

Reflections on *The Tempest*

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It's a treat to be back at Grand Valley State, and a delight to be here at a time when I'll have the pleasure of seeing what my friend, director Curt Tofteland, is bringing to his new production of *The Tempest*.

Most of you will know that this was the drama Curt drew upon years ago when he began working with a group of convicts at a prison in Kentucky. Many of their explorations were captured on camera, and in 2005 Philomath Films released *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, a touching documentary that brought this remarkable experiment to a nationwide PBS audience and garnered several prestigious awards.

By happy coincidence, I now live in the same city as Hank Rogerson and Jilann Spitzmiller, the gifted producers who teamed up with Curt for this project, and a few years ago I had a chance to watch them put their finishing touches on a charming sequel to *Shakespeare Behind Bars*. This time they were collaborating with a pair of Manhattan-based directors who were reviving *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at a New Jersey retirement home for indigent actors. What resulted from their efforts was *Still Dreaming*, a feature that was just as moving as Philomath's film about Curt and his cast of Kentucky prisoners.

I'm now savoring the highlights of a more recent *Tempest* -- an outdoor summer production that I helped bring to the Santa Fe Botanical Garden during the final weeks of August. *Shakespeare in the Garden* took place in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, and it was directed by Nagle Jackson, a versatile artist who has worked in a number of prestigious venues, among them the Kennedy Center in Washington, the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre in Wisconsin, and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland. For several years Nagle headed the McCarter

Theatre in Princeton, and because of his proximity to New York we decided to audition, and eventually to cast three, drama students from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. That proved to be a wise plan, and our attendees loved these young thespians and their winning portrayals of Ariel, Ferdinand, and Miranda.

A few years prior to this venture, in June of 2011, I'd helped import a concert version of *The Tempest* to another Santa Fe venue, the Lensic Performing Arts Center. This *Tempest* had been skillfully abridged by Richard Clifford, an actor and director you will have seen in Kenneth Branagh films. It featured incidental music by composers like Matthew Locke and George Frederick Handel, but its chief attraction was a Prospero who was brilliantly portrayed by Sir Derek Jacobi.

Among the things that made this adaptation special was the fact that it commemorated two milestones: the 400th anniversary of the earliest-known court performance of *The Tempest* (at London's royal Whitehall Palace in November of 1611) and the 400th anniversary of the settlement of what would eventually become the oldest capital city in the United States.

These associations were fascinating enough. But there was another connection between Shakespeare and Santa Fe that made this presentation even more extraordinary. The most familiar line in the play, Miranda's exclamation about the "brave new world" that is disclosed to her in *The Tempest's* final scene, provided a famous British writer with the ironic title for his dystopian novel about a grim totalitarian future. The author I refer to was Aldous Huxley, who offered only one mitigating exception to the oppressive "World State" he depicted in his influential book: an unspoiled "savage reservation" in New Mexico. It was not until a few years after Huxley published *Brave New World*, in 1932, that he began spending significant time in the American Southwest. But he knew a good deal about the region, and he would eventually become deeply familiar with the tribal natives whose beautiful

rugs, jewelry, and pottery were attracting visitors to picturesque landscapes that were being widely promoted as tourist destinations.

It would be going too far to suggest that Shakespeare was anticipating this development when he composed the speeches in which Trinculo and Stephano describe Caliban as a monstrous creature who'd "make a man" rich if he were exhibited in London or presented to any ruler in Europe as an exotic gift. But it's difficult to overlook the many ways in which *The Tempest* reflects, and comments on, the colonial empires that were proliferating throughout the Western Hemisphere during the poet's lifetime. Among Shakespeare's friends and associates were leaders of the Virginia Company, which was founding a settlement in Jamestown at the same time that a London playwright was introducing tragedies like *Antony and Cleopatra*. In all likelihood it was owing to stirring reports about what happened to a ship that was conveying a new governor to this outpost that Shakespeare decided to write a play that commences with a violent storm -- a tumult that initially appears to have been fatal not only to a "brave vessel," but to all of its occupants.

The New World associations that inform Shakespeare's magic-filled drama have long been evident to historians, literary critics, and editors. And scholars have written extensively about the degree to which references to and incidents involving conquest, exploitation, and resistance (themes that characterized many of the relationships between Old World explorers and the native populations they supplanted or subjugated throughout the Americas) are pivotal to *The Tempest*.

These themes became unusually resonant this summer as viewers who were getting ready for Santa Fe's annual Fiesta began pondering similarities between events in their own region's history and conflicts that were being dramatized in a circular amphitheater whose shape recalled the center of a Zia Sun Symbol. This was a sacred Pueblo image, with rays pointing in four directions from a circular core, and in 1925 New Mexico appropriated a design based on it for its elegant state flag. The

result bore a strong resemblance to an earlier emblem that had been adopted by the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railway. That company's enticing logo featured a cross within a circle, and it was prominently displayed on the atmospheric dining cars that conveyed movie stars like John Wayne and Betty Grable to Albuquerque and Gallup for Westerns that featured skirmishes between Cowboys and Indians.

For some of our attendees, the round amphitheater within which we staged this summer's *Tempest* brought to mind a powerful uprising in 1680, when a group of Pueblo tribes rebelled against the conquistadors who'd brutally dominated and at times enslaved them. For twelve years these tribes, who had occupied the land for centuries prior to the arrival of European explorers, enjoyed the benefits of self-rule once again. But they soon discovered that the intruders they'd driven south were not to be denied, and in 1692 an army led by Don Diego de Vargas reclaimed the territory that he and his fellow Spaniards had presided over for seven decades. As a consequence, Santa Fe resumed its identity as capital of a province the Spanish referred to as Nuevo Mexico.

In recent decades an early September pageant has commemorated de Vargas' supposedly unopposed return as a peaceful re-entry that reconciled warring combatants and ushered in a harmonious accord between Native and Hispanic cultures. But at a time when Confederate monuments have become controversial in cities like Charlottesville, a celebration that has long been a highlight of Santa Fe's civic life is now being vigorously scrutinized. So it's by no means surprising that when audiences at last month's *Tempest* observed Prospero's harsh treatment of Caliban, not to mention his intemperate outbursts at Ariel, Miranda, and Ferdinand, a few of them experienced uncomfortable feelings that were no doubt conditioned by the new context in which this revival of the play was being staged.

I hasten to note that the director of our production went out of his way to avoid any suggestion that his approach to the script was designed to address cultural

divisions that had suddenly re-emerged as political issues. And that was encouraging to me as one of the producers of this *Tempest*. A few weeks before our show opened, I published a letter in the *Washington Post* that questioned the wisdom of a Central Park presentation of *Julius Caesar* in which the title character was costumed as an orange-haired demagogue with a red tie that extended to his crotch. This portrayal struck me as one that might be construed as encouraging viewers to recall, and perhaps even to welcome a repetition of, the evening in 1865 when Shakespeare's Roman tragedy had inspired a traumatic event in Ford's Theatre.

So no, our *Tempest* was not meant to reopen old wounds, and I'm relieved to say that it didn't. But it did offer a gentle reminder that, even without the kind of overt contemporizing that the Public Theater brought to its staging of *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare's texts can be depended upon to elicit responses that challenge and at times disturb us. That's one of the many reasons they remain pertinent: because they continually prompt us to remember that the situations which challenge characters in plays like *The Tempest* are recurring phenomena. These masterpieces endure because, to borrow a line from one of Hamlet's soliloquies, they make it difficult for members of an audience to avoid "looking before and after."

This was something I'd experienced in a different way during the summer of 1992, when I spent several weeks as dramaturg for a *Tempest* that was being presented by the Grove Shakespeare Festival in southern California. It turned out to be another production that encouraged audiences to think about historical precedents, because 1992 was the 500th anniversary of Columbus' discovery of a New World on this side of the Atlantic. What this meant, of course, was that "colonial" themes were even more unavoidable that year in Garden Grove than they were to be this year in Santa Fe. As a consequence, I found that in many ways our

1992 *Tempest* tended to favor Caliban over Prospero, who emerged in many of its scenes as an unsympathetic and even at times tyrannical figure who was incapable of hearing what others tried to tell him, and consequently as a man who was deficient in his understanding either of himself or of those around him. This Prospero didn't come across as a villain; that would have gone against the grain of Shakespeare's script. But he did emerge as a man who still had a good deal of learning to do at the end of the action as he begged an indulgent audience to set him free.

But what made our efforts even more fascinating was a global conference on the environment that was taking place in Rio de Janeiro. Leaders from around the world were addressing issues such as climate change, deforestation, and the threats that modern economies pose to biodiversity. It soon emerged that a new divide had opened up, one that tended to pit nations in the Northern Hemisphere against nations south of the Equator. Statesmen in Europe and in the United States were demanding that their counterparts in regions such as Africa and South America do everything possible to prevent, or impose strict limits on, the kinds of agricultural and industrial development that endangered tropical rain forests such as those to be found in Brazil's Amazon basin. In response, representatives of the Southern Hemisphere insisted that their self-righteous critics from the North were hypocritically forgetting that their own old-growth forests had been cut down centuries earlier.

For many of us, this was an engaging debate, but what sealed its relevance to the show we were presenting was a startled recognition that many of Prospero's words and actions made him appear uncannily similar to the Europeans and white Americans in Rio de Janeiro who seemed oblivious to their own biases. It also dawned upon us that two of the characters in *The Tempest* who are subject to a furious exile's commands, Caliban and Ferdinand, are compelled to cut and carry wood for him and his daughter to burn. It seemed altogether fitting, then, that when we got to the play's Epilogue, where Prospero bids farewell to the audience and asks

theatergoers to pardon his shortcomings, we noticed, as if for the first time, that Prospero describes the setting he's about to abandon as a "bare island."

We recognized, of course, that when Shakespeare composed that speech he was alluding to the unadorned stage on which the first actor to utter Prospero's lines would be standing as he delivered his concluding prayer. We realized, in other words, that Shakespeare's protagonist was referring to what the Chorus in an earlier play, *Henry V*, demeans as an "unworthy platform." But, as so often happens with this playwright's supple phrasing, the words he put into the mouth of a Prospero who was speaking these words in 1992 carried additional implications.

They now hinted at a protagonist who could be imagined as becoming dimly aware that it might take some time for him to acknowledge all the ways in which, like King Lear, he has "taken too little care" of matters that require urgent attention. And they suggested that among those concerns, at least for Prospero's far-seeing creator, might be the kinds of ethical and ecological dilemmas that would be rising to the fore as works such as *The Tempest* approached their 400th anniversary.

So am I suggesting that, in addition to being an insightful dramatist, Shakespeare was also a prophet? If so, I wouldn't be the first person to hint at that possibility. If you've ever had the opportunity to look either at an original or at a facsimile of the 1623 folio in which *The Tempest* first appeared in print -- indeed as the masterwork that proudly opened the volume -- you'll have noticed that the book's front matter includes a tribute from Ben Jonson, the playwright's most eminent contemporary. Jonson was by no means a Shakespeare worshiper; he could be quite critical of minor oversights in his rival's plays. But in his eulogy to a man with comparatively limited schooling, a man who had "small Latine, and less Greeke," Jonson conceded that Shakespeare writings surpassed even the greatest works of such classic dramatists as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes. He saluted Shakespeare

as "Soule of the Age" he adorned. He then went on to proclaim that Shakespeare's works were immortal, because "He was not of an age, but for all time!"

More recent admirers of the playwright have spoken in similar fashion. In the 19th century, assessing Shakespeare's place in a broad panoply of great writers, Ralph Waldo Emerson concluded that Shakespeare "was inconceivably wise, the others conceivably." Matthew Arnold credited Shakespeare with "Out-topping knowledge." James Joyce dubbed him "Shapesphere" and praised him as the genius who gave us "the great folio of the world."

One of today's most perceptive observers, Kiernan Ryan, has argued that what best accounts for Shakespeare's "universality" is the fact that his greatest works demand that we evaluate every situation, every character, every decision, and every speech in terms of criteria that are, in effect, utopian, because they frequently leave us feeling uneasy with even the most satisfying resolutions to be encountered in Shakespeare's plays and poems. That's why it's so difficult for us to agree about whether *The Merchant of Venice* is anti-Semitic or anti-Christian, for example. or to decide whether *Henry V* fervently endorses or is profoundly cynical about the title character's invasion of France.

As an unnamed lord observes in *All's Well That Ends Well*, "the web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together," and once we start examining what happens in Shakespeare's poems and plays, we find that it's anything but simple to identify a character who is completely wise, sensitive, responsible, virtuous, and self-aware. And that, I think, is why we keep making discoveries as we read, watch, and produce these complex works.

So how should we approach these multifaceted gems? I've long felt that the best guides to them -- the best operators' manuals, if you will --are subtly embedded in the works themselves. And more often than not, they occur in the places where

we'd least expect to encounter them. One of the keys to Shakespeare's metrical dexterity, for example, occurs in *Hamlet*, where Polonius displays the kind of showy rhetorical flourish that prompts an exasperated Gertrude to say "More matter. with less art." The speech that elicits her impatient demand contains the following lines:

Therefore since brevity is the soul of wit,
And tediousness the limbs and outward flourishes,
I will be brief.

If we scan what Polonius says in this passage, we'll notice that in order to achieve metrical regularity in the first line, we need to abbreviate the word "brevity" to "brev'ty." That's cleverly fitting. And we'll notice in the line that follows that we count off six metrical feet rather than the five that iambic pentameter normally requires. In short, we observe that Polonius illustrates (and exhibits) "tediousness" by means of a line that's overly long, a line with "outward flourishes." And in case we've failed to notice the verbal skill that Polonius has displayed here, Shakespeare reminds us of it a moment later when he has the old counselor point out that "this effect defective comes by cause" -- in other words, that this metrical irregularity is designed to alert us to a meaningful exception, a significant departure from what we usually encounter in a well-wrought line of blank verse.

In a way that parallels Hamlet's advice to the Players, conveyed in a couple of speeches that expound on "the purpose of playing," Shakespeare here provides a humorous "teaching moment," a clue we can use both in this play and elsewhere to note and appreciate a few of the artistic methods he deploys as poet and dramatist.

Not only does Shakespeare make comic but practical use of a "tedious old fool" for sensible tips on versification; he also resorts to Polonius for an observation about character and behavior that proves key, not only to what happens in *Hamlet*, but to what goes on in all of the playwright's works. The passage that conveys this insight occurs in the commission that Polonius gives to the young men he dispatches

to Paris as informants who'll report back to him about his son Laertes. Polonius instructs his spies to employ insinuation as bait to encourage Laertes' companions to divulge any details they know about his youthful peccadilloes. Through this technique a nosy father hopes that his agents will "By indirections find directions out."

Even though it derives from a fussy and pedantic busybody who's frequently ridiculed by others, this turns out to be shrewd methodology, and it proves to be a valuable tool for anyone who seeks to understand the Danish Prince and the play that Shakespeare devoted to his tragic fortunes.

Let's now return to *The Tempest* and see whether Polonius' guidance might prove helpful in a different context, beginning with the second scene of the play as we listen to Prospero's account of why he and his daughter have been marooned for twelve long years on a remote Mediterranean island.

As we begin focusing on Prospero's frequently interrupted narrative, it soon becomes clear that he's obsessed by the treachery of his brother Antonio, a man who, after having served for an extended period as deputy to a studious but politically withdrawn Duke, has finally usurped all of his elder sibling's authority and forged a secret alliance with King Alonso of Naples -- an arrangement that has made Milan subservient to a stronger and more effectively governed city-state.

What Prospero mentions parenthetically, but fails to take personal responsibility for, is the naivete and negligence that made him vulnerable to Antonio's betrayal. This becomes clear if we pay close attention to what Prospero says and doesn't say. We quickly observe that he's a bitter and deeply resentful victim who is anything but objective, and anything but reliable as a narrator of his own biography.

We notice, too, that as a result of what has happened to him, Prospero has now become a highly controlling personality. He insists on Miranda's complete attention. He's impatient with Ariel, the sprite who has served him faithfully for many a year and who now seeks only the freedom that has long been promised him. And of

course Prospero keeps his slave Caliban under constant surveillance, tormenting him whenever he displays any impulse toward self-determination. What also becomes clear is that Miranda has become a chip off the old block when it comes to her view of Caliban. He can do no right, in her opinion, and if anything she believes that the punishment he receives is less severe than what he deserves.

Caliban reminds both Prospero and Miranda that there was a time when he was treated with "Kindness," not scorned as a "Savage" but nurtured with "humane Care." In response he showed them "all the Qualities of th' Isle," and helped them adapt to what might otherwise have proven to be a difficult habitat for them.

So what went wrong? According to Prospero, Caliban sought to "violate the Honor" of his "Child." This sounds like attempted rape. But as we listen to Miranda's account of how she taught "Language" to a creature who resembled "A thing most brutish," it occurs to us that what really happened may have been far less threatening -- that Caliban might simply have responded to Miranda's gentle instructions with a show of affection that would have been elicited a less hostile reaction if it had come from a suitor who'd impress a proud duke as a fitting match for his daughter.

It seems clear from what Caliban later tells Stephano that he's just as responsive to Miranda's grace and beauty as Ferdinand turns out to be. Caliban endorses Prospero's description of Miranda as "Non-pareil," and he assures Stephano that she will "bring thee forth brave Brood." This statement echoes Caliban's earlier assertion that if Prospero had not intervened, he'd have "peopl'd . . . this Isle" with offspring of his own. And it suggests that any offense committed by an islander who was once his "own king" might have been motivated less by violent lust than by natural desire, supplemented perhaps by dynastic aspirations that are indistinguishable from those of Ferdinand, a prince who'll soon make Prospero's daughter the Queen of Naples.

What I'm suggesting is that Caliban has attributes that are lost on both Prospero and his daughter, and that we miss a significant aspect of what Shakespeare is dramatizing in *The Tempest* if our perspective is limited to what the two of them say about him. Caliban's attributes are also lost on the two clowns who refer to him as "Servant Monster." He speaks eloquent verse, we notice (the same refined "Language" that his noble mistress taught him to employ), and he responds with poetic sensitivity to the music that Ariel uses to distract Stephano and Trinculo from their goal. He's much more intelligent and refined than the dull, prose-speaking drunkards he pins his hopes upon, and he eventually discovers that they're too frivolous and stupid to execute his plan to remove Prospero from another "Dukedom" and replace him with "King Stephano."

Shall we now proceed to the most frequently performed oration in the play? It occurs in Act IV when Prospero signals an abrupt conclusion to the wedding masque he has arranged, a solemn pageant in which spirits representing the goddesses Iris, Ceres, and Juno bless the union between Miranda and Ferdinand. After allowing himself to be lulled into a state of near rapture, Prospero suddenly remembers that Caliban and his companions are planning to slay him. So after he attempts to assure the confused lovers that there is no reason for them to worry about the agitation they detect in him, Prospero explains why he has truncated an entertainment that has left them enchanted. Speaking to Ferdinand, he says:

You do look, my Son, in a mov'd sort,
As if you were dismay'd; be cheerful, Sir,
Our Revels now are ended. These our Actors,
As I foretold you, were all Spirits, and
Are melted into Air, into thin Air,
And like the baseless Fabric of this Vision,

The Cloud-capp'd Tow'rs, the gorgeous Palaces,
 The solid Temples, the great Globe itself,
 Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
 And like this insubstantial Pageant faded,
 Leave not a Rack behind. We are such Stuff
 As Dreams are made on; and our little Life
 Is rounded with a Sleep. Sir, I am vext;
 Bear with my Weakness, my old Brain is troubled;
 Be not disturb'd with my Infirmary;
 If you be pleas'd, retire into my Cell,
 And there repose; a Turn or two I'll walk
 To still my beating Mind.

It's not difficult to understand why this speech is so frequently invoked as a way to draw formal occasions to an elegant conclusion. It's one of the most majestically heightened passages in all of Shakespeare. But it's important to observe that it impresses Ferdinand and Miranda as a poorly disguised diversion, a way to keep them from worrying about Prospero's uncharacteristically "distemper'd" behavior.

When we pause long enough to pay heed to what Prospero says here, it becomes clear that he's speaking as a man who has been jolted into the realization that his "little Life" could end at any moment. So what we're hearing in these lines is a *memento mori* meditation, similar to the one that occurs in *Hamlet's* Gravedigger Scene, a recognition that like everything else that appears firm and indestructible, from Towers, Palaces, and Temples to "the great Globe itself" (a reference not only to the planet we inhabit but to a legendary Bankside theater that was destined to burn to the ground a few years after these lines were first spoken on its boards), the "Stuff" we hold so dear is no more substantial than the "Dreams" that dot our "Sleep."

Shortly after this speech, Shakespeare treats us to one of the most amusing comic scenes he ever devised. Ariel thwarts Caliban's attempt to murder Prospero and install the loutish Stephano as ruler of the island. He then rounds up the "court party," which includes both Antonio, the brother who has supplanted Prospero as Duke of Milan, and Alonso, the Neapolitan monarch who has assisted him and helped arrange for Prospero and his infant daughter to be set adrift at sea. Prospero's sprite then informs his master that "the King and's Followers" are "Confin'd together" as "Prisoners" and "cannot boudge till your Release."

He means, of course, that they cannot move until Prospero releases them. But the words that Shakespeare assigns to the actor playing Ariel can also be construed in a different way, and in the lines that follow it becomes evident that Prospero must himself experience "release" before he can set his victims free and pardon their offenses. Ariel explains to his master that

The King,

His Brother, and yours, abide all three distracted,
 And the Remainder mourning over them,
 Brim full of Sorrow and Dismay; but chiefly
 Him that you term'd, Sir, the good old Lord Gonzalo,
 His Tears run down his Beard like Winter's Drops
 From Eaves of Reeds. Your Charm so strongly works 'em
 That if you now beheld them, your Affections
 Would become tender.

PROSPERO Dost thou think so, Spirit?

ARIEL Mine would, Sir, were I humane.

PROSPERO And mine shall.

Hast thou, which art but Air, a Touch, a Feeling
 Of their Affections, and shall not my self,

One of their Kind, that relish all as sharply
 Passion as they, be kindlier mov'd then thou art?
 Though with their high Wrongs I am strook to th' Quick,
 Yet, with my noble Reason 'gainst my Fury
 Do I take part. The rarer Action is
 In Virtue then 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.

This is the moment when a drama that might have culminated in stern punishments and even bloody executions, a drama that might have ended as a bitter revenge tragedy, concludes instead as an uplifting comedy of forgiveness and compassion. And it ends thus because Ariel guides his master to respond in a way that is both human and humane.

You may perhaps have noticed, as I recited Ariel's pivotal words, that I said "Mine would, Sir, were I humane." That's how the First Folio printing, our only textual authority for *The Tempest*, renders this line, and it offers a salient reminder that in Shakespeare's time one word did the work that would later be assigned to two.

For the playwright and his initial audiences, to be human was by definition to be what we now call humane. And, given the times we're now experiencing, I can't think of a more pertinent theme to cherish as a valedictory message from the poet who has been referred to as our most reliable guide to the mileposts of life.

These remarks were delivered in Allendale, Michigan, on Friday, September 29, 2017, as part of Grand Valley State University's annual Shakespeare Festival, a celebration organized by Jim Bell, Ivo Soljan, and their colleagues that included a staging of *The Tempest* by director Curt Tofteland.