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## INTRODUCTION

**W**illiam Shakespeare, widely regarded as the greatest poet and playwright who ever lived, wrote his plays in England four centuries ago—that's four hundred years. And yet today in the United States, more theaters put on plays by Shakespeare than by any other playwright.

Why? Because of the stories Shakespeare tells, the characters he created, and his magnificent way with words—some of the most beautiful, profound, and sometimes hilarious words you will ever hear.

Shakespeare wrote at least thirty-seven plays. He sometimes acted in them himself. In his lifetime, Shakespeare's plays were enjoyed by people from all walks of life—from butchers and blacksmiths and shopkeepers to Queen Elizabeth herself, and after her King James, for whom *The Tempest* was first performed in 1611.

*The Tempest* is a late work in Shakespeare's career, the last play he wrote on his own. Some scholars think the central character of the

play—Prospero, whose magical powers enable him to create great illusions—is in some ways Shakespeare’s depiction of himself. If so, the portrait is not flattering. Prospero is complex—he sometimes uses his power in ways that are not admirable. He can be harsh, bad-tempered, impatient, obsessive, and controlling. He is also capable of extraordinary generosity of spirit.

At first, Prospero, who has been cruelly betrayed, is filled with rage and set on revenge. His fury and power give rise to the tempest, the great storm, that opens the play—a storm so powerful and violent that it causes a shipwreck. Shakespeare’s stage directions call for “a tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning.” The script includes the cries of desperate men who think their next breath will be their last.

It is, without a doubt, a dramatic way to begin a play. If this were a present-day movie, there would be hyper-realistic computer-generated crashing waves with subsonic rumbles of IMAX thunder shaking the viewers in their seats. But how do you create a storm onstage, in a theater with live actors? Some big theaters today have elaborate

sound and lighting systems, but nothing like that was available in 1611. In Shakespeare's day, they created thunder by rattling a big sheet of thin metal, called a thunder sheet. They used fireworks for lightning. And the audience loved it.

Lacking the means for high-tech special effects, how would you create a powerful storm onstage? That is one of the challenges—and delights—of *The Tempest*. The play excites both theatermakers and audience members alike by inspiring their imaginations to embrace possibilities beyond straightforward realism.

In one recent production in a small theater, the storm was created purely through music, and the shipwreck powerfully evoked by the movements of the actors behind a large sheet of thin, clear plastic (the kind used to cover floors in rooms being painted, and easy to buy from any hardware store). In this show, the plastic sheet was held by two actors costumed as "spirits." They shook the plastic so that it rippled in the light. They moved the rippling sheet upward from the floor till it reached above the actors' heads. The effect, while not realistic, was very effective—you could easily imagine the actors being lost beneath the waves.

This kind of appeal to the imagination is central to a play that features, as its main character, a magician, one who specializes in creating illusions. The magician, Prospero, is not a showman who pulls a rabbit out of a hat, but someone who has learned to channel mysterious powers.

In the play, Prospero's magic is associated with certain objects—a robe, a staff, and especially his books. Through long study of his books of magic, Prospero has gained great power. His power, unlike that of a superhero, is not within himself. Instead, he has the ability to get the spirits on the enchanted island where he lives to do as he commands. These spirits can fill the air with thunder and lightning, stir up raging waves in the seas, vanish at will, and take many forms. One moment they may appear as lovely singing goddesses. Later they might transform into fierce howling dogs, or even into a winged monster.

While Prospero controls these powerful spirits, they sometimes resist him, especially the airy spirit Ariel. Ariel serves Prospero out of gratitude—an evil witch had imprisoned Ariel in a tree trunk, and Prospero freed the spirit from captivity. But Ariel,

while grateful, longs for complete freedom. When Ariel protests, Prospero responds with threats of punishment. In the end, not only does Prospero free Ariel, but Ariel, in a way, frees Prospero, when this thing of air, this spirit, shows him the need for human forgiveness.

Another character in the play also serves Prospero—not with magic powers, however, but with manual labor, and not at all willingly. This is Caliban, who lived on the island before Prospero arrived there. His mother was that same witch—now dead—who had imprisoned Ariel.

While Ariel is an airy spirit, Caliban is described as a thing of earth. He is also called a “monster.” Caliban is not literally a monster, though the many insulting descriptions of him make one thing clear—he is unlike anyone else in the play. The other characters see Caliban as strange and different, as something *other*. And, as is often the case, the one seen as different, as the “other,” is treated badly.

Caliban tells us that at first Prospero and his daughter, Miranda, treated him kindly, and taught him their language. In return, he showed them where to find fresh water and other resources on

the island. But then Caliban, though not a monster, committed a monstrous act—he tried to attack Miranda—and everything changed. Prospero’s kindness turned to fury. He made Caliban his slave. He forced him to gather firewood and do other hard chores. And Caliban obeys because he fears the physical pain inflicted by the invisible spirits at the magician’s command.

In Prospero’s enslavement of Caliban, the play hints at changes in Shakespeare’s world at the time he wrote *The Tempest*. During this time, European explorers were setting sail and finding new lands—new to them, at least. In many cases, the Europeans seized the lands they found, and mistreated or enslaved the native inhabitants.

In Shakespeare’s time, those who saw *The Tempest* would not have found fault with Prospero for his treatment of Caliban—for, on a small scale, Prospero was doing what Europeans presumed it was their right to do: taking land from, and imposing their will on, people they saw as other, as different and inferior. From our twenty-first century perspective, while we may understand Prospero’s desire to protect his daughter and punish

Caliban, we cannot sympathize with a punishment as inhumane as enslavement.

It's not just that we can't sympathize with Prospero in his treatment of Caliban; indeed, Shakespeare goes further and at times makes us sympathize with Caliban—he makes us feel with, and feel for, the other. Just when we are laughing at Caliban, Shakespeare catches us off guard by giving him some extraordinary lines of poetry that make us see beyond his strange appearance and foolish behavior. When Caliban speaks of his home, the magical isle where he lives, he speaks beautifully in words that reveal in this “monster” some very human depths of feeling and heights of wonder.

*The Tempest* mixes the stuff of fairy tales—magic, monsters, spirits, witches—with real human emotions and conflicts. The mistreatment of the “other”; the angry resistance to being controlled; the thirst for power; the burden of guilt at knowing we have done something wrong; the desire for revenge; the difficulty of forgiveness; the sorrow of losing a loved one; the joy of reunion; the love of parent for child, and child for parent—these and other very human, very real matters are continuous with the

magical and fantastical elements of the play.

In this book we present a shortened version of Shakespeare's play that can be performed in under ninety minutes. While condensed, with some words changed and some lines moved, this version of *The Tempest* remains true to Shakespeare, generally using the original language. The book provides helpful background information on Shakespeare's theatre and poetry. And, to help prepare you for both enjoying and understanding the play, we first present *The Tempest* in the form of a brief story, following the long tradition of introducing young people to Shakespeare by re-telling his plays as stories.

Shakespeare didn't write his plays for silent reading from a book. He wrote them to be seen and heard. *The Tempest* will come to life when you gather with classmates, friends, or family members to read it aloud, or, even better, to act it out. You don't need fancy costumes or high-tech special effects, just curiosity and imagination. And remember the advice of one of Shakespeare's greatest characters, Hamlet, who says that you only need to "speak the speech" naturally, letting the words help you express the emotions.

