

Literature Insights
General Editor: Charles Moseley

William Shakespeare: The Tempest

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*'The dream failed,
in the end; but it
was not a foolish
dream to have,
nor is it one from
which we wake
without regret.'*

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Introduction

I am attempting the impossible, which is always entertaining. *The Tempest* has over the years generated an enormous variety of critical response and debate, often bad-tempered and highly politicised. Ways of staging it are as varied as critical responses, ranging from the twee to the bizarre: Prospero's Island was relocated to the Arctic at Stratford-on-Avon in 2006. Sometimes, nowadays, those ways are all too predictable when directors claim, as they often do, something called originality. I am going to try to get behind all that. I want to consider what issues *The Tempest* would have suggested to its audience at its first recorded performance before the King in the old Banqueting House in Whitehall on 1 November 1611, when all the things that have developed its cultural baggage over the last four hundred years had simply not happened—and a lot of things had, which we have forgotten. So early twenty-first century discussions of theatricality, of power, sexual and racial politics, of post-colonialism, post modern issues—all the things which we can quite legitimately make the play discuss for us in the theatre now—will not get much space here, even though they can be very interesting and are often the way that most students first approach this widely-taught play.¹ The *Jacobean* play *cannot* be talking about them, and, in the terms we see them, they would have completely mystified Shakespeare's audience. Yet I am very aware that I cannot completely divest myself of the assumptions of my generation: as T. S. Eliot said, in every statement about the past we make there is an unquantifiable amount of error. We can't simply un-live the centuries that have made us what we are; we can never know what it was like to be our ancestors. In a real sense, their planet circled a different sun.

But we can—should—make that imaginative effort of visiting another mindset. Not to do so is to make the literature and art of the past a mere echo chamber for our own obsessions. We read what has come down to us to measure, and test, our own certainties against ones that were once just as firmly held as we hold ours. Our forebears certainly thought differently to us about the world, God, politics, love, death, the self, and they may have a good deal to tell us. This play certainly looks at the way

¹ See Section 7, 'Afterlife and Further Reading', for some suggestions about choosing modern editions.