

Unearthing *The Tempest*

The Tempest tells the story of Prospero, the deposed Duke of Milan, and his daughter, Miranda, who have spent the last twelve years in exile on a mysterious island. Upon first washing ashore with his infant child, Prospero captures two of the island's occupants; with their help, Prospero spends the next twelve years plotting his revenge. The play opens on its namesake: a great storm of Prospero's devising. Through the magic he has appropriated from Ariel, a mystical spirit, and the natural resources he has acquired from Caliban, the island's only known native inhabitant, Prospero washes those who wronged him to his shores, seeking to bring them to justice and reestablish Milan's natural order of succession. What follows is a story of revenge, redemption, and renewal as Prospero learns the meaning of mercy and forgiveness.

Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England in 1564, William Shakespeare is the author of some of the most well known plays in the western canon of dramatic literature. As he moved into the last stage of his career and life, Shakespeare was increasingly drawn to stories of restoration and rebirth, with a strong emphasis on father-daughter relationships. Other plays that share these themes have become known as "the romances," which also include *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, and *Pericles: Prince of Tyre*. Penned between 1610 and 1611 under the patronage of King James I of England, *The Tempest* had its first recorded performance in 1611 on All Saints' Day at Whitehall Palace. The King's Men, the acting troupe to which Shakespeare belonged, performed the play before the King and his court. The subject of many dramatic, musical, operatic and film adaptations, this rich play has continued to capture the imaginations of artists, scholars and audiences around the world for more than four hundred years.

The Tempest is one of Shakespeare's few plays that has no identifiable source text of its own. It is clear, however, that the play was inspired by travel narratives written by European explorers, such as Sir Walter Raleigh and Michel de Montaigne, who recently returned from "the new world." One such narrative is William Strachey's *A True Repertory of the Wracks and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight*, an eyewitness account of the 1609 wreck of *The Sea Voyage* on the island of Bermuda. These travel narratives were extremely popular as Europeans discovered just how much more of the world was left to explore and colonize. With *The Tempest*, Shakespeare found a way to tap into the cultural imagination of seventeenth century London by putting the shipwreck and its aftermath on stage. By supporting the staging of what exotic lands and people had to offer England, the King sought to ensure the taxpayer's continued enthusiasm of British global exploration. The play was particularly popular during the Restoration, inspiring such adaptations as John Dryden and Sir William Davenant's *The Tempest, or The Enchanted Island*, which sought to perpetuate the public's interest in worldwide colonization. Inspired by Shakespeare's world of magic, fantasy, cultural violence, and political intrigue, contemporary artists and adaptors, such as Sam Mendes, George C. Wolfe, and Julie Taymor, continue to return to this rich source.

Since its original production in 1611, *The Tempest* has invited scholars and performers to examine it through a variety of critical lenses. Throughout the second half of the twentieth century, *The Tempest* was the target of a large body of post-colonial criticism. Many famous productions and adaptations, such as Aimé Césaire's 1969 Haitian adaptation, *Une Tempête*, investigates the play from this critical position. Additionally, adaptations such as Julie Taymor's 2010 film engages feminist criticism of the play by casting Helen Mirren as Prospera, the powerful matriarch and rightful duchess of Milan.

Increasingly, as scholars and artists become more concerned with climate change and the sustainability of natural resources, *The Tempest* has become part of a new conversation in eco-criticism. This turn in scholarly attention reflects the rich complexity of Shakespeare's late play and inspires our production. Four centuries after its premiere, scholars and performers continue to find ways of making *The Tempest* speak to our current cultural concerns. By implementing sustainable production practices, such as repurposing existing materials and utilizing energy efficient equipment, the University of Illinois Department of Theatre seeks to engage this ongoing interdisciplinary conversation between eco-criticism, sustainability studies, and contemporary Shakespearean performance.

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