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Shakespeare 400 at the Victoria & Albert

by Dominic Green

John Everett Millais, Ferdinand Lured by Ariel*, 1850, oil on canvas*

April 22, 1616 was William Shakespeare's last full day of life, so what better way to observe its four hundredth anniversary than a full day of *The Tempest*, the last of the Last Plays, and his last full play?

The Tempest is the most formal of Shakespeare's plays. The unities are all observed, the barrage of Classical allusion never stops, and the drama ascends into abstract summation in a masque. The play also describes the paradoxical forms of mimesis. The shipwrecked escape a tempest that is made of waves and winds, to land with the audience in Prospero's kingdom of language, where spells shape reality. Yet on his island, voices are disembodied and thrown, just as the play's blank verse becomes music. The play's plot doubles this cyclical structure, by ending with the rebirths of Miranda's betrothal and Prospero's restoration.

How to unpick the tight cords of this gem of late style, which exposes the workings of theatrical form in order to dispel one illusion—the fiction of the theater—while creating another illusion, the fiction of the court masque? Which betrays the secrets that shape the art of dreams, while enchanting afresh with the dream of art?

For this program at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Oxford professor John Pitcher assembled an interdisciplinary team of experts. Most of them are practitioners of what Prospero calls "rough magic," rather than the theoretical "heavenly music." They contend with the questions at the heart of the play: creation and control, poetry and space, art and illusion. The keynote was the disembodied voice of the actress Harriet Walter, reading "Prospero in Private," a prologue which intermingles Prospero's vaunting and self-doubt with Pitcher's analysis and comments. Prospero knows that his magic is an "insubstantial pageant," but he has come to believe his own publicity: he conflates petty magic in a small kingdom with divine dominion.

This, Pitcher argued in his opening lecture, is just one of the ways in which *The Tempest*, a play about play-making, is also a play about the play's maker, "a window into Shakespeare's preoccupations." These include his ambivalent relationship to Classical precedents. He had his Greek myths second-hand, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses.* The Cambridge-educated, Classical-fluent shadow of Christopher Marlowe lingered: Marlowe's magician, Dr. Faustus, is antecedent to Prospero.

Angelica Kaufmann, Miranda and Ferdinand*, 1782, oil on canvas*

Prospero's island is the last of Shakespeare's microcosms. In *The Tempest*, he puns on "the great globe" to remind us that the theater is one too, and the play was first performed not in the open-roofed Globe, but in the closed, intimate space of the Blackfriars Theatre. Pitcher took the audience on a long tour of "magical islands" as "places of consciousness," from the lost Atlantis in Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critia* to "modern, money-mad Manhattan," by way of Odysseus, and Robinson Crusoe. The *energeia*, the "besotted vividness" of the drama is a psychological concentrate, a willed illusion. Manhattan's great industry, like that of Prospero's isle, is the making of "magic shows to sell us short."

As a businessman, Shakespeare understood the production of objects; as a poet, the making of images. The next speakers explored the two kinds of production, each of which creates what Shakespeare's age called "quiddity," or "thing-ness." Bridget Escolme, a specialist in Shakespearean performance and design history at Queen Mary University, London, described the doubling between things in the theater, the props and costumes, and the "brave utensils" of Prospero's magic, and how differences in presentation have affected critical responses. Then, in one of the day's high points, poet Alicia Stallings delivered a superb reflection on how the quiddity of *The Tempest* aligns with and inverts the mythical and literary objects that precede it.

Stallings' theme was the etiquette of Classical shipwreck and love, where the bedraggled sailor washes up at the feet of the island's princess, and must assume, in hope as much as caution, that she is a goddess: Aeneas and Dido, Jason and Medea, Odysseus and Nausicaa, Don Juan and Haidée. The happy ending, Stallings observed, depends on whether the princess informs the god-king of her passion for the stranger who will supplant him.

William Hamilton, Prospero and Ariel, *1797, oil on canvas*

The tropes with which Prospero abjures his magical powers come, Stallings showed, by way of Pindar, Apollonius, Virgil, and then Ovid. Dido pretends to work the spell as she prepares for suicide. Medea uses it to prolong the life of Jason's father. Prospero, who has come to believe in his pretenses, speaks the *topoi* as he accepts age, time, and the world beyond his island: the old myth is remade into a new object.

Stallings cited the tag from Petronius that Milton applied to Lycidas, his lament for a drowned friend, "Shipwreck is everywhere." The classical difference between tragedy and comedy is that of Lucretius: the spectacle of someone else drowning gratifies, because it is "sweet to know from what

misfortunes you are free." In *The Tempest*, however, Miranda responds to the spectacle of disaster with the modern emotion, empathy. The Bermuda colonists went bravely to the New World, but the "brave new world" comes to Miranda's island. Another oddly modern innovation in *The Tempest*: the strange equality with which Miranda and Ferdinand both wonder if their beloved is divine.

Another poet, Alice Oswald, described Shakespeare as "a great magician," expert in moving the audience's perception between levels of reality. The masque in *The Tempest* is like a "magician's cloth which covers the action of the play." When Prospero interrupts the masque, the cloth is whipped away, and an impression of reality confirmed. In the switches, we forget the missing women of the play: Prospero's wife, Ceres' lost child in the masque, and Sycorax, Caliban's mother, the "foul witch" and "blue-eyed hag" who once ruled the island. In Oswald's poem "Wasp," a long, tormented, and magnificent "insect preface" to *The Tempest*, Sycorax, buried in the island's soil, still lives and breathes through its vegetation and insects. "Whose myth, whose mouthpiece, is she?"

Oswald also described the challenge of "having to respond" to Shakespeare, the "perfect" and "powerful" island magus who still controls the language of the British Isles, and beyond. Unsurprisingly, this is an occupational hazard for writers. Still, the audience had no trouble responding to John Pitcher and the novelist John Lanchester's discussion of Shakespeare's early poem, "The Phoenix and the Turtle." As Pitcher and Lanchester advanced a close reading of love and property, themes which prefigure the relationship of Prospero and Miranda, they were waylaid by thrown voices from the auditorium. When it comes to Shakespeare, everyone has their own "vision of the island."

William Hogarth, The Tempest*, ca. 1736, oil on canvas*

Several members of the audience detected a "coldness" in the play. This may be a problem of late style. *The Tempest* is writing about writing. It aspires upwards to formal perfection, not downwards into the inner lives of its characters; outwards into waves of sound, not inwards into waves of emotion. How many of us find our favorite Beethoven in the intellectual tensions and tendrils of the Late Quartets, or our favorite T.S. Eliot in the Anglican Olympian of *Four Quartets*? There is something impersonal about intellectual purity, something of the grave, or deep space. The play's development away from personality also provoked dispute over whether its emotional heart was the Prospero–Miranda relationship, or the plight of Caliban, or, as Alicia Stallings suggested, the idyll that precedes the play, which was ruined by Caliban's attempted rape of Miranda.

The day ended on a warming note: a strong cup of tea, a ginger biscuit, and a genial chat between the poetry editor Paul Keegan and the singer/actress Toyah Willcox, who played Miranda in Derek Jarman's film of *The Tempest* (1979). Willcox's costume of rags is held by the V&A, and was too delicate to be released for this symposium. The film has aged similarly: part camp period piece, part inspired dismantling of the play. Jarman, Willcox recalled, started with "design." He broke the final image of the play into its components, and then reconstructed them in his fashion. If he did not build a smoothly working machine, at least its coughs and rattles add to the chorus of interpretations and images.

While filming Jarman's *Tempest*, the cast and crew chose to sit out a snow storm in their remote set, a derelict abbey. "It was fantastically wild," Willcox recalled of working inside a real tempest. "We were living the dream."

The final readings, from Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* (1944), in which Caliban describes Prospero and his minions as incompetent amateurs, and Marvell's "Bermudas" (1654), in which the rowers' dream of the Golden Age threatens to propel the "English boat" into the Mexique Bay and beyond, could not dispel the magic of Shakespeare's "imaginary island." But we had to leave, or the speakers and audience would have been locked in for the night.

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