

# The tempest is full of magic and illusion

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



Some people believe that *The Tempest* was Shakespeare's response of the courtly masque. This masque was a type of theatre, performed at court, which developed and was very popular during the reign of James I. It was during this king's reign that *The Tempest* was written. In a masque, there were spectacular theatrical effects, music, dancing and bizarre and mythological characters. The court of King James' time would have expected a masque to end in the triumph of virtue, peace and beauty, with harmony restored under its rightful monarch.

All of these things occur in *The Tempest*.

This interpretation of *The Tempest* could well be what Shakespeare intended when he first wrote the play. Throughout the play there are lots of magical incidents which take place. Mythological creatures appear (Ariel as a harpy and the Gods - Juno, Ceres and Iris), and in Act 4 Scene 1, Prospero stages his own masque. At the end of the play, Prospero is re-instated as the rightful Duke of Milan, Miranda and Ferdinand marry, Ariel is set free and Prospero forgives his enemies.

This is the kind of ending that would be expected in a masque in the reign of James I:

" Now my charms are all o'erthrown, And what strength I have's mine own...  
... Since I have my dukedom got... Let your indulgence set me free". The *Tempest* was written in 1611-12. At that time, the line between magic and science was not clearly drawn. Many people believe that the character of Prospero is loosely based on Dr. John Dee, a famous Elizabethan mathematician and geographer. Some of Dee's work was genuinely

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scientific, but it was widely rumoured that Dr. Dee was a magician or wizard. Lots of people believed this rumour, because superstition was rife at that time.

The normal working person did not understand science and mathematics. To explain peculiar events, they relied on superstitions. These same working people were the people that filled the theatres to see William Shakespeare's plays, alongside other playwrights. It did not seem strange to see a play all about magic and spirits. It was accepted as reality. Everybody believed in these things, so why not write plays about them? People were willing to believe in the unexplained and supernatural, and it made good theatre if these things were included in plays.

Technology in the 17th century was nowhere near as good as it is today. Actors had very little or no scenery, and had only a handful of props to use. From these, they had to create appropriate atmospheres for the plays, for their audience to understand what was happening. A lot of the play relied on the audience using their imagination. Showing things like a storm were, therefore, very difficult. People were probably behind the stage using various musical instruments to get the sound effects right.

The actors would have had to exaggerate their movements, as if they actually were caught in a storm. They had to make the audience believe that the sailors are fighting against the elements for their lives. They are somewhat helped with the script. During the storm, a lot of people have dialogue. A lot of this dialogue ends in exclamation marks, giving the impression that they are shouting to one another. This would have helped

create the atmosphere of chaos and panic, and with whatever sound effects were going on at the same time, the first scene would have been very noisy.