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ARIEL

A character study from Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#)

The following essay was originally published in *Shakespeare Studies: Papers Read Before The Literary Clinic*. F. Hyatt Smith. Buffalo: The Literary Clinic, 1916.

In Shakespeare's [The Tempest](#), Ariel is wondrous. He revolves about Prospero like his stellar namesake about Uranus; and whenever he would stray from his orbit the Master brings him back. He is not an angel above man, nor a fiend below man. He is a being with all the faculties of reason, yet immortal. Did Shakespeare mean him to typify the soul in its heavenly estate? Or is he the pure fancy, roaming earth and sky, Shelley's skylark, a joy unembodied, a blithe spirit ever on the wing? He is surely unearthly, ethereal and refined, imaginary power, and the swiftness of thought. He drinks the air.

He has a sense of goodfellowship in all his employments. His songs sound as if invisible. He is frolic some and fairy, agreeable and open, mischievous and capricious, daring and roguish. He thanks his master for his release but his gratitude does not seem human. He must ever be held in check. He is promised his freedom in two days, and then his spirits recover their old abandon. The old angels of literature weary us with their ill-set wings and their stately speech. Shakespeare manages this sprite with consummate tact and naturalness. Ariel is the proper attendant for Miranda. He and his fellows hover above her head, they minister to her needs, they call up before her pageants of great beauty. He is the image of the air, and on air he feeds. He is the poet's thought, the poet's intuition, the poet's insight. He anticipated the telegraph and leaps vast spaces.

If man shall ever conquer the air and ride in aerial ships, looking down on continents and cities, then he will share Ariel's powers and survey Ariel's domain. He comes and goes; a spirit in the grasp of a mighty enchanter. He feels his bondage. Unlike Goethe's [Faust](#), his energies are always employed for good. He can fly, swim, and dive into the fire. He boards a ship, dives into the cabin, rushes to the



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topmast, follows Jove's lightnings, makes old Neptune tremble, causes a fearful storm, and the sailors cry: "Hell is empty and all the devils are here!" Yet not a hair perishes. He disperses the voyagers about the isle. He can cool the air. He leaves all asleep. [Prospero](#) has freed him from torment and he is eager for new fields to conquer. Sometimes he appears as a water nymph.

What wonderful songs are his; "Full fathom five thy father lies, Of his bones are coral made, Those are pearls that were his eyes, Nothing of him that doth fade, But doth suffer a sea change, Into something rich and strange." The last three lines are appropriately cut on Shelley's tomb. Prospero calls him his industrious servant. He summons the peasants and Iris and Ceres to the nuptials of Miranda and Ferdinand. When urged by his master he says, "I go, I go." He confines the king and his followers distracted and dismayed; he makes tears run down their beards like winter's drops. Indeed he would pity them were he human. Immediately Prospero orders their release. They must again be themselves. Ariel fetches them. He sings: "Where the bee sucks, there suck I, in a cowslip's bell I lie, there I couch when owls do cry, on the bat's back I do fly, after summer merrily. Merrily, merrily shall I live now, under the blossom that hangs on the bough."

Now he awakens the shipmaster and boatswain under the hatches of the ship; he goes and returns before twice the pulses beat; he stands invisible by when the seamen say they were in a dream, and he asks his master--"was it well done?" This is our last view of the singular sprite until Prospero delivers all and says, "My Ariel, chick, to the elements be free and fare thou well!" From the air he came and to the air he returned. He is the most fascinating and unworldly and blithesome creature in all literature.

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