

# The significance of stories in othello and the tempest

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Characters in Shakespeare's Othello and The Tempest use stories to explain personal history or change the course of events. These are no simple tales; rather, they are complex and thought-provoking means of enriching each play and carrying action forward. This paper examines some of the stories told in each play.

First, in order to successfully woo Desdemona, Othello provides her with tales of his military experience that chronicle his bravery and honor. When interrogated by the Duke and Brabantio, Othello pleads his case against the charge of trickery. He narrates his introduction to Desdemona and how she came to know "the story of my life," declaring that "She loved me for the dangers I had passed,/ And I loved her that she did pity them" (1. 3. 128, 166-7). The recounting of this tale becomes a story of its own, for it persuades the Duke to exonerate Othello from any misdeed; the purpose of the passage is to provide the first layer of storytelling from which the reader may draw the characterization of Othello and, oppositely, his preliminary adversaries. Just as the story is successful in convincing the court, so too is it successful in convincing Desdemona of Othello's value as a soldier and, as a result, garnered the general a wife and "a world of kisses" (1. 3. 158). The significance of the stories, explained specifically in this passage and alluded to in others, is that they create a drastic contrast between the descriptive story of what actually occurs to Othello and what Iago says.

Iago depends on the power of rumor to further his desire to kill Othello. Simple murder would be too easy; Iago wants to shatter his opponent's life, to fashion the "net/ That shall enmesh them all" (2. 3. 355-6).. Thus Iago

spins stories that create deeply entrenched feelings of jealousy and resentment in Othello's mind. In the end, the most destructive rumor which Iago propagates is that of Desdemona's potential unfaithfulness. This story and the havoc it causes reveals a new side of Othello. Until this point the reader only knows of Othello's impressive military victories as he described them to the Duke; once Iago interferes, we see a violent, jealous side of Othello.

As Iago describes to Othello, there is a "monster in thy thought/ Too hideous to be shown!," - that is, Othello is thinking something for which, Iago posits, he is not responsible (3. 3. 111-2). Iago makes it seem as though he has nothing to do with the change in Othello, which helps advance his objective - Othello's complete mental breakdown. Iago's stories trap Othello in a web of lies and cause him to exhibit ignoble traits and commit shameful acts that culminate in his wife's murder.

Just as Iago's rumors further the play's plot of "Othello" and set up his opponent for ruin, the stories Prospero tells to Miranda and the audience elucidate surprising parallels between his past and that of his "slave," Caliban. Though at first it seems as if the master and slave are opposites in title and description, the stories told by each are surprisingly similar.

At the opening of the *Tempest*, Prospero provides his daughter with the much anticipated truth of their past in Milan; Prospero was the "Duke of Milan, and his only heir/ And princess no worse issued" (*Tempest*, 1. 2. 58-9). He then goes on to relate the events of his deposal at the hands of his

brother, Antonio, to whom he had initially entrusted “ the manage of my state” (1. 2. 70). While Prospero devoted his time to studying the “ liberal arts,” he gave his brother full governmental control which, eventually, caused the deposal and banishment of Prospero and his daughter. Although this story provides a background against which the audience may compare the magician’s acts of revenge, a more interesting comparison arises when the creature Caliban is introduced. The reader learns that Caliban was the original host who received Prospero and Miranda upon their arrival on the island and it was, in fact, he who provided them with food and shelter so they could survive.

The language of each character’s personal introduction reveals that in reality Prospero and Caliban have experienced relatively similar depositions and, at the end of the play, contemporaneous ascensions. As Prospero relates to Miranda, after his brother rose to power Antonio quickly became adept at perfecting “ how to grant suits,/ How to deny them, who t’advance and who/ To trash for over-topping” (1. 2. 79-81). Antonio had, effectively, taken control of “ the creatures” that originally belonged to Prospero and used them to further his own goals (1. 2. 82). With control of the government, Prospero’s brother had “ both the key/ Of officer and office” and “ set all hearts l’th’ state/ To what tune pleased his ear,” that is, he did exactly what he wanted without consulting the original “ prime Duke” (1. 2. 83-5, 72). Antonio had, Prospero notes, betrayed him in a most vicious fashion; his “ trust,/ Like a good parent, did beget of him/ A falsehood” (1. 2. 93-5). While delivering a speech that mirrors the language of Prospero’s conversation

with Miranda, Caliban characterizes the wizard in ways similar to how Prospero described his disloyal brother. The creature recounts how he initially welcomed Prospero and, after having been taught “ To name the bigger light, and how the less,” he “ then loved [Prospero]” and “ showed [him] all the qualities o’th’ isle” (1. 2. 338-40). At first, Caliban trusted Prospero completely, just as the Duke trusted his brother. Then, just as Antonio had done to Prospero, so did the magician to Caliban by usurping the creature’s control over the island and claiming it as his own.

Over the course of only a few pages, the reader encounters two stories which at first seem to distance the cultured, learned, and civilized conjurer from the primitive and foulmouthed Caliban, but in reality, show that the two characters share more than just the island they inhabit. With Prospero’s plan a success and his Dukedom awaiting him in Milan, he implies that he will be leaving the isle and returning with his daughter, future son-in-law, and the rest of the cast-aways. Before Prospero closes the play, he orders Caliban away after being treated to a rather insincere apology by the offending creature. Although the stage directions do not note that Caliban makes an aside in this passage, it appears as if he is speaking directly to the audience after rebuking himself for following Stephano and Trinculo. After receiving Prospero’s mercy, Caliban states “ I’ll be wise hereafter,” referring to the way he will act when other, new guests happen upon his isle in the future (5. 1. 298). From this statement and the audience members’ knowledge of Prospero’s intentions to return to Milan, it appears that the magician will

reassume his role as Duke, and Caliban will once again become the ruler of his own island.

Though these narratives and tales present themselves as simple background to the casual audience member, a closer inspection reveals both their dramatic and thematic importance within each play. The story and its delivery allow Othello to successfully court Desdemona and, at the same time, for Iago to wreak havoc upon the lives of the general and his wife. In Othello, tales are used for the positive and the negative, for love and for treachery. The narratives take an active role, exposing Othello's dual nature as an admirable warrior and as the dreaded "green-eyed monster" (3. 3. 170). Narratives work similarly in *The Tempest*; Prospero's background justifies his revenge on his enemies and provides a dramatic basis for his motivation. More importantly, however, the stories which Caliban tells are very similar to those of Prospero and in fact chronicle an unjust usurpation much like the one committed by the magician's brother, Antonio. The respective narratives makes the careful reader second-guess Prospero's legitimacy in seeking revenge and, furthermore, commit the reader to feel a deeper sympathy to the parallel injustice performed upon the unfortunate Caliban.