

Study Questions: *The Tempest*

1. In this play, more than in any other Shakespeare wrote, the setting plays an active, dynamic role in the action. We are told that that setting is “an uninhabited island.” Why an island? And the island is far from “uninhabited”: even before Prospero arrived, there were individuals living there. Who were they? What is Prospero’s relationship to them? Is that relationship justified in your view? Shakespeare leaves the island’s location in the known physical world Shakespeare ambiguous. Why? What is Shakespeare’s island like in terms of geography and climate? Note that characters describe it in many different ways: are these descriptions compatible? If not, why not?
2. Prospero is far and away the most powerful figure in Shakespeare’s play. What is the source of his power? How does he exercise that power? How does he maintain his authority? He is often depicted as a master and even a king: is he a benevolent ruler or a tyrant? Why is he on the island in the first place? Why has he brought Alonso, Antonio, and their entourage to the island? Does he have anything in common with the Magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*? Why does Prospero break the illusion he has created, thereby ruining his own magical empire? Why does Prospero renounce his power in the end?
3. One of the most important characters in *The Tempest* is Gonzalo, who is often seen as the mouthpiece of Renaissance “humanism,” a worldview that valued deep classical learning, put human beings at both the center and pinnacle of creation, and was committed to their inherent value, virtue, and capacity for rational thought. Where do we see Gonzalo’s humanist values? How are these different from those of other characters? What is his moral code? What is he aware of that other characters are not? How does this awareness establish his virtue? In Act 2, Scene 1, lines 143-153, Gonzalo describes what we would call a perfect utopian community. What is this community like? How does it differ from the community we see in the play? What, according to Sebastian, is the great irony of Gonzalo’s imagined community?
4. Why are there no “letters”—i.e., written words, literature—in Gonzalo’s commonwealth? What does Shakespeare have to say about books elsewhere in the play? What part does the written word play in relations of power? Why does Prospero “drown [his] book” in the end?
5. Rare is the character in Act I who is not in some kind of prison, literal or metaphorical. How many prisoners do you find in this act? What kinds of prison restrain them and why are they there? When does imprisonment seem just, when does it seem unjust, and how is freedom achieved?
6. What kind of father is Prospero? Protective? Tyrannical? His daughter Miranda has been raised in perfect innocence and seems quite dutiful. Why is preserving Miranda’s virginity and innocence important to Prospero? What do we know about her mother? Are there ways in which Miranda has defied her father? What has she learned from him? How is Miranda’s response to the Europeans who end up on the

island different from Prospero's? Does he have anything to learn from her? In Act 5, Miranda speaks one of the play's most famous lines: "O brave new world, that has such people in it." What does Miranda mean by "brave"? (You might want to look up this word in the Oxford English Dictionary.) How are Miranda's words ironic? What do they tell us about her? Miranda first spoke these words as England was beginning to build an empire by establishing colonies the so-called new world. How do Miranda's words reverse the perspective of English colonists on the new world?

7. Caliban is one of the most important characters in *The Tempest*. Is he human? What allows us to decide whether a being is human or not? Caliban claims that he has a right to the island that predates Prospero's: Does he? And if he does, was Prospero entitled to take away that right? Is Prospero's relationship to Caliban one of simple domination or has Caliban actually profited from his presence on the island? Who taught Caliban to speak? What is his language like? At the end of the play, Caliban appears to have been confined to Prospero's "cell" even as Prospero says he will free him. What do you think will happen to Caliban?
8. Caliban is very much presented as a contrast to Ariel. How are the two different? How are they similar? Why does Prospero give them such different tasks to perform?
9. *The Tempest* is unique among Shakespeare's plays in that it takes place in a very short period of time—essentially the amount of time it takes to watch the play. Ancient Greek drama called this the unity of time; we might call it real time, though little is real on this island. What other kinds of time are represented in the play? A tight time frame makes the audience's experience of watching the play very like the experiences of characters *in* the play. Why is this similarity important to Shakespeare? How is Shakespeare's authority like Prospero's? What does this imply about the nature of authority itself?
10. The world of this play is obviously a fantasy world and many recent film adaptations and stage productions draw on this aspect, setting *The Tempest* in far-away places that can be colonized only by the human imagination. Those worlds can then become places to explore the problems of this world. What problems of this world does Shakespeare seem to explore?
11. Shakespeare's play depicts several parent/child relationships, some literal and some metaphorical. What are those relationships like? How does power enter into them and how is power defined?