

A dramatic painting of a storm at sea. Two wooden sailing ships are shown in the upper half, struggling against turbulent, white-capped waves. The sky is filled with swirling, dark and light clouds, suggesting a violent storm. In the foreground, a rocky shore is visible, with a large, weathered wooden log or beam lying horizontally across the rocks. The overall color palette is dominated by blues, purples, and whites, with warm brown tones for the ships and rocks.

**UNDERSTANDING  
SHAKESPEARE:  
THE TEMPEST**

**Robert A. Albano**

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**Understanding  
Shakespeare:**

***The Tempest***

Robert A. Albano

**MERCURYE PRESS**

**Los Angeles**

# **Understanding Shakespeare: *The Tempest***

Robert A. Albano

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## UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE: THE TEMPEST

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## UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE: THE TEMPEST

## NOTE:

All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

## UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE: THE TEMPEST

## INTRODUCTION

*The Tempest* is one of Shakespeare's most popular and highly regarded plays. The mysterious magician, the fantastical characters, the innocent ingénue, the delightful songs, and the rowdy physical humor all contribute to making this work charming and delightful to audiences all around the world.

At the center of the play and in control of all of the events is the enigmatic sorcerer or mage named Prospero. In several ways Prospero is like the title character in Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Both magicians value deep learning and esteem the power of magic, and both use their power to control the elements. And just as Doctor Faustus has the good angel and bad angel hovering about him as supernatural powers to influence or to affect his actions, Prospero has the goodly Ariel and the wicked Caliban to fulfill or to thwart his plans.

Yet, Prospero is also the opposite of Doctor Faustus as well. Faustus is a proponent of black magic or evil magic. His powers come from the devil Mephistopheles and from Satan himself. More importantly, he ultimately is unable to accomplish any of his plans or wishes. Prospero is a master of white magic. His powers come from learning and from his own inner abilities. And Prospero is able to control events and achieves the ends that he desires.

The intentions of the two playwrights were also quite on opposite ends of the spectrum. Christopher Marlowe was writing a Christian play to promote a Christian and moral purpose. Nearly twenty years later (in 1611) William Shakespeare was writing a secular play to promote a more

universal message regarding the behavior of mankind.

Prospero is a complex character, and that complexity has led some critics to view him as an allegorical figure and other critics to see him as a symbol for Shakespeare himself. Audiences, however, can accept the character on his own terms and do not need to rely on extravagant theories of symbolism. Prospero enchants his audience and practically mesmerizes them just as he controls all of the events on his mysterious island.

Literary critics have also had some difficulty in determining the genre to which *The Tempest* belongs. Most critics today label the play as a **romance**, and many anthologies of Shakespeare's works group *The Tempest* as a romance along with three other late plays by Shakespeare (*Pericles*, *Prince of Tyre*; *Cymbeline*; and *The Winter's Tale*).

The genre of the romance was highly popular in England during the Middle Ages. Many of the tales involving King Arthur and his knights are romances (which became popular in printed form in Thomas Mallory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* in the 15<sup>th</sup> century), and notable earlier romances include *King Horn* from the 13<sup>th</sup> century and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* from the 14<sup>th</sup> century. These medieval romances focused on chivalric deeds of knights. They are primarily adventure stories, but they frequently included elements of courtly romance as well as supernatural characters or objects.

The romance genre continued into the Renaissance with certain changes by writers like Robert Greene and Thomas Lodge. The plots became more complex, and the writers placed a

greater stress upon the emotions or sentiment of the main characters.

Plays based on these prose romances or plays bearing similar attributes could thus be called romances as well. However, Shakespeare himself never referred to *The Tempest* or *The Winter's Tale* as romances. In fact, not until 1876, more than 250 years after Shakespeare wrote these plays, did critics start referring to the plays as romances. And the term is really unnecessary.

The critics have been largely inconsistent in defining and determining the category of romance. On the one hand, Robert Greene's romance *Pandosto* is the source for Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*; on the other hand, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* (which was based on the medieval romance *Gamelyn*) is the source for *As You Like It*. Yet critics label *The Winter's Tale* a romance and label *As You Like It* a comedy. Both plays could be called romances; and, just as easily, both plays could be called comedies.

In the Renaissance there are really only two categories of plays: **tragedies** (involving the tragic fall of the protagonist and thus ending sadly) and **comedies** (any play ending happily even though it may involve sad or serious events in the preceding action). *The Tempest*, then, is a comedy.

Yet, no matter what one may call *The Tempest* – romance or comedy or just a play – Shakespeare's magical tale of the wizard Prospero and his innocent daughter Miranda – a tale of love and betrayal and usurpation and eventual redemption – has intrigued and enchanted audiences for four centuries and will continue to intrigue and enchant audiences for many more centuries to come.



# ACT I

## Act I, Scene 1: You Mar Our Labor

The play begins with a setting of a ship at sea. A terrible storm, a tempest, is raging and tossing the ship wildly. Aboard the ship are a number of Italian aristocrats:

**Alonso**, the King of Naples

**Sebastian**, Alonso's brother

**Ferdinand**, Alonso's son

**Antonio**, the Duke of Milan

As the **Boatswain** (a minor officer aboard the ship) attempts to direct the sailors so that the ship will avoid crashing into the rocks, the aristocrats come out of their cabins and make a nuisance of themselves. They ask the Boatswain questions, but he is clearly too busy trying to save the ship and the lives of everyone on board to stop and respond to the imperious demands of the nobles.

The Boatswain even bluntly tells the aristocrats, "You mar our labour" (line 12). He is telling the nobles that they are getting in the way and hindering the sailors from doing their job. Shakespeare frequently hints at the **conflict between aristocrats and commoners** in his plays, and he is doing so here in this scene. The nobility always expected respect and obedience from the commoners regardless of the circumstances. King Alonso's good



counselor, **Gonzalo**, even warns the Boatswain to “remember whom thou hast aboard” (17). Gonzalo is warning the Boatswain to be respectful toward the King and Duke or else he will suffer punishment at their hands.

However, the Boatswain has no time to stop his work in order to be respectful to the nobles at such a dangerous time; and thus the aristocrats are clearly being foolish in worrying about their demands for respect over their own safety. As the Boatswain sarcastically indicates, “What care these roarers for the name of king?” (15-16). The roaring sea will just as easily drown a king as it will drown a commoner. The tempestuous sea makes no distinction of social class. And if Nature, of which the sea is a part, makes no such distinction; then such a distinction (as Shakespeare is subtly declaring) is clearly an unnatural one.

Of the distinguished passengers aboard the ship, only the honest counselor Gonzalo recognizes the wisdom of the Boatswain’s words despite the crude and disrespectful manner in which he utters them. Gonzalo is hopeful that perhaps the Boatswain can find a way to save the ship. However, when the timbers start to crack loudly and when the mariners start to shout that the ship is splitting apart, Gonzalo and the aristocrats believe that their death is at hand.

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