

# The second scene of "the tempest": a scene study

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



It is often noted that *The Tempest* is an odd play in Shakespeare's canon; unlike any of his other works, with the exception of *The Comedy of Errors*, it observes classical unities of time and setting. Of all of Shakespeare's opening scenes, the one in *The Tempest* is probably the most dramatic, including as it does both a storm and a shipwreck. However, the drama seems to almost completely subside in the next scene, in which Prospero narrates the prehistory of the play. This is an extreme challenge to the actor playing Prospero, since it is his job to maintain momentum in a scene which is full of long expository passages. This is one reason many actors who have played him have called him the most difficult character they have ever played. Miranda remembers her past only vaguely; "rather like a dream than an assurance that my remembrance warrants." Prospero explains that he was once the Duke of Milan, his title forcefully removed from him by his brother, Antonio, who had been allied with Alonzo, King of Naples. Walter Clyde Curry argues that Prospero does not say that he neglected his duty; he says, rather, that he neglected 'worldly ends' – a virtue for Shakespeare's overwhelmingly Christian audience, but not a virtue for a duke in a Machiavellian Italian Renaissance. Prospero here is describing an irreconcilable collision of value systems. Some critics argue that he is a weak ruler who brings his fate upon himself by isolating himself in his studies, therefore allowing his dukedom to be taken from him. However, many believe that Shakespeare wrote Prospero as a wise man who studies to make himself a better person, a victim of a power-hungry brother. Both interpretations are at least partially correct, and I think it's best to view Prospero as a combination of these two models. It is clear here that Prospero

is not a good ruler, as he is more interested in his studies than in his dukedom. Therefore, he is not completely blameless regarding his loss of power. His "false" brother could not so easily have taken power from Prospero, had he been more involved in the workings of Milan. This diminishes Antonio's betrayal and sets up the romantic genre right away: if Prospero is blameless, the play becomes a tragedy, since the "villain" would be beyond reconciliation. Prospero therefore cannot be perceived as vengeful: Shakespeare goes to lengths to assure us of this, telling the audience at least twice that although the ship in the opening scene was wrecked, everyone was saved and the passengers are safely on the island. Leslie Dunton-Downer argues, correctly I believe, that the "stereotype of Prospero as a sanitized Merlin-the-magician figure is misleading." He is neither simple nor purely good. He lashes out at his "false" brother, yet admits that he was "so retired" from his duties as Duke that an "evil nature" was "awaked" in his brother, and his "trust did beget of him a falsehood." He can be calm and empathetic, as he demonstrates at the beginning of the scene when he soothes Miranda's fears for the safety of the shipwrecked men in the previous scene. However, he becomes a different person altogether when he tells the story of Antonio's betrayal. Dean Ebner notes the seriousness with which Shakespeare's audiences would have taken this account: rebellion was "thoroughly condemned in the homilies of the English Church and by Shakespeare in his previous plays. The homilists viewed mass rebellion and individual usurpation as sins against God's anointed which violated the order of nature, bringing calamity to the commonwealth and damnation to the individuals involved." It seems to me

that we can effectively discover the heart of this largely expository scene by examining Prospero's language. As David Hurst suggests, as soon as Prospero begins to describe Antonio, "his syntax disintegrates under the strain of emotional recollection" (this begins at about line 70.) The multiple dashes and omissions strongly suggest that Prospero's story is not a leisurely tale meant to pass time, but a compressed, urgent version of a much larger, more complicated story. Anne Richter Barton argues that "the verse achieves an uncanny eloquence by way of what it omits or pares away." We also must note Prospero's continuous interrupting of himself, in order for Miranda to assure him that she is, in fact, paying attention to his story. At line 66, he says, "My brother and thy uncle, called Antonio - I pray thee mark me." His commands for her attention become more and more forceful: "Thy false uncle - Dost thou attend me?" (77-78). This is a startling break in the narrative, and Miranda must reassure him that she is paying attention "most heedfully." Even more emphatically in his next speech, Prospero says, "Thou attend'st not!...I pray thee, mark me!" Jay Halio suggests that "Miranda may be more concerned with what is happening offshore than with events long since past," and that Prospero rebukes her because she is continually glancing offstage. However, her responses point out exactly the opposite: "Your tale, sir, would cure deafness" (107). Therefore, Prospero's impatience must stem from his own sense of urgency: of course she is interested in her father's story, since they directly concern her and her present situation. This questioning is equally directed at the audience: Prospero wants to make sure he has their full attention, since he will return in the Epilogue and seek their judgment. Prospero appears to be

very much in control throughout *The Tempest*. He controls much of the action on and off stage and is able to manage the island's natural phenomena. If this play deals extensively with the machinations of power in various forms, then Prospero is the center of that power, effectively manipulating the events around him. He is a master of both magic and language — and aren't those, for Shakespeare, one and the same? Finally, Miranda falls asleep. Jungsil Lee suggests that a given character's attitude regarding sleep can point the way toward a critical analysis of that character's personality. Prospero puts Miranda to sleep in order to avoid her question about his plot. Lee here argues that "the hierarchy between father and daughter is implied as legitimate since the order given by Prospero — sleep — is naturally powerful and unavoidable." Yet the enforcement to sleep here does not seem to represent a mere tyranny of the older, physically superior being over his subject, because Prospero's speech is softly rhymed, as to show his tender affection to his daughter, rather than serve as an unreasonable statement of authority. Miranda's silence, Lee argues, shows that she, as a faithful daughter, does not resist, but helplessly accepts the patriarchy.