

The Tempest -- Notes from the Dramaturg
by Roxanne Ray

The Tempest is one of only three of Shakespeare's plays whose narrative has no known direct literary source (the other two being *Love's Labour's Lost* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). Yet, *The Tempest* has social and political origins to which we can point: the play illuminates the beginnings of a European colonialist project whose effects still reverberate in today's world.

In writing *The Tempest* in 1611, Shakespeare looked to the world around him. He combined the Elizabethan-era image of the *magus*, a masterful elder whose knowledge and experimental powers encompassed both science and magic related to the natural world, with early reports by William Strachey, and an essay by Michel de Montaigne, concerning travels to the "West Indies" and North America's Atlantic coast. By linking Caliban, the native inhabitant of the island on which Prospero and his daughter Miranda are stranded, with witchcraft through his mother Sycorax – and by repeatedly labeling Caliban a monster both physically and morally – Shakespeare reinforces Elizabethan cultural constructions of Native Americans and Africans as "Other," constructions that have also pervaded American history and culture. And yet, Shakespeare complicates this Othring image, by positioning Caliban as noble and eloquent in his defense of his island and his freedom – thereby offering contemporary productions of *The Tempest* the opportunity to link this 500-year-old play to current political events and liberation movements.

Shakespeare also complicates his presentation of Prospero as benevolent father-*magus*. Although Prospero's magical conjurings bring only the *terror* of death – rather than death itself – to King Alonso and his entourage sailing home from Tunis, this elder magician enforces his will upon everyone else, from kings to spirits to slaves. Before the play begins, Prospero has freed the sprite Ariel from Sycorax's bondage, only to indenture this hard-working spirit in seemingly endless tasks. And despite the freedom he allows Miranda to follow her heart in love, he nonetheless supervises her sexuality and insists upon her virginity at marriage. Yet, without wavering in his pursuit of kingly power, Prospero nonetheless practices restraint in the face of grand opportunities for revenge. While at times he threatens vengeance against those who took his crown and exiled him, in the end Prospero teaches his daughter, his servants, and his one-time rivals that the simple righting of a wrong may be sufficient to restore harmony. Forgiveness, for the learned Prospero, may not yet lead to forgetting, but perhaps *The*

Tempest shows us the image of a mature – and *maturing* – mentor, providing us with one example of the challenges, as well as the value, of reconciliation among former enemies.