

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***The Tempest*, presented by the Lord Chamberlain's Men at Cardiff Castle, 7 July
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Directed by: Peter Stickney. With: Patrick Neyman (Alonso/Trinculo/Juno), Simon Jenkins (Sebastian/Miranda), Danann McAleer (Prospero), Ronnie Yorke (Antonio/Ferdinand), Duncan Mitchell (Gonzalo/Stephano/Iris), Reece Richardson (Caliban/Spirit/Ceres), William Pennington (Boatswain/Ariel)

British troupe the Lord Chamberlain's Men pride themselves on the 'authenticity' with which they recreate Shakespeare performances. The company's slogan on their website reads: 'Authenticity – Excellence – Magic'.¹ Their productions, which tour the UK every summer, always feature entirely male casts in early-modern costumes and incorporate music and dancing, invariably ending with a jig. The better to imitate strolling players, the Men perform on portable wooden stages, with minimal scenery and props.² Most authentically of all, their performance of *The Tempest* that I saw took place in Cardiff's city centre on a Saturday night, with the sound of police sirens and drunken bellowing crisply audible in the background, which created an aura of alcohol-induced menace no doubt very like Jacobean Bankside.

¹ *The Lord Chamberlain's Men* <www.tlcm.co.uk> [accessed 22 November 2019].

² For instance, at 2.2.0 Caliban lumbered on with a rolled-up cloth, representing the firewood Prospero orders him to gather, then unrolled this so it became the 'gaberdine' that he hides under; later, when Caliban sings 'Nor fetch in firing', the actor gestured with the cloth, now furled to become a log again (2.2.177). All references are to William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan, rev. edn (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2011).

Wales's capital city has a neo-medieval Victorian edifice at its centre, directly opposite a concentration of well-frequented licenced premises.³ Inside the grounds of this castle was a small permanent set, a bare platform with an upper level half-concealed by an erected cloth, the whole resembling a ship with a forecastle and a sail: slanting wooden hatches under the upper stage burst open to issue sailors in 1.1, but also doubled as the mouth of Prospero's cave. Prospero and Ariel ascended some steps to this upper deck to observe other characters invisibly.⁴ Pre-performance, as a sign that the play would be starting soon, six of the actors assembled in front of the stage and two of them started singing unaccompanied (the appropriate 'We be three poor mariners'); gradually, more members of the cast joined them, singing different vocal parts. Then Prospero (Danann McAleer) entered upstage from behind the cloth, wearing a long green gown, and made gestures with his staff, conjuring the storm, and the play's action, into being. He took off this gown and descended as 1.2 commenced, then when Prospero says, 'Now I arise' (1.2.169), McAleer climbed the steps and donned the green gown again as he prepared to summon Ariel.⁵

The text provides many opportunities for the actors to show their musical and terpsichorean prowess. Ariel played on a pipe, as the direction at 3.2.124 requires. After Caliban's drunken song of liberation (2.2.174-82), he and the two clowns segued into a reprise of 'We be three poor mariners' to mark the end of the first half. In place of Prospero's nymphs and reapers, 'Now is the month of Maying' appeared at the end of the masque; it was this song that the magus interrupted by sending his spirits offstage suddenly when reminded of the conspiracy against him. Finally, after Prospero's epilogue, Ariel re-entered playing a pipe; then all the cast danced to an *a cappella* 'Now is the month of Maying'. As the audience started trooping out of the castle grounds, the

³ Information about the various cultural and heritage events staged inside the castle is available at <https://www.cardiffcastle.com>. For information on alcohol-related crime in the city, see <https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/impact-and-innovation/research-impact/reducing-violent-crime> [accessed 22 November 2019].

⁴ A stage-direction at 3.3.17 ('*Solemn and strange music, and PROSPERO on the top, invisible*') suggests that this might have been the original practice. It seems to have been conventional for a supernatural or divine figure who observes others unseen to stand on an upper stage, gallery or scaffold: see Leah Scragg, 'The Victim of Fashion? Rereading the Biography of John Lyly', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England*, 19 (2006), 210-26 (p. 212).

⁵ Prospero and his daughter had both been standing already (there was nowhere on the stage for them to sit). Like editors, directors have tended to interpret Prospero's announcement literally, but this particular reading still seems to be unique. See Horace Howard Furness (ed.), *The Tempest* (Philadelphia; London: J.B. Lippincott, 1892), pp. 47-9; Christine Dymkowski (ed.), *Shakespeare in Production: The Tempest* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 137-8.

actors got to work dismantling the set. (They were due to be playing at Ham House in Surrey the following day.)

Just as Gonzalo's golden chain of office marked his social superiority to the sailors in 1.1, this production clearly conveyed the differences in Ariel and Caliban's statuses in terms a Jacobean might have recognised from everyday life.⁶ William Pennington's Ariel was rather a courtly servant in a swallowtail coat with knee-breeches and stockings, given to making Prospero elaborate, formal bows. The greenish blue of his costume distinctly resembled the green gown Prospero wore to perform magic, assimilating the major-domo to his master. This Ariel often stood poker-backed, chest out, his hands clasped behind him in an officious posture, as if he were in attendance on someone, even when he was just surveilling Caliban and the clowns.⁷ Reece Richardson as Caliban used a Yorkshire accent, in contrast to Ariel's RP;⁸ he mimed his deformity by stooping and lumbering around in a simian fashion, and through the rags he wore, his arms, legs and torso were visibly splashed with mud. Before the postcolonial vogue for having black actors play Caliban, the part was often taken by white actors like Michael Hordern or David Suchet in what amounted to blackface.⁹ There was a trace of this tradition in the black make-up smeared around Richardson's eyes; otherwise, he seemed less like a slave and more like one of the rogues and vagabonds who worried early-modern authorities so much.

On occasions, however, the Chamberlain's Men's quest for authenticity means adjusting the play to fit their house style and not vice versa. We know that *The Tempest* was performed privately, for an elite audience, and that Shakespeare had more resources available to him than at the Globe.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the Men insist on recreating the conditions of the pre-James-Burbage era:

⁶ Prospero first addresses Ariel as 'servant' (1.2.187); apart from the *dramatis personae* in the 1623 Folio, Caliban is called a 'slave' six times in his first scene alone (1.2.309, 314, 320, 345, 352, 375). Prospero makes the contrast pointedly at 1.2.270-1.

⁷ The 1995 Nottingham Playhouse production, set in the eighteenth century, similarly had multiple elaborately wigged Ariels dressed like Georgian footmen, but this was still an unusual choice considering how productions have typically represented him (see Dymkowski, pp. 28-30, 34-48).

⁸ The two clowns likewise had regional English accents: Stephano was from the West Country and Trinculo a Cockney.

⁹ On representations of Caliban, see Dymkowski, pp. 49-71.

¹⁰ There is no evidence that *The Tempest* was ever performed at the Globe; despite a seventeenth-century tradition recorded by Dryden that it was performed at Blackfriars (indoors, with musical interludes and before a wealthier audience), the only concretely known performances took place at court. The King's Men presented the play before James I in 1611, then again on the occasion of his daughter's wedding (Dymkowski, pp. 4-5). Keith Sturgess and Andrew Gurr attempt to recreate Blackfriars performances:

Touring had been the staple of actors' lives before the creation of permanent theatres. Today it gives the Lord Chamberlain's Men the opportunity to take theatre to all parts of the country, providing access to Shakespeare for communities who might otherwise have little chance to experience his work.¹¹

However powerful an attraction the idea of 'the provinces' as an inchoate place of deep cultural poverty and short attention spans has for metropolitan scholars and theatre practitioners, Laurie E. Maguire concludes that

there is no evidence that drama was specially adapted or shortened for touring purposes [...] there are records of mystery cycles being performed in provincial towns as late as the 1570s and 1580s. It is hard to believe that local tradesmen could perform and watch these marathon medieval sequences [...] yet be unable to tolerate sixteen lines of Juliet's lyric utterance.¹²

The LCM website nevertheless refers to 'evidence that scripts may have been shortened for touring' and declares, 'The Lord Chamberlain's Men perform sympathetically edited versions of the text, without losing any of the work's richness or subtlety'. Both of these last points seemed to me debatable.

Although *The Tempest* has thirteen male speaking parts and four female ones, the Chamberlain's Men recreated their hypothetical tour with seven actors in all, requiring much cutting and doubling of parts.¹³ Sometimes this demonstrated ingenuity. As well as Ariel, Pennington doubled as the Boatswain, adopting a Northern accent and (in his second appearance as the mariner) wearing a brown jerkin over his distinctive green-blue costume, so that the disguise was obvious; when Ariel asks Prospero in this scene whether he has done well (5.1.239), the actor turned aside to Prospero and briefly switched accents and characters. More often, though, it meant a loss of spectacle, action, or simple coherence. When Ariel as the Harpy told the courtiers, 'I and my fellows / Are ministers of fate' (3.3.60), he had no fellows but was the only spirit onstage. Likewise, when Prospero orders him, 'Go bring the rabble / (O'er whom I give thee power)',

Sturgess, *Jacobean Private Theatre* (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), pp. 73-96; Gurr, 'The *Tempest*'s *Tempest* at Blackfriars', *Shakespeare Survey*, 41 (1988), 91-102.

¹¹ *The Lord Chamberlain's Men* <<http://www.tlcm.co.uk/about/>> [accessed 22 November 2019].

¹² Laurie E. Maguire, *Shakespearean Suspect Texts: The 'Bad' Quartos and their Contexts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 6.

¹³ As Sturgess says, all females are onstage together in the masque scene and all males at the climax, making doubling impossible (p. 76).

adding 'bring a corollary, / Rather than want a spirit' (4.1.37, 57), this suggests that Ariel has a whole throng under his command: these lines remained in performance but there was no rabble of spirits, only Ariel. The cutting of all Ariel's underlings meant that, when Prospero's spirits chase the conspirators in the form of hounds (4.1.257), the actors playing Caliban, Trinculo and Stephano had to stand still on stage, flailing their arms in the air as if pestered by invisible insects, a rather feeble effect. Most regrettably, perhaps, doubling forced this production to cut Prospero's reunion with Gonzalo, one of the most poignant moments in the play. When Alonso's retinue walked onstage, spellbound, Prospero addressed them one by one as per the text (5.1.58-79); but when he addressed Gonzalo (Duncan Mitchell), Gonzalo exited, as Mitchell was shortly required to re-enter as Stephano.¹⁴ This is one of the places in the play where Gonzalo, his periodic absurdity aside, demonstrates his essential decency; in this production he remained merely a comical senex.

Both the LCM's repertoire and their modus operandi strongly emphasize comedy (of the fifteen productions they have staged since their inception in 2004, eleven have been comedies).¹⁵ Accordingly, this production accentuated comedy throughout. Prospero's interjections to Miranda as he tells the traumatic story of their exile ('Dost thou attend me?' 'Thou attend'st not?' 'Dost thou hear?' [1.2.78, 87, 106]) were warranted, as her gaze wandered away from her father, she fiddled with her ear and gave various signs of inattention. It would prove to be typical of this performance that any potential moments of romance or pathos were played for comedy. When Ferdinand first spoke to Miranda, he enunciated loudly and slowly, as if to a particularly stupid foreigner (1.2.423-8). Later in this scene, when they had unaccountably fallen for each other, Prospero delivered 'It works' to the audience with a shrug, apparently bewildered at how quickly his plan had taken effect (1.2.491). Comedy likewise forced an entrance into the scene where the young couple are first alone together. Ferdinand, unused to labour, couldn't move a log lying on the stage; when the prince made his speech about how willingly he undertook the chores that Prospero forced onto him, he was audibly straining with effort (3.1.21-3, 25-8). Miranda then lifted it with ease ('It would become me / As well as it does you' [3.1.28]). All these moments got big laughs from the audience, but it seemed

¹⁴ Likewise, when Caliban exclaimed, 'What a thrice-double ass / Was I to take this drunkard for a god, / And worship this dull fool' (5.1.296-8), he was referring only to Stephano, as Trinculo was not onstage (the actor who had played him was busy playing the king). Adrian and Francisco vanished entirely: when Alonso and Gonzalo fall asleep and the two courtly villains plot their murder, Antonio duly said, 'for all the rest / They'll take suggestion as a cat laps milk' (2.1.288), but owing to the cutting there was no-one onstage for him to refer to.

¹⁵ *The Lord Chamberlain's Men* <<http://www.tlcm.co.uk/past-productions/>> [accessed 22 November 2019].

to me that more had been stripped from the play than scenery, props and supernumerary characters: the production could not accommodate the text's variety of tones.

Most gratingly, as in previous productions, the Chamberlain's Men assumed that the sight of males dressed as females was laughable.¹⁶ Notwithstanding what Sonnet 53 suggests about how boy actors transformed into females,¹⁷ Simon Jenkins as Miranda did not even wear a wig or headdress. Here Miranda was not a child or juvenile but an adult straining his voice into a high register.¹⁸ When Miranda quotes Prospero ('Stay, not yet' [1.2.36]), Jenkins forced his voice back down into a comically gruff basso profundo. As with all the production's comedy interpolations, this netted a big laugh from the audience, but the most discordant laughter came in the masque scene. All three actors playing the goddesses used falsetto and wore grotesque, enormous farthingales with no material over the hoops, so that their legs could be seen underneath. When Duncan Mitchell, who had been playing Stephano, performed his speech as Iris, the audience laughed at this, both because they had already been laughing at him all evening, and because Mitchell played the speech campily, for laughs. Even more incongruously, Reece Richardson, the full-bearded, burly actor playing Caliban, played Ceres. As per the text, the wedding-song the spirits sing charmed Ferdinand ('This is a most majestic vision' [4.1.118]), but the incongruity of the prince's reaction got an additional audience laugh. The masque itself allegorizes the sacrament of marriage, and its abrupt end gives Prospero a premonition not only of death but of the end of the world: in other words, it is not laughable. Not only were Shakespeare's original audience accustomed to seeing boy actors tackle heavyweight female roles such as Cleopatra and Juliet, androgyny is a part of the original *Tempest*: Ariel refers to 'Ariel and all his quality' (1.2.193), but then takes the form of a sea-nymph, a harpy and apparently Ceres as well (4.1.167).¹⁹ Surely a Shakespeare production that treats all female characters as pantomime dames is recreating the bard neither in letter nor spirit.

¹⁶ For example, see P.B. Roberts, review of a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, *Cahiers Élisabéthains*, 80 (2011), 80-2.

¹⁷ See Katherine Duncan-Jones, *Ungentle Shakespeare: Scenes from his Life* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2001), p. 207.

¹⁸ All the cast appeared to be in their twenties. Gonzalo was not played by an older actor, or even an actor wearing a false grey beard, but a clean-shaven young man: he walked with tiny, mincing steps, and made fussy little hand-gestures like C-3PO. The production retained Gonzalo's 'When we were boys...' (3.3.43), with its assumption that Gonzalo, like Alonso and Prospero, is old enough to have a marriageable child like Ferdinand or Miranda, but here all the actors onstage, parents and children, were of an age.

¹⁹ Dymkowski, p. 34. For the spectrum of ways an early-modern audience might have reacted to a transvestite boy actor, see Phyllis Rackin, 'Androgyny, Mimesis, and the Marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage', *PMLA*, 102 (1987), 29-41.

So how did this production deliver on its promise of authenticity, excellence and magic? Perhaps it is unwise to claim authenticity when recreating something as evanescent as a performance from four hundred years ago. Excellence was definitely on display in the singing and dancing, but, considering the source material, there was disappointingly little magic.