

# **Introduction**

**Why this play?**





*“The Tempest ... has nothing in its pretty little head other than the desire to beguile, to enchant, to entertain, and to reassure the King, his minions, and the groundlings of the Globe that the King shall always prevail,”*  
Joseph Suglia, American  
screenwriter



# William, was it really nothing?





It has been argued that meaning in Shakespeare's plays  
has been made too elusive to allow for complete  
agreement over what it is

This is especially true of *The Tempest*

Why?

Because it's an allegory—a symbolic fictional  
narrative that conveys a meaning not explicitly set  
forth in the narrative



So, whatever *The Tempest* may have  
“in its pretty little head” lies buried  
beneath the surface

why? when and where is allegory used?

*The Tempest* is a sustained, consistent,  
penetrating—possibly dangerous & seditious—  
reflection on politics, and especially the  
relationship between authority & resistance

or, to be more precise, power & resistance



# Part One

**Who was Shakespeare?**



# Will in the World



Stephen Greenblatt biography (2004)  
Limited records of Shakespeare's life

Birth and death 1564-1616

first evidence of arrival on London theatrical scene  
1592

forms *Lord Chamberlain's* men 1594

renamed the *King's Men* 1603

Composition of *Tempest* around 1610-1611

Circa 1611 London career ends

but the rest very sketchy—  
considerable gaps

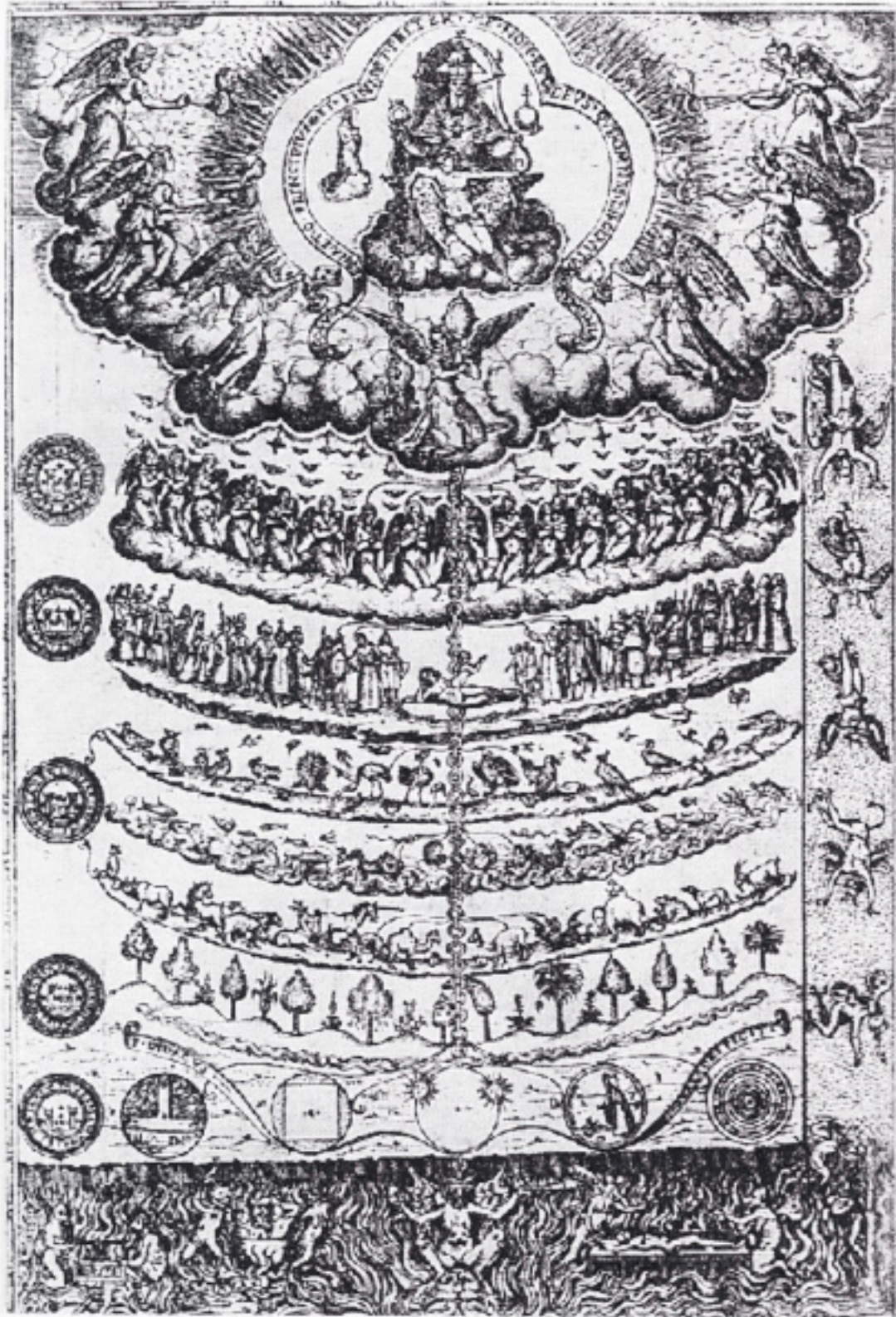
Greenblatt builds entire scenarios to  
show “How Shakespeare Became  
Shakespeare”



# Shakespeare often seen as a “*willing* spokseperson” for the orthodoxies of his age

- Shakespeare a conservative crypto-catholic?
- theatrical companies/actors in bed with monarchs?
- *The Tempest* an attempt to restore a natural order?





God  
 Angels  
 Kings/Queens  
 Archbishops  
 Dukes/Duchesses  
 Bishops  
 Marquises/Marchionesses  
 Earls/Countesses  
 Viscounts/Viscountesses  
 Barons/Baronesses  
 Abbots/Deacons  
 Knights/Local Officials  
 Ladies-in-Waiting  
 Priests/Monks  
 Squires  
 Pages  
 Messengers  
 Merchants/Shopkeepers  
 Tradesmen  
 Yeomen Farmers  
 Soldiers/Town Watch  
 Household Servants  
 Tennant Farmers  
 Shephards/Herdors  
 Beggars  
 Actors  
 Thieves/Pirates  
 Gypsies  
 Animals  
 Birds  
 Worms  
 Plants  
 Rocks

Great Chain of being: all  
 existing things in the  
 universe have a place in a  
 divinely planned  
 hierarchical order,  
 pictured as a chain  
 vertically extended



1559 proclamation expressly  
forbade any plays that considered  
religion or politics

. . . her majesty doth likewise charge every of them [i.e.  
her officers] as they will answer: that they permit none to  
be played wherein either matters of religion or of the  
governance of the estate of the commonweal shall be  
handled or treated, being no meet matters to be written  
or treated upon but by men of authority, learning, and  
wisdom, nor to be handled before any audience but of  
grave and discreet persons



# But the reality very different

From the late 1580s until the closing of the theaters in the middle of the seventeenth century, the drama was able to stage plays that repeatedly took up these apparently forbidden questions about politics and religion, largely because playing and playgoing came to be seen by the authorities as harmless forms of commercial recreation for common people (Paul Yachnin “The Powerless Theater,” 1991)



# Shakespeare and the authorities



William Alabaster. Engraving by John Payne after the portrait by Cornelius Janssen.



- the Essex rebellion 1601 (sponsored a performance of Shakespeare's play, *Richard II*, at the Globe Theatre in London, on 7 February)
- Master of the Revels
- generally speaking Shakespeare kept his nose clean
- but censorship could be surprisingly liberal
- relative tolerance of Elizabeth I



# **Part Two**

**Performance History and Common Readings of the play**



# last becomes first

First Folio:  
1623





# Stage history



- first performed at court: James I, November 1, 1611
- performed again in 1613 for the Princess Elizabeth's wedding
- no further performances recorded until the mid 1700s
- from 1667 *The Tempest* was displaced by William Davenant & John Dryden's adaptation "The Enchanted Island"
- original play did not reappear with any consistency until the very early Victorian period (William Macready 1838)



# From Prospero to Caliban

- Macready production of 1838 first sympathetic portrayal of Caliban as a victim of oppression
- Herbert Beerbohm Tree actor and theatre manager 1904 production focused on Caliban





# The recovery of Caliban's humanity

- Davenant & Dryden reduced Caliban to exclusively comic, distorted, ugly character
- Caliban fades to the background
- but Caliban now emerging as human form beneath an outward animal appearance
- 1859: Darwin, *The Origin of Species*



F. R. Benson,  
1890s



Beerbohm Tree,  
1904



# Beyond Darwin

- eventual prominence of colonial and post-colonial interpretations in the 20th century
- 1945 Margaret Webster's New York production: actor Canada Lee is first black Caliban
- but deformed and covered partly in scales





# various Calibans





# *The Tempest* criticism

Two interpretations dominate

1. the meta-theatrical readings
2. colonial/post colonial readings



# A play about plays

An interpretation that  
obviously works  
But all of Shakespeare's  
plays are about the  
theatre  
More specifically, the  
play is seen as a  
valediction (a  
playwright's farewell to  
the theatre)





# A glorious autobiographical farewell disguised as a play?

Act 4, Scene 1, line 148 (p. 180)

“Our revels now are ended...”

Act 5, Scene 1, line 33 (p. 189)

“Ye elves of hills...”

Act 5, Scene 1, line 319 (p. 204)

“Now my charms are all o’erthrown...”



# Colonial/Post-colonial readings



“This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak’st from me” Act 1, Scene 2, line 331 (p. 119).



# Barbados born poet Kamau Brathwaite



- » Ariel aligns with spirit of the Caribbean intellectual
- » Caliban a descendant of slaves and a symbol of pride
- » Prospero tries through language to erase Caliban's African heritage
- » Sycorax a counterforce: reminds Caliban of his heritage
- » He has a "mother tongue" (a "nations language")
- » He can resist and subvert Prospero's power

Major works: *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968), and *Islands* (1969)  
(later published together as *The Arrivants* in 1973)

Another trilogy—*Mother Poem* (1977), *Sun Poem* (1982), and *X/Self* (1987)—also examines the issues of identity



**Is Shakespeare himself a  
sort of post colonial critic?**



# **Part Three**

**Authority (Power) & Resistance in the play**



**From its opening lines, this a  
play about authority & resistance**

**Act 1, Scene 1, lines 1-65 (p. 97)**





# Who has authority is this play?

“The relationship between power & authority is very complicated, but authority is most simply understood as *legitimate* power. In other words, authority is only present when I acknowledge that I have a duty to obey. If I obey only because of coercion or manipulation this is *not* evidence that authority is exercised, or that I even recognize that such authority is present. That “authority” is often really just power cloaked in the language of legitimacy or rightfulness is undeniable, but that’s the point of making a distinction between power & authority”





# The play so thoroughly undermines traditional ideas of authority that it can seem to border on sedition

- are Kings and nobles to be blindly obeyed?
- is Prospero a good king or a tyrant?
- is Prospero like James I? — abdication (hints at aloofness of James: 1.2 line 75, p. 105); empty political spectacle (“this insubstantial pageant faded” 4.1 p.181)
- is the now dead Elizabeth R being compare to Sycorax?  
(Sycorax or sic-o-rex?)



**The man  
behind the  
masque?**







**KEEP  
CALM  
AND**

**read the  
Tempest**