‘it was not a foolish
dream to have, nor
... one from which we
wake without regret.’
William Shakespeare:  
*The Tempest*  

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A Note on the Author

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In this series, of which he is General Editor, he has so far written an Insight on Shakespeare’s Richard III, and also English Renaissance Drama: a Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres in Shakespeare’s Time, which he hopes you will enjoy and find useful.

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Introduction

I am attempting the impossible, which is always entertaining. \textit{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 \textit{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.\footnote{See Section 7, ‘Afterlife and Further Reading’, for some suggestions about choosing modern editions.} The Jacobean play \textit{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
humans treat other humans, at issues of power, and its use and misuse, but it does it on its first audience’s terms. And they did not suddenly invent our ideas when they wrote plays or poems, or painted the pictures that stare silently out of time at us, challenging and disquieting. Their drama is based on those different assumptions, but then as now those assumptions are in a constant process of change, criticism and development. When you grasp the code, you see that they are all continually discussed in pamphlet, painting, poetry and drama. Theatre was one of the only ways of publicly examining through the agreed fiction of the stage things that matter: but it had to be done obliquely. And remember the useful concept of intertextuality; plays reply to plays, poems reply to poems, and plays are not only the fun they certainly are: they explore some very serious, topical issues.

Any reading or production that does not acknowledge the ‘doubleness’, the contradictory voices of the play—as of many of the good plays in this period—must be inadequate. In Twelfth Night, Sir Andrew Aguecheek is a mere gull, a fool belonging to a stage genre of fools, and deserves all he gets. But when in 2.iii he suddenly responds to Sir Toby’s complacent claim that Maria adores him with ‘I was adored once, too’, it is impossible to play it in any way that avoids sudden plangent pathos that momentarily suspends the comic buffoonery. Just so Caliban: a stage grotesque, yet he has some of the loveliest, most moving, lines in the play. In Shakespeare’s drama, it is often the case that contradictory things are both true at the same time (As it can be in life: nothing is simple, and many notorious tyrants have been wonderful with children and dogs, and even loved.) Henry V is a Machiavellian thug and a ‘mirror of all Christian kings’ (2.0.6), depending on where you see him from: the play allows both things to be true. Let us keep that in mind in approaching this most beautiful of plays.

It would be very helpful indeed if anyone using this little book had read my English Renaissance Drama: A Very Brief Introduction to Theatre and Theatres of Shakespeare and his Time (hereafter Very Brief Intro.) in this series, where the issues I have just raised are explored much more fully than I have room for now. What I shall now go on to say assumes some knowledge of the issues discussed in that book.
Shakespeare, the King’s Men and the Court

We do not know a lot about Shakespeare the man—we know much more about, say, his friend and rival Ben Jonson. We know he was born in Stratford-on-Avon, probably in 1564, and died there in 1616, a rich man: a lot of people made a lot of money out of the theatre (see my Very Brief Intro.). We know about his children, a little about his family, a little about his property. We are pretty certain he went to the local very good grammar school. His father was a prominent citizen, who remained a (Roman) Catholic despite the swingeing penalties imposed on them by the authorities, and that Shakespeare’s cousins included the Jesuit martyr Robert Southwell. We do not know Shakespeare’s religious views, or, indeed, what he thought about a lot of things. You certainly cannot derive a comprehensive view of his opinions and values from his plays, for to write a play is not to open your soul but to create a world for your different characters to live in. We have his will, but no letters. We know he acted, we know he was connected in some way with the circle round the young earl of Southampton, to whom he dedicated, possibly in the hope of direct patronage, those wonderful, fashionable, slightly flashy, poems, Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece. We know people rather liked him, and admired him: ‘sweet Mr Shakespeare’, ‘our Roscius’—Roscius was a famous Roman actor—and said things like ‘the sweet wit-tie soule of Ovid liveth again in our Master Shakespeare’.¹ We know Ben Jonson had a qualified respect for his work, and thought he wrote too fast and was rather slovenly. He wrote a lot of plays—we may not have all of them—some in cheerful collaboration with other writers, and was through and through a man of the theatre.² But

¹ Francis Meres, Palladis Tamia, (1597)
² The ‘authorship question’, ‘who wrote Shakespeare?’ need not detain us. The Baconian or Oxfordian positions depend on massive conspiracy theories with no hint of the leakiness that we see as a matter of course in all conspiracies, conspiracies that were wholly successful for all Shakespeare’s lifetime and long afterwards. We are asked to believe they were only penetrated in the mid nineteenth century by the perspicacity of Miss Delia Bacon, an American lady with no academic training and no fulfilled pretensions to scholarship. The Oxfordian case has attracted a multiplication of conspiracy theories from the gentle to the lunatic, and recent attempts to suggest that the authorship question is academically respectable are just plain wrong: it is not. Those who argue that Bacon wrote Shakespeare can never have read Bacon. As G. K. Chesterton said, there is only one sense in which bacon wrote Shakespeare, and that is alimentary…
he remains, as a man, an enigmatic figure. All we can say is that he was a man of the late Renaissance in the peculiar form it took in England, and we do him a disservice to pretend otherwise.

Shakespeare’s known career splits into two more or less equal halves: 25 plays and the poems in 12 or so years in the reign of Elizabeth, and 9 years or so and 12 known plays under James. Let us start by glancing at how that change of Prince might have affected how he writes, and what he writes about. This is not to ignore the idea of a dramatist consciously or unconsciously developing and changing, and exploring ideas, but is an attempt to insert into understanding that process an awareness of the dynamic relationship with the market and public taste, and alertness to the preoccupations of power.¹ For nobody owes a writer, even if he is Will Shakespeare, a living—and once upon a time he was without that enormous posthumous clout we take for granted. He certainly was one among many in 1603, with some of the work we most value still to come. Shakespeare operated in a small and intensely commercial world, and public taste takes its cue from the issues raised and the fashions followed in the courts of princes. Several plays show the influence of court taste and the characteristic preoccupations of James’ reign, and feed back to the Court an appraisal of them.

So how did the way people looked at things change with James’ accession? First of all, there was relief: relief that the uncertainty as to who would succeed was over, and relief that the succession had in the event been uncontested—many, as Francis Bacon tells us, feared it would not be.² For Elizabeth all her life refused to indicate whom she wanted to succeed her—not that it was exactly her choice, constitutionally—and the legal position was tangled: a major area of controversy in the late 90s was the legality of the succession, and the conflicting claims of the descendants of Henry VII, or the Plantagenet claim represented by the charismatic Infanta Isabella of Spain. There was uncertainty and anxiety, and despite the links Elizabeth’s minister Cecil and others had formed with James, a civil war for the crown was possible.

Anxieties are soon forgotten when they do not fruit. James’ arrival brought further changes. For he was followed south by his Queen Anne of Denmark, and later still by his elder son, Prince Henry. What must it have felt like to have, for the first time since 1549, a Royal Family? No-one under 45 had ever known any other govern-

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¹ See my Very Brief Intro.
² Bacon, Works, ed. Spedding, pp. 276–7: The Beginning of the History of Great Britain: ‘After Queen Elizabeth’s decease, there must follow in England nothing but confusions, interreigns, and perturbations of estate, likely far to exceed the ancient calamities of Lancaster and York.’
ment but that of the sole empress, Elizabeth, a prince without peer as she was without heir. But she was a prince on the most insecure throne in Europe at her accession, a prince de-legitimized and deposed by Pius V in 1570 as ‘a bastard of a notorious courtesan’. She was vulnerable all her reign to conspiracy. Conspiracies centred on her rival, Mary of Scotland, or on other claimants to the questionable throne of the Tudors. But in 1603, there is a secure Protestant monarch as king of all three realms in Britain, recognized by a Pope hopeful that he would soon convert (like Henri IV of France) to Catholicism, a king courted by the princes of Europe, determined to be a peacemaker with the Catholic power of Spain, and blessed already with a numerous progeny in the glamorous and precocious Prince Henry, Prince Charles—though little and sickly—and the strong minded Princess Elizabeth. The baby Princess Mary was born in England (in 1606). For a large section of the English, the Catholics—and Shakespeare was perhaps one of their number¹—here was a prince who, it seemed, might offer relief from the penal sanctions under which they had suffered for so long, and they enthusiastically welcomed him. The Protestants recognised in him a theologian who had argued in their cause. And those royal children: that assurance not only of stable succession, but of a future in the young—a topic to which I shall return. At a stroke, James’ accession made all those plays, including some by Shakespeare, that in veiled terms addressed the topical issues of succession, legitimacy and the nature of the crown—Richard II, King John, Henry IV, Henry V, Oldcastle, Edward II—obsolete in at least that respect: if they had a future in the theatre, it would have to be on other merits. Some old jokes won’t work any more: for example, you had better be nice to Scots! Hitherto, Scots had been on the whole comic on the Eliz stage: they could not speak English properly, rather like Frenchmen; they were foreigners. But now the King himself talked funny, and was a foreigner, and put a lot of Scots in positions of power and influence in England—not without generating resentment, of course. Popular preoccupations, to which the commercial drama must respond as much as to court taste, changed, and we should never forget how responsive to those changes dramatists are—indeed, they themselves shared them.

The political map of England, then, is unrecognizably different. It has a future of hope and not only a past of glory. James was genuinely learned, and despite the bad press he has had for centuries—largely growing from stories put about by men disappointed of the favour they thought was their due—he was no fool. Unquestionably,

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