

SHAKESPEARE'S *THE TEMPEST*: A Text from the Age of Discovery about the Discoveries of Age

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Prospero discovers the limitations of power based on illusion, fear and obligation, and re-discovers the power of forgiveness, redemption and community. The play ends somewhat ironically as both Prospero and Miranda respectively rediscover and discover the full spectrum of humankind that has been temporarily present on their island.

As a text from the Age of Discovery, set on an island not far from the Old World, Shakespeare's *The Tempest* highlights the fact the some of the most important discoveries are waiting at our doorstep.¹ Just as Prospero's relationship with the island's indigenous population, Caliban and Ariel, is based on power; his usurpation by his brother is not that dissimilar and highlights the realities of human nature that transcend place, time and race. In searching for the great unknown, Prospero's story shows us that we should not forget to acknowledge what lies within ourselves. Twelve years of reflection and maturity changed Prospero through a better understanding of self, human nature and community. His desire to return to Milan is partly for Miranda's future, but also a necessary stage in his own redemption and renewal as he approaches death. He abandons the diversion provided by his books (his vicarious experience of life) and with a better understanding of power as independent of station and magic, he desires to return to Milan ready to face his responsibilities. Finally, as Shakespeare's last play (1610–1611), *The Tempest* represents the Bard's symbolic farewell. Words can represent reality but they can never replace reality: 'the world is a stage' but the stage is not the world in which we exist. In the end, some discoveries have to be experienced first hand and can only be fully embraced when one is ready, sometimes only after a lifetime of experiences, mistakes and reflection.

Discovery as a concept seems to be a more complex area of study than its predecessor and should prove a richer and more rewarding intellectual exploration. A closer look at the rubric confirms the multi-dimensional nature of this particular concept. It has at least three distinct stages: catalyst, response and consequences. Triggers can be diverse, stemming from curiosity, necessity or wonder (internal), ranging from individuals to experiences

or events (external), and can be sought, serendipitous or threatening. The concept can involve re-discovery (and re-evaluation), as well as initial discovery, on many levels: emotional, intellectual, spiritual, physical and creative. The discovery or rediscovery is influenced by personal, historical, cultural and social contexts that involve values and perspectives. In short, for individuals and societies ready to accept the implications of discovery, it can be a transformative experience that can yield both positive and negative consequences. Ultimately, discovery is about knowledge and, as Francis Bacon observed much earlier, knowledge is about power. Discovery is an essential process that leads to a better understanding of the forces that shape the self, society and the world in which we co-exist. However, not all discoveries are of equal value, some are 'more equal' than others.

Having explored the concept, it is now necessary to examine in greater detail how it is represented in *The Tempest*. As he approaches the end of his life and after a considerable period of exile on an island microcosm populated by four beings (two humans [male and female, young and old], one spiritual and one bestial being), Prospero reflects on his past (culpability), his present (limitations) and his future (forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration). As noted by William Harlan, there is 'an almost religious quality about the romances.'² In other words, he comes to a higher understanding of the nature of earthly power and of God. The other human being on the island that is so near, so different and yet so alike, is his now eighteen-year old daughter Miranda who is approaching womanhood. It is in his explanation to Miranda at the beginning of the play that Prospero revisits his past and she discovers hers:

...; thee, my daughter, who
Art ignorant of what thou art; nought knowing

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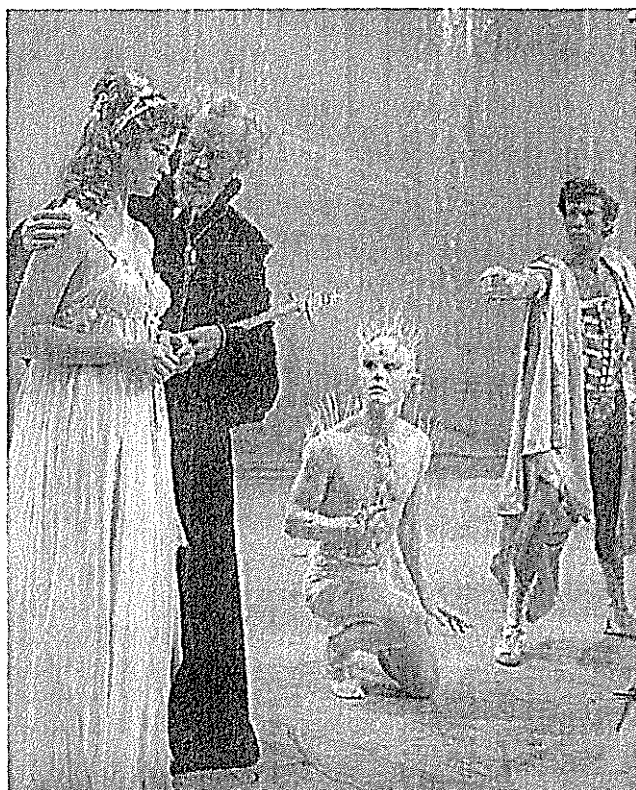


Photo from the Hallmark Hall of Fame presentation of *The Tempest*. From left-Lee Remick as Miranda, Maurice Evans as Prospero, Roddy McDowall as Ariel and William Bassett as Ferdinand. 15 January 1960. NBC Television. Source: Wikimedia Commons

*Of whence I am, nor that I am more better
Than Prospero, master of a full poor cell,*
[I.ii.17-20]

As Duke of Milan, Prospero chose to indulge personal desires over public responsibilities. Seduced and obsessed by his books on magic he effectively abnegated his ducal responsibilities to his brother, Antonio. An important discovery with long-term consequences is that of fraternal disloyalty, a new perspective on human nature:

*I pray thee, mark me, that a brother should
Be so perfidious! – he whom next thyself
Of all the world I lov'd,...*

[I.ii.67-69]

With the aid of Alonso, King of Naples, Antonio secures the throne and exiles Prospero and Miranda to an uncertain future on the seas. With the compassionate and loyal intervention of Gonzalo, however, they are given sufficient provisions and Prospero's books to reach the island. The past already has the seeds of the future embedded within it – personal culpability, the recognition of both good and evil as the human condition and the forgiveness

that is necessary for reconciliation and restoration:

*I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated
To closeness and the bettering of my mind
With that which, but by being so retir'd,
O'er-priz'd all popular rate, in my false brother
Awak'd an evil nature; and my trust,
Like a good parent, did beget of him
A falsehood in its contrary, as great
As my trust was;...*

[I.ii.89-96]

The years succeeding his exile provided the time for Prospero to reach his first stage of discovery: the limitations of power based on illusion and the illusion of power based solely on station. Through the operation of chance or fate another opportunity presents itself to allow Prospero to move to the next stage: forgiveness and reconciliation. Significantly, it is Ariel, a symbol of reason held captive by the abuse of power, who is commanded to create the illusion of a storm that brings to the island all those responsible for Prospero's plight and his future:

*(Ferdinand); ...cried "Hell is empty,
And all the devils are here."*

[I.ii.213-214]

Whilst returning from a marriage in Tunisia, the ship carrying those responsible, both good and evil, are soon on his island.

*Pros. ...My high charms work,
And these mine enemies are all knit up
In their distractions: thy now are in my power;*
[III.iii. 88-90]

It is important to stress that the storm is not only an illusion, as first suspected by Gonzalo [II.i.59-62], but it is also the making of Ariel not Prospero who merely issues the order: 'Hast thou, spirit,/Performed to point the tempest that I bade thee?' [I.ii.193-194]³. Clearly his arts proved inadequate to prevent his exile and they continue to prove of little use except through the inducement of a goodly earthly spirit who acknowledges an obligation of reciprocal service. Moreover, just as Ariel created the illusion of the tempest, Prospero created the illusion of control and Shakespeare created a theatrical illusion of a greater reality. Whilst the basis of Prospero's power over the bestial Caliban is more evident than his control over the ethereal Ariel, neither relationship is a strong one as both are founded on the misuse of power; a fault as damaging as Prospero's earlier abnegation of power and authority in Milan:

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*Dost thou (Ariel) forget
From what torment I did free thee?*

[I.ii.250–251]

Prospero's ironic dispossession of Caliban's island encourages the bestial in him to seek revenge, first by his attempted rape of Miranda and then by his determination to avenge his dispossession, even if it means aligning himself with less scrupulous human beings, Stephano and Trinculo [I.ii.333–346]. The island continues to evolve into a microcosmic representation as Sebastian (Alonso's brother) is seduced by Antonio to commit the same crime he committed against his own brother (Prospero) in Milan. The stage is set for history to repeat itself, except for the influence of Ariel and the hope provided by the love between Miranda and Ferdinand.

Having confronted his own culpability and limitations, Prospero is presented with an opportunity to demonstrate what else he is prepared to discover and to demonstrate in his life: revenge or reconciliation. The final stage of Prospero's journey of discovery is triggered by the love that develops between Miranda and Ferdinand:

*So glad of this as they I cannot be,
Who are surpris'd with all; but my rejoicing
At nothing can be more...*

[III.i.93–95]

Miranda's awakening sexuality with the discovery of men beyond her father is juxtaposed against Prospero's discovery of the power of love to unite and reconcile:

*I (Miranda) might call him (Ferdinand)
A thing divine; for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble.*

[I.ii.420–422]



Caliban (Todd Scofield) in Folger Theatre's production of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, 2007. Photo: Carol Pratt. Source: Wikimedia Commons

It is suggested that the more effective way of confronting evil is with good, not with more evil. The limitations of his magic that Prospero is forced to realise and accept is its inability to confront and genuinely change reality, in particular human nature. His magic, based on the powers of suggestion and the illusions conjured up by Ariel, are proven ineffective when faced with the bestiality of Antonio, Caliban and the other conspirators.

*Pros. [Aside] I had forgot that foul conspiracy
Of the beast Caliban and his confederates
Against my life: ...*

[IV.i. 139–142]

Unable to confront and to remove this aspect of human nature, he misinterprets the nature of the love between Miranda and Ferdinand, and seeks to divest the latter of any lustful intentions through threats. Prospero's idealistic view of marriage is best represented by the celestial world of the masque, 'the vanity of mine Art' [IV.i.41], inhabited by the morally pure Ceres, Juno and Iris, an idealised world threatened by the realities represented in Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo. In short, the masque reveals the limitations of Prospero's magic and, more importantly, the limitations of imagined and idealised worlds. The reality beyond Prospero's perception is that Miranda and Ferdinand are genuinely attracted to each other because they each recognise the worth of the other and the genuine affinity they share. Ultimately, it is the relationship between Miranda and Ferdinand that is a continual reminder of the power of love to transcend differences and to heal old wounds:

*Pros. Then, as my gift, and thine own acquisition
Worthily purchas'd, take my daughter:...*

[IV.i.13–14]

The masque device and the many songs throughout foreshadow the impending marriage and provide a comedic celebration of the continuity of society, encompassing both good and evil, upon the only sustainable values of love, trust and acceptance.

On another level, the play also represents some of the initial reactions of the Europeans who discovered the New World and the 'creatures' that inhabited it. Drawing heavily on Montaigne's essay 'Of Cannibals', Shakespeare is able to explore the illusory nature of power and colonialism. He represents his progressive perspective on the nature of power based on illusion and the importance of forgiveness and redemption, continuing the almost

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religious contemplations common to those of faith as they approach their Judgement Day:

Pros.... *We are stuff
As dreams are made on ; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep....*

[IV.i.156-158]

Although Caliban's name may be a play on the word cannibal, there is no suggestion in the play that he is a cannibal, nor that he is Montaigne's representation of the 'noble savage'. He is a more complex creation of Shakespeare, designed as always to appear at first a confirmation of the contemporary prejudices but on closer examination to be seen as a criticism of the ascendant perspective. Amidst the rather comedic and ironic scene (II.ii) in which Caliban is enslaved yet again and Trinculo is mistaken for a monster, a serious discovery is also made. Under the influence of alcohol, Caliban believes Trinculo and Stephano to be higher beings and offers to worship them.

Cal. [Aside] *These fine things, an if they be not
sprites,
That's a brave god, and bears celestial liquor:
I will kneel to him.*

[II.ii.116-119]

However; just as Prospero dispossessed Caliban, these representations of low life seek to do the same:

Cal. *I say, by sorcery he (Prospero) got this isle;
From me he got it. If thy greatness will
Revenge it on him,-*

[III.ii. 51-53]

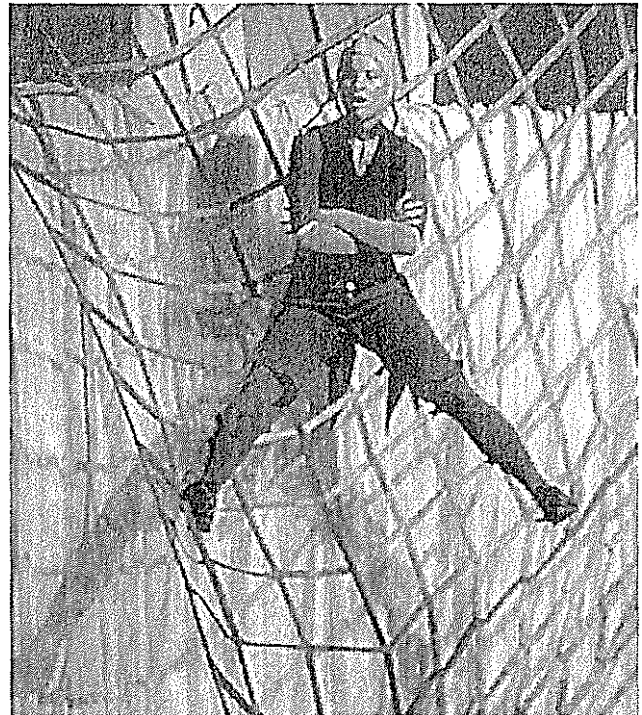
The only difference is that Prospero offered Caliban something other than alcohol; he gave him the power of the conqueror's language to question and ultimately to challenge and liberate:

Cal. ...*What a thrice-double ass
Was I, to take this drunkard for a god,
And worship this dull fool!*

[V.i.295-297]

In short, what appears initially as a representation of the European reaction to the exotic yet inferior creatures of the New World turns out to be a more serious revelation about what the conqueror and the conquered have in common: the self-interested reality of colonialism and the darker side of 'human nature', as well as the transcendent 'savage' desire to believe in a higher order.

However; not all are ready or willing to go on a journey of discovery or to accept what has been revealed to them in order to undergo moral and



Ariel (Amy Suss) in RWE's production of *The Tempest*. The enslaved spirit is seen on netting above and behind characters on which she is spying. Source: Wikimedia Commons

spiritual reform. Beyond Prospero's heightened self-awareness or self-discovery, only some of the others are transformed by repentance and regeneration. Ironically, the character most transformed, besides Prospero, is Alonso – the one who is by nature and station the most noble. Others such as Gonzalo and Ferdinand do not change and only discover their rewards. Finally, there are those who are not transformed at all by what they discover on the island: the conspirators are merely defeated without really knowing why, nor caring to avoid the same situation again.

Seb. *I remember*

You did supplant your brother Prospero.

Ant. *True:*

*And look how swell my garments sit upon me;
Much feater than before: my brother's servants
Were then my fellows; now they are my men.*

Seb. *But for your conscience.*

Ant. *Ay, sir; where lies that?...*

Seb. *Thy case, dear friend,*

*Shall be my precedent; as thou got'st Milan,
I'll come by Naples,...*

[II.i. 265–287]

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It is in these characters that the limitations of Prospero's magic are most profound: discovery without internal reception and contemplation cannot be transformative.

The cycle of discovery, re-discovery, renewal, transformation as well continuity is evident in *The Tempest*. In Prospero's transformation we should not underestimate the ironic influence of Ariel:

Ari. ... *That if you now beheld them, your affections
Would become tender.*

Pro. *Dost thou think so, spirit?*

Ari. *Mine would, sir, were I human.*

Pros. *And mine shall....
Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th'
quick,
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury
Do I take part: the rarer action is
In virtue than in vengeance: they being penitent,
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend
Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel;
My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,
And they shall be themselves.*

[Vi. 16-32]

Just as the more bestial humans have been shown to have much in common with Caliban, those more noble characters seem to share the qualities of reason, compassion and justice represented in Ariel. The concluding scenes confirm much about the diverse impact of discovery. Prospero finally abandons his illusions of power and seems stronger without them because he has discovered the power that lies within himself to reform and in the goodness of others:

Pro.... *I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book.*

[V.i.54-57]

In implicitly admitting his own error, Prospero is morally obliged to forgive the errors of others. He forgives the repentant Alonso:

Pros.... *I do forgive thee,
Unnatural though thou art.*

[V.i.78-79]

And it seems with no other compunction except graciousness, he forgives his unrepentant brother and demands from him the return of what is rightfully his, the Dukedom of Milan:

Pros. *No.*

*For you, most wicked sir, whom to call brother
Would even infect my mouth, I do forgive
Thy rankest fault, – all of them; and require
My dukedom of thee, which perforce, I know,
Thou must restore.*

[V.i.129-134]

Prospero has almost reached the end of his journey of discovery and undergone the changes that will allow him to belong again to the world in which he refused to exercise his duties and from which he was excluded. At the other end of the spectrum of discovery is Miranda whose inexperience, innocence and youthful seclusion elicits great expectations of the same world her father will re-discover in his transformed state:

Mir. *O, wonder!*

*How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't.*

Pros. *'Tis new to thee.* [Vi.182-184]

It is of no surprise that the ending of the play is one that reinforces the importance of forgiveness in 'a naughty world':

*As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.*

[Epilogue.19-20]

The Tempest is an extravagant *tour de force* and depends for much of its effectiveness on a wide range of special effects: sound, lighting, illusions. But there is more to the play than just special effects. It is a record and a reflection of a journey of discovery that has taken a lifetime to internalise. Prospero seeks through his 'white' magic books to discover the secrets of the universe; though, unlike Sycorax and Faustus before her, he does not sell his soul to the Devil and align himself with the darker forces. He comes to see the limitations and dangers inherent in this pursuit by beings unable to fully fathom the depth and breadth of creation and abandons his mission. Some discoveries, it seems, should not be made when the full implications of their impact remain unknown or their price too great. We are led to reflect on the Edenic

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transgression that created the world as we know it. Like Prospero and the limitations of his magic, perhaps Shakespeare has also come to realise near the end of his life that the theatre is after all an illusion; it can seek to reflect life like a mirror held up to nature and to improve society, but it can never take the place of life and it can never transform real people unwilling or unprepared for that journey. Whilst Prospero has discovered deeper truths about himself, his society and his place within it, Miranda has her perspective of self and her world suddenly and serendipitously transformed with all the possibilities before her. Unlike her father who is approaching death and the discovery of the yet unknown, Miranda is really only beginning her life of discovery and her discovery of life. Some will return to their known world after this Arden-like sojourn being morally regenerated, while others will continue to enact the duality of man in his society where good and evil are in constant tension and opposition. As members of society, devoid of any real power and as the subjects of a greater power, we must continue to hope that their discovery of the ennobling, healing and ultimately unifying influence of love will be strong enough to counter and defeat its opposing forces.

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All references to the text are from *The Arden Shakespeare* edited by Frank Kermode and reprinted by Routledge in 1994.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 The play was written at a time of enormous interest in voyages of discovery. For example, the English colony of Jamestown (named after the reigning monarch, James I) in Virginia (named after Elizabeth I, the Virgin Queen) had started and was financed by a private stock company. More importantly, in 1609 a fleet of ships with supplies and colonists headed there was blown off course by a storm near Bermuda with the survivors managed to survive on an island before making a ship on which they were able to proceed to their intended destination.
- 2 William Harlan has observed that the four romances are a clear break from the tragedies that preceded them and are more focused on the idea of redemption using simple characters with highly complicated and poetic language. *The Tempest*, he argues, is as if Shakespeare "were showing us how God might view mankind."
- 3 Prospero's magic is in the tradition of Renaissance occult that extends from Ficino and Pico, and whose objective is the acquisition of knowledge and wisdom through books and the control of good spirits.