tender, and delicate temperance,” where “the air breathes upon us . . . most sweetly” (II.i.42–47). Gonzalo says that the grass is “lush and lusty” and “green” (II.i.53–54). Antonio and Sebastian, however, cynical to the last, refuse to let these descriptions rest in the audience’s mind. They say that the air smells “as ‘twere perfumed by a fen” (II.i.49), meaning a swamp, and that the ground “indeed is tawny” (II.i.55), or brown. The remarks of Antonio and Sebastian could be easily discounted as mere grumpiness, were it not for the fact that Gonzalo and Adrian do seem at times to be stretching the truth. (Adrian, for example, begins his remarks about the island’s beauty by saying, “Though this island seem to be desert . . .
Uninhabitable, and almost inaccessible" [II.i.35–38].) Thus the bareness of the stage allows the beauty and other qualities of the island to be largely a matter of perspective. The island may be a paradise, but only if one chooses to see it that way.

Shakespeare uses this ambiguous setting for several different purposes. First, the setting heightens the sense of wonder and mystery that surrounds the magical island. It also gives each audience member a great deal of freedom to imagine the island as he or she so chooses. Most importantly, however, it enables the island to work as a reflection of character—we know a great deal about different characters simply from how they choose to see the island. Hence the dark, sensitive Caliban can find it both a place of terror—as when he enters, frightened and overworked in Act II, scene ii—and of great beauty—as in his “the isle is full of noises” speech (III.ii.130–138). Therefore, both Gonzalo (at II.i.147–164) and Trinculo (throughout Act III, scene ii), colonially minded, are so easily able to imagine it as the site of their own utopian societies.

Gonzalo’s fantasy about the plantation he would like to build on the island is a remarkable poetic evocation of a utopian society, in which no one would work, all people would be equal and live off the land, and all women would be “innocent and pure.” This vision indicates something of Gonzalo’s own innocence and purity. Shakespeare treats the old man’s idea of the island as a kind of lovely dream, in which the frustrations and obstructions of life (magistrates, wealth, power) would be removed and all could live naturally and authentically. Though Gonzalo’s idea is not presented as a practical possibility (hence the mockery he receives from Sebastian and Antonio), Gonzalo’s dream contrasts to his credit with the power-obsessed ideas of most of the other characters, including Prospero. Gonzalo would do away with the very master-servant motif that lies at the heart of The Tempest.

The mockery dished out by Antonio and Sebastian reveals, by contrast, something of the noblemen’s cynicism and lack of feeling. Where Gonzalo is simply grateful and optimistic about having survived the shipwreck, Antonio and Sebastian seem mainly to be annoyed by it, though not so annoyed that they stop their incessant jesting with each
other. Gonzalo says that they are simply loudmouthed jokers, who “would lift the moon out of her sphere, if she would continue in it five weeks without changing” (II.i.179–181). By conspiring against the king, however, they reveal themselves as more sinister and greedier than Gonzalo recognizes, using their verbal wit to cover up their darker and more wicked impulses. However, their greediness for power is both foolish and clumsy. As they attempt to cover their treachery with the story of the “bellowing / Like bulls, or rather lions” (II.i.307–308), it seems hard to believe that Antonio ever could have risen successfully against his brother. The absurdly aggressive behaviour of Antonio and Sebastian makes Prospero’s exercise of power in the previous and following scenes seem necessary. It also puts Alonso in a sympathetic position. He is a potential victim of the duo’s treachery, a fact that helps the audience believe his conversion when he reconciles with Prospero at the end.

**Act II, scene ii**

**Summary**

Caliban enters with a load of wood, and thunder sounds in the background. Caliban curses and describes the torments that Prospero’s spirits subject him to: they pinch, bite, and prick him, especially when he curses. As he is thinking of these spirits, Caliban sees Trinculo and imagines him to be one of the spirits. Hoping to avoid pinching, he lies down and covers himself with his cloak. Trinculo hears the thunder and looks about for some cover from the storm. The only thing he sees is the cloak-covered Caliban on the ground. He is not so much repulsed by Caliban as curious. He cannot decide whether Caliban is a “man or a fish” (II.i.24). He thinks of a time when he traveled to England and witnessed freak-shows there. Caliban, he thinks, would bring him a lot of money in England. Thunder sounds again and Trinculo decides that the best shelter in sight is beneath Caliban’s cloak, and so he joins the man-monster there.
Stephano enters singing and drinking. He hears Caliban cry out to Trinculo, “Do not torment me! O!” (II.ii.54). Hearing this and seeing the four legs sticking out from the cloak, Stephano thinks the two men are a four-legged monster with a fever. He decides to relieve this fever with a drink. Caliban continues to resist Trinculo, whom he still thinks is a spirit tormenting him. Trinculo recognizes Stephano’s voice and says so. Stephano, of course, assumes for a moment that the monster has two heads, and he promises to pour liquor in both mouths. Trinculo now calls out to Stephano, and Stephano pulls his friend out from under the cloak. While the two men discuss how they arrived safely on shore, Caliban enjoys the liquor and begs to worship Stephano. The men take full advantage of Caliban’s drunkenness, mocking him as a “most ridiculous monster” (II.ii.157) as he promises to lead them around and show them the isle.

**Analysis**

Trinculo and Stephano are the last new characters to be introduced in the play. They act as comic foils to the main action, and will in later acts become specific parodies of Antonio and Sebastian. At this point, their role is to present comically some of the more serious issues in the play concerning Prospero and Caliban. In Act I, scene ii, Prospero calls Caliban a “slave” (II.ii.311, 322, 347), “thou earth” (II.ii.317), “Filth” (II.ii.349), and “Hag-seed” (II.ii.368). Stephano and Trinculo’s epithet of choice in Act II, scene ii and thereafter is “monster.” But while these two make quite clear that Caliban is seen as less than human by the Europeans on the island, they also treat him more humanely than Prospero does. Stephano and Trinculo, a butler and a jester respectively, remain at the low end of the social scale in the play, and have little difficulty finding friendship with the strange islander they meet. “Misery acquaints a man with strange bedfellows,” says Trinculo (II.ii.36–37), and then hastens to crawl beneath Caliban’s garment in order to get out of the rain. The similarity, socially and perhaps physically as well, between Trinculo and Caliban is further emphasized when Stephano, drunk, initially
mistakes the two for a single monster: “This is some monster of the isle with four legs” (II.ii.62).

More important than the emphasis on the way in which Caliban seems to others more monster than man, is the way in which this scene dramatizes the initial encounter between an almost completely isolated, “primitive” culture and a foreign, “civilized” one. The reader discovers during Caliban and Prospero’s confrontation in Act I, scene ii that Prospero initially “made much of” Caliban (II.ii.336); that he gave Caliban “Water with berries in’t” (II.ii.337); that Caliban showed him around the island; and that Prospero later imprisoned Caliban, after he had taken all he could take from him. The reader can see these events in Act II, scene ii, with Trinculo and Stephano in the place of Prospero. Stephano calls Caliban a “brave monster,” as they set off singing around the island. In addition, Stephano and Trinculo give Caliban wine, which Caliban finds to be a “celestial liquor” (II.ii.109). Moreover, Caliban initially mistakes Stephano and Trinculo for Prospero’s spirits, but alcohol convinces him that Stephano is a “brave god” and decides unconditionally to “kneel to him” (II.ii.109–110). This scene shows the foreign, civilized culture as decadent and manipulative: Stephano immediately plans to “inherit” the island (II.ii.167), using Caliban to show him all its virtues. Stephano and Trinculo are a grotesque, parodic version of Prospero upon his arrival twelve years ago. Godlike in the eyes of the native, they slash and burn their way to power.

By this point, Caliban has begun to resemble a parody of himself. Whereas he would “gabble like / A thing most brutish” (I.ii.359–360) upon Prospero’s arrival, because he did not know language, he now is wilfully inarticulate in his drunkenness. Immediately putting aside his fear that these men are spirits sent to do him harm, Caliban puts his trust in them for all the wrong reasons. What makes Caliban’s behaviour in this scene so tragic is that we might expect him, especially after his eloquent curses of Prospero in Act I, scene ii, to know better.
Act III, scene i

Summary

I am your wife, if you will marry me.
If not, I'll die your maid. To be your fellow
You may deny me, but I'll be your servant
Whether you will or no.

Back at Prospero’s cell, Ferdinand takes over Caliban’s duties and carries wood for Prospero. Unlike Caliban, however, Ferdinand has no desire to curse. Instead, he enjoys his labours because they serve the woman he loves, Miranda. As Ferdinand works and thinks of Miranda, she enters, and after her, unseen by either lover, Prospero enters. Miranda tells Ferdinand to take a break from his work, or to let her work for him, thinking that her father is away. Ferdinand refuses to let her work for him but does rest from his work and asks Miranda her name. She tells him, and he is pleased: “Miranda” comes from the same Latin word that gives English the word “admiration.” Ferdinand’s speech plays on the etymology: “Admired Miranda! / Indeed the top of admiration, worth What’s dearest to the world!” (III.i.37–39).

Ferdinand goes on to flatter his beloved. Miranda is, of course, modest, pointing out that she has no idea of any woman’s face but her own. She goes on to praise Ferdinand’s face, but then stops herself, remembering her father’s instructions that she should not speak to Ferdinand. Ferdinand assures Miranda that he is a prince and probably a king now, though he prays his father is not dead. Miranda seems unconcerned with Ferdinand’s title, and asks only if he loves her. Ferdinand replies enthusiastically that he does, and his response emboldens Miranda to propose marriage. Ferdinand accepts and the two part. Prospero comes forth, subdued in his happiness, for he has known that this would happen. He then hastens to his book of magic in order to prepare for remaining business.
Analysis

There be some sports are painful, and their labour
Delight in them sets off. Some kinds of baseness
Are nobly undergone, and most poor matters
Point to rich ends. This my mean task
Would be as heavy to me as odious, but
The mistress which I serve quickens what's dead
And makes my labours pleasures.

This scene revolves around different images of servitude. Ferdinand is literally in service to Prospero, but in order to make his labour more pleasant he sees Miranda as his taskmaster. When he talks to Miranda, Ferdinand brings up a different kind of servitude—the love he has felt for a number of other beautiful women. Ferdinand sees this love, in comparison to his love for Miranda, as an enforced servitude: “Full many a lady / I have eyed with the best regard, and many a time / Th’ harmony of their tongues hath into bondage / Brought my too diligent ear” (III.i.39–42). When Miranda stops the conversation momentarily, remembering her father’s command against talking to Ferdinand, the prince hastens to assure her that he is worthy of her love. He is royalty, he says, and in normal life “would no more endure / This wooden slavery [carrying logs] than to suffer / The flesh-fly blow my mouth” (III.i.61–63). But this slavery is made tolerable by a different kind of slavery: “The very instant that I saw you did / My heart fly to your service; there resides, / To make me slave to it” (III.i.64–66). The words “slavery” and “slave” underscore the parallel as well as the difference between Ferdinand and Caliban. Prospero repeatedly calls Caliban a slave, and we see Caliban as a slave both to Prospero and to his own anger. Ferdinand, on the other hand, is a willing slave to his love, happy in a servitude that makes him rejoice rather than curse. At the end of the scene, Miranda takes up the theme of servitude. Proposing marriage to Ferdinand, she says that “I am your wife, if you will marry me; / If not, I’ll die your maid. . . . / You may deny me; but I’ll be your servant / Whether you will or no” (III.i.83–86). This is the only scene of actual interaction we see between Ferdinand and Miranda. Miranda is, as we know, and as she says, very innocent: “I do not know / One of my sex, no woman’s face remember / Save from my glass mine own; nor have I seen /
More that I may call men than you, good friend, / And my dear father” (III.i.48–52). The play has to make an effort to overcome the implausibility of this courtship—to make Miranda look like something more than Prospero’s puppet and a fool for the first man she sees. Shakespeare accomplishes this by showing Ferdinand in one kind of servitude—in which he must literally and physically humble himself—as he talks earnestly about another kind of servitude, in which he gives himself wholly to Miranda. The fact that Miranda speaks of a similar servitude of her own accord, that she remembers her father’s “precepts” and then disregards them, and that Prospero remains in the background without interfering helps the audience to trust this meeting between the lovers more than their first meeting in Act I, scene ii.

Of course, Prospero’s presence in the first place may suggest that he is somehow in control of what Miranda does or says. At the end he steps forward to assure the audience that he knew what would happen: "So glad of this as they I cannot be, / Who are surprised with all" (III.i.93–94). But Prospero’s five other lines (III.i.31–32 and III.i.74–76) do not suggest that he controls what Miranda says. Rather, he watches in the manner of a father—both proud of his daughter’s choice and slightly sad to see her grow up.

**Act III, scene ii**

**Summary**

Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano continue to drink and wander about the island. Stephano now refers to Caliban as “servant monster” and repeatedly orders him to drink. Caliban seems happy to obey. The men begin to quarrel, mostly in jest, in their drunkenness. Stephano has now assumed the title of Lord of the Island and he promises to hang Trinculo if Trinculo should mock his servant monster. Ariel, invisible, enters just as Caliban is telling the men that he is “subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer, that by his cunning hath cheated me of the island” (III.ii.40–41). Ariel begins to stir up trouble,
calling out, “Thou liest” (III.i.42). Caliban cannot see Ariel and thinks that Trinculo said this. He threatens Trinculo, and Stephano tells Trinculo not to interrupt Caliban anymore. Trinculo protests that he said nothing. Drunkenly, they continue talking, and Caliban tells them of his desire to get revenge against Prospero. Ariel continues to interrupt now and then with the words, “Thou liest.” Ariel’s ventriloquizing ultimately results in Stephano hitting Trinculo.

While Ariel looks on, Caliban plots against Prospero. The key, Caliban tells his friends, is to take Prospero’s magic books. Once they have done this, they can kill Prospero and take his daughter. Stephano will become king of the island and Miranda will be his queen. Trinculo tells Stephano that he thinks this plan is a good idea, and Stephano apologizes for the previous quarrelling. Caliban assures them that Prospero will be asleep within the half hour.

Ariel plays a tune on his flute and tabor-drum. Stephano and Trinculo wonder at this noise, but Caliban tells them it is nothing to fear. Stephano relishes the thought of possessing this island kingdom “where I shall have my music for nothing” (III.i.139–140). Then the men decide to follow the music and afterward to kill Prospero.

**Analysis**

As we have seen, one of the ways in which The Tempest builds its rich aura of magical and mysterious implication is through the use of doubles: scenes, characters, and speeches that mirror each other by either resemblance or contrast. This scene is an example of doubling: almost everything in it echoes Act II, scene i. In this scene, Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano wander aimlessly about the island, and Stephano muses about the kind of island it would be if he ruled it—“I will kill this man [Prospero]. His daughter and I will be King and Queen . . . and Trinculo and thyself [Caliban] shall be viceroys” (III.i.101–103)—just as Gonzalo had done while wandering with Antonio and Sebastian in Act II, scene i. At the end of Act III, scene ii, Ariel enters, invisible, and
causes strife among the group, first with his voice and then with music, leading the men astray in order to thwart Antonio and Sebastian’s plot against Alonso. The power-hungry servants Stephano and Trinculo thus become rough parodies of the power-hungry courtiers Antonio and Sebastian. All four men are now essentially equated with Caliban, who is, as Alonso and Antonio once were, simply another usurper. But Caliban also has a moment in this scene to become more than a mere usurper: his striking and apparently heartfelt speech about the sounds of the island. Reassuring the others not to worry about Ariel’s piping, Caliban says:

The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices,
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again. (III.ii.130–138)

In this speech, we are reminded of Caliban’s very close connection to the island—a connection we have seen previously only in his speeches about showing Prospero or Stephano which streams to drink from and which berries to pick (I.ii.333–347 and II.ii.152–164). After all, Caliban is not only a symbolic “native” in the colonial allegory of the play. He is also an actual native of the island, having been born there after his mother Sycorax fled there. This ennobling monologue—ennobling because there is no servility in it, only a profound understanding of the magic of the island—provides Caliban with a moment of freedom from Prospero and even from his drunkenness. In his anger and sadness, Caliban seems for a moment to have risen above his wretched role as Stephano’s fool. Throughout much of the play, Shakespeare seems to side with powerful figures such as Prospero against weaker figures such as Caliban, allowing us to think, with Prospero and Miranda, that Caliban is merely a monster. But in this scene, he takes the extraordinary step of briefly giving the monster a voice. Because of this short speech, Caliban becomes a more understandable character, and even, for the moment at least, a sympathetic one.
Act III, scene iii

Summary
Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo, and their companion lords become exhausted, and Alonso gives up all hope of finding his son. Antonio, still hoping to kill Alonso, whispers to Sebastian that Alonso’s exhaustion and desperation will provide them with the perfect opportunity to kill the king later that evening.

At this point “solemn and strange music” fills the stage (III.iii.17, stage direction), and a procession of spirits in “several strange shapes” enters, bringing a banquet of food (III.iii.19, stage direction). The spirits dance about the table, invoke the king and his party to eat, and then dance away. Prospero enters at this time as well, having rendered himself magically invisible to everyone but the audience. The men disagree at first about whether to eat, but Gonzalo persuades them it will be all right, noting that travellers are returning every day with stories of unbelievable but true events. This, he says, might be just such an event. Just as the men are about to eat, however, a noise of thunder erupts, and Ariel enters in the shape of a harpy. He claps his wings upon the table and the banquet vanishes. Ariel mocks the men for attempting to draw their swords, which magically have been made to feel heavy. Calling himself an instrument of Fate and Destiny, he goes on to accuse Alonso, Sebastian, and Antonio of driving Prospero from Milan and leaving him and his child at the mercy of the sea. For this sin, he tells them, the powers of nature and the sea have exacted revenge on Alonso by taking Ferdinand. He vanishes, and the procession of spirits enters again and removes the banquet table. Prospero, still invisible, applauds the work of his spirit and announces with satisfaction that his enemies are now in his control. He leaves them in their distracted state and goes to visit with Ferdinand and his daughter.
Alonso, meanwhile, is quite desperate. He has heard the name of Prospero once more, and it has signalled the death of his own son. He runs to drown himself. Sebastian and Antonio, meanwhile, decide to pursue and fight with the spirits. Gonzalo, ever the voice of reason, tells the other, younger lords to run after Antonio, Sebastian, and Alonso and to make sure that none of the three does anything rash.

Analysis

Ariel’s appearance as an avenging harpy represents the climax of Prospero’s revenge, as Antonio, Alonso, and the other lords are confronted with their crimes and threatened with punishment. From Prospero’s perspective, the disguised Ariel represents justice and the powers of nature. He has arrived to right the wrongs that have been done to Prospero, and to punish the wicked for their sins. However, the audience knows that Ariel is not an angel or representative of a higher moral power, but merely mouths the script that Prospero has taught him. Ariel’s only true concern, of course, is to win his freedom from Prospero. Thus, the vision of justice presented in this scene is artificial and staged.

Ariel’s display has less to do with fate or justice than with Prospero’s ability to manipulate the thoughts and feelings of others. Just as his frequent recitations of history to Ariel, Miranda, and Caliban are designed to govern their thinking by imposing his own rhetoric upon it, Prospero’s decision to use Ariel as an illusory instrument of “fate” is designed to govern the thinking of the nobles at the table by imposing his own ideas of justice and right action upon their minds. Whether or not Prospero’s case is really just—as it may well be—his use of Ariel in this scene is done purely to further his persuasion and control. He knows that a supernatural creature claiming to represent nature will make a greater impression in advancing his argument than he himself could hope to. If Prospero simply appeared before the table and stated his case, it would seem tainted with selfish desire. However, for Ariel to present Prospero’s case in this fashion makes it
seem like the inevitable natural order of the universe—even though Prospero himself is behind everything Ariel says.

This state of affairs gets at the heart of the central problem of reading The Tempest. The play seems to present Prospero’s notion of justice as the only viable one, but it simultaneously undercuts Prospero’s notion of justice by presenting the artificiality of his method of obtaining justice. We are left to wonder if justice really exists when it appears that only a sorcerer can bring about justice. Alternatively, Prospero’s manipulations may put us in mind of what playwrights do when they arrange events into meaningful patterns, rewarding the good and punishing the bad.

**Act IV, scene i**

**Summary**

Prospero gives his blessing to Ferdinand and Miranda, warning Ferdinand only that he take care not to break Miranda’s “virgin-knot” before the wedding has been solemnized (IV.i.15–17). Ferdinand promises to comply. Prospero then calls in Ariel and asks him to summon spirits to perform a masque for Ferdinand and Miranda. Soon, three spirits appear in the shapes of the mythological figures of Iris (Juno’s messenger and the goddess of the rainbow), Juno (queen of the gods), and Ceres (goddess of agriculture). This trio performs a masque celebrating the lovers’ engagement. First, Iris enters and asks Ceres to appear at Juno’s wish, to celebrate “a contract of true love.” Ceres appears, and then Juno enters. Juno and Ceres together bless the couple, with Juno wishing them honour and riches, and Ceres wishing them natural prosperity and plenty. The spectacle awes Ferdinand and he says that he would like to live on the island forever, with Prospero as his father and Miranda as his wife. Juno and Ceres send Iris to fetch some nymphs and reapers to perform a country dance. Just as this dance begins, however, Prospero startles suddenly and then sends the spirits away. Prospero,
who had forgotten about Caliban’s plot against him, suddenly remembers that the hour nearly has come for Caliban and the conspirators to make their attempt on his life.

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. (IV.i.148–158)

Prospero’s apparent anger alarms Ferdinand and Miranda, but Prospero assures the young couple that his consternation is largely a result of his age; he says that a walk will soothe him. Prospero makes a short speech about the masque, saying that the world itself is as insubstantial as a play, and that human beings are “such stuff / As dreams are made on.” Ferdinand and Miranda leave Prospero to himself, and the old enchanter immediately summons Ariel, who seems to have made a mistake by not reminding Prospero of Caliban’s plot before the beginning of the masque. Prospero now asks Ariel to tell him again what the three conspirators are up to, and Ariel tells him of the men’s drunken scheme to steal Prospero’s book and kill him. Ariel reports that he used his music to lead these men through rough and prickly briars and then into a filthy pond. Prospero thanks his trusty spirit, and the two set a trap for the three would-be assassins.

On a clothesline in Prospero’s cell, Prospero and Ariel hang an array of fine apparel for the men to attempt to steal, after which they render themselves invisible. Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano enter, wet from the filthy pond. The fine clothing immediately distracts Stephano and Trinculo. They want to steal it, despite the protests of Caliban, who wants to stick to the plan and kill Prospero. Stephano and Trinculo ignore him. Soon after they touch the clothing, there is “A noise of hunters” (IV.i.251, stage
direction). A pack of spirits in the shape of hounds, set on by Ariel and Prospero, drives the thieves out.

**Analysis**

The wedding of Ferdinand and Miranda draws near. Thus, Act IV, scene i explores marriage from several different angles. Prospero and Ferdinand’s surprisingly coarse discussion of Miranda’s virginity at the beginning of the scene serves to emphasize the disparity in knowledge and experience between Miranda and her future husband. Prospero has kept his daughter extremely innocent. As a result, Ferdinand’s vulgar description of the pleasures of the wedding-bed reminds the audience (and probably Prospero as well) that the end of Miranda’s innocence is now imminent. Her wedding-night will come, she will lose her virginity, and she will be in some way changed. This discussion is a blunt reminder that change is inevitable and that Miranda will soon give herself, in an entirely new way, to a man besides her father. Though Prospero somewhat perfunctorily initiates and participates in the sexual discussion, he also seems to be affected by it. In the later parts of the scene, he makes unprecedented comments on the transitory nature of life and on his own old age. Very likely, the prospect of Miranda’s marriage and growing up calls these ideas to his mind.

After the discussion of sexuality, Prospero introduces the masque, which moves the exploration of marriage to the somewhat more comfortable realms of society and family. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, masques were popular forms of entertainment in England. Masques featured masked actors performing allegorical, often highly ritualized stories drawn from mythology and folklore. Prospero’s masque features Juno, the symbol of marriage and family life in Roman mythology, and Ceres, the symbol of agriculture, and thus of nature, growth, prosperity, and rebirth, all notions intimately connected to marriage. The united blessing of the union by Juno and Ceres is a blessing on the couple that wishes them prosperity and wealth while explicitly tying their marriage to notions of social propriety (Juno wishes them “honour”) and harmony with the Earth. In this way, marriage is subtly glorified as both the foundation of society
and as part of the natural order of things, given the accord between marriage and nature in Ceres’ speech.

Interestingly, Juno and Ceres de-emphasize the role of love, personal feeling, and sexuality in marriage, choosing instead to focus on marriage’s place in the social and natural orders. When Ceres wonders to Iris where Venus and Cupid, the deities of love and sex, are, she says that she hopes not to see them because their lustful powers caused Pluto, god of the underworld, to kidnap Persephone, Ceres’s daughter (IV.i.86–91). Iris assures Ceres that Venus and Cupid are nowhere in sight. Venus and Cupid had hoped to foil the purity of the impending union, “but in vain” (IV.i.97). Ceres, Juno, and Iris have kept the gods of lust at bay; it seems that, through his masque, Prospero is trying to suppress entirely the lasciviousness of Ferdinand’s tone when he discusses Miranda’s virginity.

In almost all of Shakespeare’s comedies, marriage is used as a symbol of a harmonious and healthy social order. In these plays, misunderstandings erupt, conflicts break out, and at the end, love triumphs and marriage sets everything right. The Tempest, a romance, is not exactly a comedy. However, it is deeply concerned with the social order, both in terms of the explicit conflict of the play (Prospero’s struggle to regain his place as duke) and in terms of the play’s constant exploration of the master-servant dynamic, especially when the dynamic appears unsettled or discordant. One reason Shakespeare might shift the focus of the play to marriage at this point is to prepare the audience for the mending of the disrupted social order that takes place at the end of the story. Calling upon all the social and dramatic associations of marriage, and underscoring them heavily with the solemnity of the masque, Shakespeare creates a sense that, even though the play’s major conflict is still unresolved, the world of the play is beginning to heal itself. What is interesting about this technique is that the sense of healing has little to do with anything intrinsic to the characters themselves. Throughout this scene, Ferdinand seems unduly coarse, Miranda merely a threatened innocent, and
Prospero somewhat weary and sad. But the fact of marriage itself, as it is presented in the masque, is enough to settle the turbulent waters of the story. After this detailed exploration of marriage, the culmination of Caliban’s plot against Prospero occurs merely as a moment of comic relief, exposing the weaknesses of Stephano and Trinculo and giving the conspirators their just desserts. Any hint of sympathy we may have had for Caliban earlier in the play has vanished, partly because Caliban’s behavior has been vicious and degraded, but also because Prospero has become more appealing. Prospero has come to seem more fully human because of his poignant feelings for his daughter and his discussion of his old age. As a result, he is far easier to identify with than he was in the first Act. Simply by accenting aspects of character we have already seen, namely Prospero’s love for Miranda and the conspirators’ absurd incompetence, Shakespeare substantially rehabilitates Prospero in the eyes of the audience. We can cheer wholeheartedly for Prospero in his humorous defeat of Caliban now; this is one of the first really uncomplicated moments in the play. After this moment, Prospero becomes easier to sympathize with as the rest of the story unfolds.

Act V, scene i & Epilogue

Summary
Ariel tells Prospero that the day has reached its “sixth hour” (6 p.m.), when Ariel is allowed to stop working. Prospero acknowledges Ariel’s request and asks how the king and his followers are faring. Ariel tells him that they are currently imprisoned, as Prospero ordered, in a grove. Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian are mad with fear; and Gonzalo, Ariel says, cries constantly. Prospero tells Ariel to go release the men, and now alone on stage, delivers his famous soliloquy in which he gives up magic. He says he will perform his last task and then break his staff and drown his magic book.
Ariel now enters with Alonso and his companions, who have been charmed and obediently stand in a circle. Prospero speaks to them in their charmed state, praising Gonzalo for his loyalty and chiding the others for their treachery. He then sends Ariel to his cell to fetch the clothes he once wore as Duke of Milan. Ariel goes and returns immediately to help his master to put on the garments. Prospero promises to grant freedom to his loyal helper-spirit and sends him to fetch the Boatswain and mariners from the wrecked ship. Ariel goes.

Prospero releases Alonso and his companions from their spell and speaks with them. He forgives Antonio but demands that Antonio return his dukedom. Antonio does not respond and does not, in fact, say a word for the remainder of the play except to note that Caliban is “no doubt marketable” (V.i.269). Alonso now tells Prospero of the missing Ferdinand. Prospero tells Alonso that he, too, has lost a child in this last tempest—his daughter. Alonso continues to be wracked with grief. Prospero then draws aside a curtain, revealing behind it Ferdinand and Miranda, who are playing a game of chess. Alonso is ecstatic at the discovery. Meanwhile, the sight of more humans impresses Miranda. Alonso embraces his son and daughter-in-law to be and begs Miranda’s forgiveness for the treacheries of twelve years ago. Prospero silences Alonso’s apologies, insisting that the reconciliation is complete.

After arriving with the Boatswain and mariners, Ariel is sent to fetch Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano, which he speedily does. The three drunken thieves are sent to Prospero’s cell to return the clothing they stole and to clean it in preparation for the evening’s reveling. Prospero then invites Alonso and his company to stay the night. He will tell them the tale of his last twelve years, and in the morning, they can all set out for Naples, where Miranda and Ferdinand will be married. After the wedding, Prospero will return to Milan, where he plans to contemplate the end of his life. The last charge Prospero gives to Ariel before setting him free is to make sure the trip home is made on “calm seas” with “auspicious gales” (V.i.318).
The other characters exit, and Prospero delivers the epilogue. He describes the loss of his magical powers (“Now my charms are all o’erthrown”) and says that, as he imprisoned Ariel and Caliban, the audience has now imprisoned him on the stage. He says that the audience can only release him by applauding, and asks them to remember that his only desire was to please them. He says that, as his listeners would like to have their own crimes forgiven, they should forgive him, and set him free by clapping.

**Analysis**

In this scene, all of the play’s characters are brought on stage together for the first time. Prospero repeatedly says that he is relinquishing his magic, but its presence pervades the scene. He enters in his magic robes. He brings Alonso and the others into a charmed circle (V.i.57, stage direction) and holds them there for about fifty lines. Once he releases them from the spell, he makes the magician-like spectacle of unveiling Miranda and Ferdinand behind a curtain, playing chess (V.i.173, stage direction). His last words of the play proper are a command to Ariel to ensure for him a safe voyage home. Only in the epilogue, when he is alone on-stage, does Prospero announce definitively that his charms are “all o’erthrown” (V.i.1).

When Prospero passes judgment on his enemies in the final scene, we are no longer put off by his power, both because his love for Miranda has humanized him to a great extent, and also because we now can see that, over the course of the play, his judgments generally have been justified. Gonzalo is an “honourable man” (V.i.62); Alonso did, and knows he did, treat Prospero “[m]ost cruelly” (V.i.71); and Antonio is an “[u]nnatural” brother (V.i.79). Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo, led in sheepishly in their stolen apparel at line 258, are so foolish as to deserve punishment, and Prospero’s command that they “trim” his cell “handsomely” (V.i.297) in preparation for the evening’s revels seems mild. Accusing his enemies neither more nor less than they deserve, and forgiving them instantly once he has been restored to his dukedom, Prospero has at last
come to seem judicious rather than arbitrary in his use of power. Of course, it helps that
Prospero’s most egregious sins have been mitigated by the outcome of events. He will
no longer hold Ariel and Caliban as slaves because he is giving up his magic and
returning to Naples. Moreover, he will no longer dominate Miranda because she is
marrying Ferdinand.
Prospero has made the audience see the other characters clearly and accurately. What
is remarkable is the fact that the most sympathetic character in the play, Miranda, still
cannot. Miranda’s last lines are her most famous: “O wonder!” she exclaims upon
seeing the company Prospero has assembled. “How many goodly creatures are there
here! / How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world / That has such people in’t!”
(V.i.184–187). From Miranda’s innocent perspective, such a remark seems genuine and
even true. But from the audience’s perspective, it must seem somewhat ridiculous. After
all, Antonio and Sebastian are still surly and impudent; Alonso has repented only after
believing his son to be dead; and Trinculo and Stephano are drunken, petty thieves.
However, Miranda speaks from the perspective of someone who has not seen any
human being except her father since she was three years old. She is merely delighted
by the spectacle of all these people.

In a sense, her innocence may be shared to some extent by the playwright, who takes
delight in creating and presenting a vast array of humanity, from kings to traitors, from
innocent virgins to inebriated would-be murderers. As a result, though Miranda’s words
are to some extent undercut by irony, it is not too much of a stretch to think that
Shakespeare really does mean this benediction on a world “[t]hat has such people in’t!”
After all, Prospero is another stand-in for the playwright, and he forgives all the
wrongdoers at the end of the play. There is an element in the conclusion of The
Tempest that celebrates the multiplicity and variety of human life, which, while it may
result in complication and ambiguity, also creates humor, surprise, and love.
If The Tempest is read, as it often is, as a celebration of creativity and art, the aging Shakespeare’s swan song to the theater, then this closing benediction may have a much broader application than just to this play, referring to the breadth of humanity that inspired the breadth of Shakespeare’s characters. Similarly, Prospero’s final request for applause in the monologue functions as a request for forgiveness, not merely for the wrongs he has committed in this play. It also requests forgiveness for the beneficent tyranny of creativity itself, in which an author, like a Prospero, moves people at his will, controls the minds of others, creates situations to suit his aims, and arranges outcomes entirely in the service of his own idea of goodness or justice or beauty. In this way, the ambiguity surrounding Prospero’s power in The Tempest may be inherent to art itself. Like Prospero, authors work according to their own conceptions of a desirable or justifiable outcome. But as in The Tempest, a happy ending can restore harmony, and a well-developed play can create an authentic justice, even if it originates entirely in the mind of the author.

The plot of The Tempest is organized around the idea of persuasion, as Prospero gradually moves his sense of justice from his own mind into the outside world, gradually applying it to everyone around him until the audience believes it, too. This aggressive persuasiveness makes Prospero difficult to admire at times. Still, in another sense, persuasion characterizes the entire play, which seeks to enthrall audiences with its words and magic as surely as Prospero sought to enthrall Ariel. And because the audience decides whether it believes in the play—whether to applaud, as Prospero asks them to do—the real power lies not with the playwright, but with the viewer, not with the imagination that creates the story, but with the imagination that receives it. In this way, Shakespeare transforms the troubling ambiguity of the play into a surprising cause for celebration. The power wielded by Prospero, which seemed unsettling at first, is actually the source of all of our pleasure in the drama. In fact, it is the reason we came to the theatre in the first place.