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THE TEMPEST

An analysis of the play by Shakespeare

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MIRANDA AND CALIBAN
A painting by James Ward (1769-1859)

The Tempest has little of action or progressive movement; the union of Ferdinand and Miranda is settled at their first interview, and Prospero merely throws apparent obstacles in their way; the shipwrecked band go leisurely about the island; the attempts of Sebastian and Antonio on the life of the king of Naples, and the plot of Caliban and the drunken sailors against Prospero are nothing but a feint, for we foresee that they will be completely frustrated by the magical skill of the latter; nothing remains, therefore, but the punishment of the guilty by dreadful sights which harrow up their consciences, and then the discovery and final reconciliation.

Yet this want of movement is so admirably concealed by the most varied display of the fascinations of poetry, and the exhilaration of mirth, the details of the execution are so very attractive, that it requires no small degree of attention to perceive that the denoument

is, in some degree, anticipated in the exposition. The history of the loves of Ferdinand and Miranda, developed in a few short scenes, is enchantingly beautiful; an affecting union of chivalrous magnanimity on the one part, and on the other of the virgin openness of a heart which, brought up far from the world on an uninhabited island, has never learned to disguise its innocent movements. The wisdom of the princely hermit, Prospero, has a magical and mysterious air; the disagreeable impression left by the black falsehood of the two usurpers is softened by the honest gossiping of the old and faithful Gonzalo; Trinculo and Stephano, two good-for-nothing drunkards, find a worthy associate in Caliban; and Ariel hovers sweetly over the whole as the personified genius of the wonderful fable.

Caliban has become a by-word as the strange creation of a poetical imagination. A mixture of gnome and savage, half demon, half brute, in his behavior we perceive at once the traces of his native disposition, and the influence of Prospero's education. The latter could only unfold his understanding, without, in the slightest degree, taming his rooted malignity. It is as if the use of reason and human speech were communicated to an ape. In inclination Caliban is malicious, cowardly, false and base; and yet he is essentially different from the vulgar knaves of a civilized world, as portrayed occasionally by Shakespeare. He is rude, but not vulgar; he never falls into the prosaic and low familiarity of his drunken associates, for he is, in his way, a poetical being; he always speaks in verse. He has picked up everthing dissonant and thorny in language to compose out of it a vocabulary of his own; and of the whole variety of nature, the hateful, repulsive and deformed have alone been impressed on his imagination. The magical world of spirits, which the staff of Prospero has assembled on the island, casts merely a faint reflection into his mind, as a ray of light which falls into a dark cave, incapable of communicating to it either heat or illumination, serves merely to set in motion the poisonous vapors. The delineation of this monster is throughout consistent and profound, and, notwithstanding its hatefulness, by no means hurtful to our feelings, as the honor of human nature is left untouched.

In the zephyr-like Ariel the image of air is not to be mistaken, his

name even bears an allusion to it; as, on the other hand, Caliban signifies the heavy element of earth. Yet they are neither of them simple, allegorical personifications, but beings individually determined. In general we find in *A Midsummer Night's Dream,* in *The Tempest,* in the magical part of *Macbeth,* and wherever Shakespeare avails himself of the popular belief in the invisible presence of spirits, and the possibility of coming in contact with them, a profound view of the inward life of nature and her mysterious springs, which, it is true, can never be altogether unknown to the genuine poet, as poetry is altogether incompatible with mechanical physics, but which few have possessed in an equal degree with Dante and himself.

The principal characters in *The Tempest* are drawn with remarkable strength. In Prospero we have a delineation of peculiar profundity. He was, once, not altogether just a prince, not thoroughly a just man; but he had the disposition to be both. His soul thirsted after knowledge; his mind sincere in itself, after love; and his fancy, after the secrets of nature; but he forgot what a prince should least of all forget, that, upon this moving earth, superior acquirements, in order to stand firmly, must be exercised carefully; that the world is full of enemies who can only be subdued by a watchful power and prudence, and that in certain situations the armor ought never to be put off. Thus it became easy for his nearest relation, his brother, with the help of a powerful neighboring king who could not resist the offered advantage, to depose him from his dukedom. But as the pure morals of the prince, although they were perhaps but lazily exercised in behalf of his subjects, had nevertheless acquired their love, and the usurper did not dare to make an attack on the lives of the fallen, Prospero saved himself, his daughter, and a part of his magical books, upon a desert island. Here he became what, in its highest sense, he had not yet been, a father and a prince. His knowledge extends. Nature listens to him, perhaps because he learned to know and love her more inwardly. Zephyr-like spirits, full of a tender, frolicsome humor, and rude, earth-born gnomes, are compelled to serve him. The whole island is full of wonders, but only such as the fancy willingly receives, of sounds and songs, of merry helpers and comical tormenters; and Prospero shows his great human wisdom particularly in the manner with which he, as

the spiritual centre, knows how to conduct his intercourse with friends and foes. First, with his daughter. Miranda is his highest, his one, his all; nevertheless there is visible a certain elevation, a solemnity, in his behavior toward her--peculiarities which, even with the deepest love, the severely tried and aged man early assumes. Indeed, much as the pure sense of his daughter must have long cheered him, he deems it good to relate to her now for the first time the history of his earlier sufferings, now that he has mastery over, and the power to punish, his adversaries. The external miracles of Nature scarcely affect her upon an island where Nature herself has become a wonder, and the wonders become Nature. But for her, even on that account, there are only so many greater wonders in the heart and life of man.

Caliban is a character of the most powerful poetic fancy; and the more the character is investigated the more is our attention rewarded. He is the son of a witch, Sycorax, who, though long since dead, continues to work even from the grave. In her offspring there is a curious mixture of devil, man and beast, descending even to the fish species. He desires evil, not for the sake of evil or from mere wickedness, but because it is piquant, and because he feels himself opressed. He is convinced that gross injustice has been done him, and thus he does not rightly feel that what he desire may be wicked. He knows perfectly well how powerful Prospero is, whose art may perhaps even subdue his maternal god Setebos, and that he himself is nothing but a slave. Nevertheless, he cannot cease to curse, and he curses with the gusto of a virtuoso in this more than liberal art. Whatever he can find most base and disgusting he surrounds almost artistically with the most inharmonious and hissing words, and then wishes them to fall upon Prospero and his lovely daughter. He knows very well that all this will help him nothing, but that at night he will have "cramps" and "side-stitches," and be "pinched by urchins;" but still he continues to pour out new curses. He has acquired one fixed idea--that the island belonged to his mother, and, consequently, now to himself, the crown prince. The greatest horrors are pleasant to him, for he feels them only as jests which break the monotony of his slavery. He laments that he had been prevented from completing a frightful sin, and the thought of murder gives him a real enjoyment, perhaps chiefly on

account of the noise and confusion that it would produce.

An eminent critic has aptly remarked: "We find him only laughably horrible, and as a marvelous, though at bottom a feeble monster, highly interesting; for we foresee from the first that none of his threats will be fulfilled. Opposed to him stands Ariel, by no means an ethereal, featureless angel, but a real airy and frolicsome spirit, agreeable and open, but also capricious, roguish, and, with his other qualities, somewhat mischievous." When we hear Prospero recite his too modest epilogue, after laying down his enchanted wand, we feel that the magic we have experienced was too charming and mighty not to be enduring.

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Back to Shakespeare Index