

# Painting with words: language as art in the tempest

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



In Shakespeare's romance, *The Tempest*, Miranda instructs Caliban, "I endowed thy purposes / With words that made them known" (I. ii. 357-8), affirming the power of language to transform the insubstantial into a forceful and purposeful entity. As Prospero conjures up tempests, masques, and spells, Shakespeare creates a linguistic pageant of lush imagery, tense staccato exchanges, straight-forward narration, and lyrical songs to intensify different moments in and expose major themes of the play. *The Tempest* begins with an abrupt, monosyllabic exchange between the Boatswain and Master that evolves into a series of confused, frenzied conversations tempests of language that convey the helplessness, fear, and consternation faced by the crew. The play moves toward elevated poetry delightful music, and masques of mysticism, all of which converge in Prospero's poignant valedictory speech in which he surrenders his magic powers after asserting his authority as an artist and proceeds to accomplish the prescribed reconciliations that resolve the drama: Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves, And ye that on the sands with printless foot Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him When he comes back; you demi-puppets that By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make, Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastimes to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid (Weak masters though ye be) I have bedimmed The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds, And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder Have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak With his own bolt; the strong-barked promontory Have I made shake and by the spurs plucked up The pine and cedar; graves at my command Have waked their sleepers, oped,

and let 'em forth  
By my so potent art. But this rough magic  
here abjure; and when I have required  
Some heavenly music (which even now I do)  
To work mine end upon their senses that  
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,  
Bury it  
certain fathoms in the earth, And deeper than did ever plummet  
sound  
I'll drown my book. (V. i. 33-57)

The sound patterns and connotations of Shakespeare's language convey Prospero's temperament. Prospero begins by poetically describing the magical inspiration of fantastical creatures, ascends into a charging affirmation of his power to perform the impossible, and concludes in a gentle tone as he lays his magic powers to rest. Prospero employs images of magic to confirm the potency and beauty of artistic power. In calling upon "elves" (33) and "demi-puppets" (36), or dwarves, – both existent only in the imagination – he conveys art's capacity to transcend nature and humanity with airy wonder. Prospero refers to "moonshine" (37), suggesting the enchantment of the "demi-puppets'" activities, and connoting a sense of the unsubstantial or imaginary, which both he and Shakespeare enliven through art. "Elves," "demi-puppets," and "moonshine" illustrate the supernatural elements of Prospero's artistry and contribute a sense of playfulness and jollity to the serious, tragicomic drama. By recalling the influence of these supernatural powers, Prospero affirms his ability to create out of nothing, to perform the impossible using his artistic powers. Just as the "demi-puppets" craft "green sour ringlets," Prospero creates tempests, spells, and mini-dramas. Shakespeare's image of "hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves" relates the beauty of nature reflected in the supernatural creations. Prospero echoes this poetic beauty with cadences of sound that resonate with lulling musicality: "elves of hills,

brooks, standing lakes, and groves, / And ye that on the sands with printless foot / puppets / / sour ringlets" (33-4, 36-7). The consonance gives the lines a flowing rhythm and incantatory tone that reinforce the mysticism of both the speech and the play. While his speech begins in a mood of happy fantasy, Prospero soon reminds the audience of his artistic powers that, paradoxically, constitute his whole being and also lead to his exile from Naples and temporary unawareness of Caliban's death plots upon him. While he credits the elves and dwarves for their "aid" of inspiration, he labels them "weak masters" (41) in a parenthetical aside that sarcastically subverts their abilities by comparing them with the magical powers of Prospero, the authoritative "master." Prospero leaps into a cascading monologue, comprised of images of power, which presents "a portrait of the artist as an old man" who seeks recognition of his magic. Prospero uses a form of the pronoun "I" twelve times during the speech, which confirms his obsession with his own powers and continues the egotism he displays throughout the play, namely in his dealings with Ariel (I. ii. 244-304) and Caliban (I. ii. 324-9, 344-8, 365-71). Prospero's ability to accomplish the impossible reveals an irony in the speech, for who can realistically "bedim / The noontide sun," "call forth the mutinous winds" (41-2), or set "roaring roar" (44) between the heavens and the earth? Prospero affirms art as a vehicle of creativity and transcendence. No task is too arduous or inconceivable for his capacious imagination to construe. Shakespeare also creates a sense of urgency within Prospero, who delivers this twenty line speech in two sentences (33-50, 50-57). Phrases like "mutinous winds" (42), "roaring war," "red rattling thunder" (44), and "rifted Jove's stout oak" (45)

convey Prospero's brewing desire to convey the power of his magic. The alliteration in "roaring war" and "red rattling" creates a mood of madness, which characterizes Prospero as a magician, frantic in his outpourings of emotion. Images of natural disaster winds, earthquakes, and the opening of graves parallel the play's frenetic speech patterns and illustrate the artist's influence upon the audience's imagination. Shakespeare juxtaposes the beauty of "the green sea and the azured vault" (43) with the "roaring war" and "red rattling thunder" created by Prospero, which enforces the power of art to transcend reality. While Prospero cannot literally make the earth tremble or the winds blow violently, he can "shake" the "promontory" (45-6) of his enemies' imaginations, and, within this realm, can order graves to open, spirits to descend, and tempests to occur. "Roaring" connotes "riotous and noisy revelry" (Oxford English Dictionary), which reverts to the play's opening scene of noisy confusion caused by the creation of the tempest. Prospero's "noisy revelry" in this speech confirms his need to emphasize the artist's power to realize the impossible. Shakespeare characterizes both Prospero's magic artistry and his own linguistic artistry as "potent," suggesting authority, great power, and commanding influence, all of which Prospero embodies throughout the play. He becomes a "potentate," both the designer of the play's dramatic schemes and the emblem of its acute artistry. The language of Prospero's speech illustrates his fluctuating emotions: complacent happiness, powerful authority, and collected tranquility. After his charging defense of his artistic powers, Prospero demonstrates his control over the dramatic action. "But" (50) signals a shift in temperament, as Prospero decides to "abjure" (51) his "

rough magic" (50) and incite the play to its anticipated conclusion. In a parenthetical aside, he admits that even the magician who, " by the spurs plucked up / The pine and cedar" (47-8), needs the assistance of " some heavenly music" (52) in accomplishing his tasks. This reference, "(which even now I do)" (52), opposes his previous aside, "(Weak masters though ye be)" (41), illustrating Prospero's declining artistic vitality and anticipating the dramatic surrender of his powers. Prospero imparts a commanding authority even in his artistic farewell. He does not delicately set his magic wand aside, but " break[s] [his] staff" (54) and " bur[ies] it certain fathoms in the earth" (55). Similarly, he does not gently place his book of magic in his library, but " drown[s]" it " deeper than did ever plummet sound" (56-7). The hyperbole illustrates Prospero's obsession with both his art and himself, which he consolidates as a single entity. Despite his powerful emotions conveyed through metaphor, overstatement, and sound patterns, Prospero fades into nothingness by the play's conclusion. His epilogue is a plea for applause and recognition: rather than boasting about his magical powers, he begs, " Release me from my bands" (E. i. 9). This speech illustrates Prospero's decline from mystical happiness and powerful emotion to a gentle, controlled abandonment of his magic, and leaves the audience questioning whether, after all of his efforts to reconcile his enemies, Prospero really prospers. Prospero notes the " airy charm[s]" (54) that his magical powers effect upon Ferdinand, Miranda, and his enemies. " Airy" connotes something both " imaginary" and " visionary," but also " composed of air" (Oxford English Dictionary). Prospero gives " air," or substance, to the unreal through his magic. Similarly, Shakespeare's drama exists only in the imagination until

the reader or actor enlivens it by infusing physical breath to empower the words on the page. Art gives breath to the imagined, the unknown, and the seemingly impossible. Just as Prospero the magician “bedims / The noontide sun” (41-2) and creates the “rough magic” (50) of the tempest, Shakespeare the poet incarnates the unsubstantial through his language. His “gentle breath” fills the “sails” (E. i. 11-12) of the reader’s imagination, setting them afloat in the adventurous waters of artistic creativity. On one level, Prospero’s speech initiates his apex as an artistic magician and propels the ensuing resolutions in the larger drama. On another, however, it symbolizes the poet’s power to paint with words, to create an ordered depiction of the imaginary, and to “give,” as Theseus insists in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, “to airy nothing, / A local habitation and a name” (V. i. 16-17). Works Cited” Airy.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.” Potent.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989.” Roaring.” *The Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 1989. Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Ed. Wolfgang Clemen. New York: Penguin, 1998. Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Ed. Robert Langbaum. New York: Signet, 1998.