

National Division
English Department
Grade: S2
Class:

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Name:
Date:

The Tempest

Act 4 Summary & Analysis +Questions

Summary

This scene begins with Prospero acknowledging that he has only been testing Ferdinand and Miranda's love. Now that he knows Ferdinand really loves his daughter, he is willing to bless the wedding. But he severely warns Ferdinand against completing the marriage before the wedding and promises "barren hate, sour-eyed disdain, and discord" if he doesn't respect Prospero's wishes.

To celebrate the engagement and to show his powers, Prospero instructs Ariel to go and bring spirit actors to perform a masque. Iris, Ceres, Jupiter, Venus, Mars, Hymen, and Juno all feature in this dramatic production that honors the contract of marriage. Ferdinand, amazed by Prospero's powers that can call forth such spirits at his bidding, longs to stay on the island and live with Prospero as his father and Miranda as his wife.

But Prospero suddenly stops the dancing when he remembers Caliban and his companions plan to kill him and the time is fast approaching. He disperses the spirits and comforts the disappointed Ferdinand by reminding him that everything eventually comes to an end.

With his troubled mind, Prospero sends Ferdinand and Miranda away so that he can come up with a plan.

Ariel enters and together the two discuss how best to handle "Caliban and his confederates." Ariel recalls what has already been done to the men. Using music as a lure, Ariel has brought them on an uncomfortable path through "toothed briars, sharp furzes, pricking gorse, and thorns" and then left them in a filthy, stinking pool of water near Prospero's cell. Prospero sends Ariel off to gather some glittery apparel. Meanwhile Prospero laments the devilish nature of Caliban, which cannot be broken or corrected even with the humane treatment Prospero initially offered him.

When Ariel returns they hang the fancy garments on a line near Prospero's cell. When the men enter, soaking wet from the filthy pond, they are complaining and arguing. Caliban tries to keep them focused on the matter at hand: murdering Prospero. But the men become distracted by the beautiful clothing, claiming it for "King Stephano" as Caliban becomes more and more upset that they need to "do

the murder first," but the men will have none of it as they try on all the clothes. In the midst of this chaos Prospero sends spirits in the shape of hunting dogs upon the three men to drive them off.

Now Prospero recognizes that everything he has been working toward is suddenly within his control: "At this hour/Lie at my mercy all mine enemies." He only has to finish his plans and he can free Ariel.

Analysis

The subject of marriage is central to this scene, which begins with Prospero's assent to his daughter's marriage to Ferdinand and moves into the lengthy masque. Particularly at the time of the play's writing, marriage was an institution that symbolized order and structure in society. In fact many marriages were founded on reasons other than love because the social contract between two families offered economic or political power for one or both parties.

Ferdinand and Prospero discuss the marriage. Modern audience members might extend the theme of exploitation and power to this relationship, particularly as it was written at a time when women had few rights and a wife was considered a possession of her husband. Miranda is passed from one "owner," Prospero, to another, Ferdinand, as Prospero says, "Then as my gift and thine own acquisition/Worthily purchased, take my daughter." However, it is unlikely Shakespeare was pointing to Miranda and Ferdinand's marriage as an additional type of exploitation since their marriage is a key ingredient and source of harmony in the happy ending of the play.

Prospero's repeated admonitions to Ferdinand not to give into his passions before the wedding support the ideal of romantic love, which asserts love is a pure, holy, and honorable condition. At the same time Prospero recognizes the strength of human passion, whereby "The strongest oaths are straw/To th' fire i' th' blood." Shakespeare, through Prospero, acknowledges two powerful, sometimes opposing, forces in human nature: passion and reason. Prospero's insistence that Ferdinand and Miranda undergo the full ceremony of legitimate marriage likewise shows a concern about legitimacy and formality. Despite the fact that Ferdinand has pledged his love and fidelity and technically now has a legal obligation to Miranda, Prospero wants to ensure that Miranda's future is secure.

Prospero commands a masque to be performed to celebrate the betrothal of Ferdinand and Miranda. In the 17th century a masque was an elaborate theatrical production that included costumes, actors, singing, and dancing. The characters and plots were based on story lines from Greek and Roman mythology. In the masque in *The Tempest*, the goddesses in the masque symbolize fertility and prosperity within family and nature.

This scene provides more insight into the humanity of Prospero's character. Despite the murderous nature of Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo's plot against Prospero, he does not severely punish them. Instead he uses magic to scare them and run them off, so that they do not try to kill him again. Prospero wishes to right wrongs, not create new ones. At the same time Ariel's devotion and Prospero's commitment to freeing Ariel are underscored. In fact there is a true, shared affection between the two, as Ariel asks, "Do you love me, master?" and Prospero responds, "Dearly, my delicate Ariel."

Prospero, who has recently been engaged with his many plans and the masque itself, stops suddenly because he has to solve a new problem. He acknowledges he is getting old and in describing the end of the masque makes clear comparisons to life itself. All the artifice of the masque is like the artifice of life, which, like a play, eventually fades. Our human lives are like short dreams that are surrounded by sleep. Many scholars view Prospero's speech here as Shakespeare's personal farewell to the theater, where his own plays and pageants "now are ended."

Prospero says at the end of the scene that "At this hour/Lies at my mercy all mine enemies," but his confession to Ferdinand a few minutes earlier that "my old brain is troubled" makes it seem like he does not find the successful completion of his revenge plan as satisfying as he had anticipated.

Questions

- 1- In Act 4, Scene 1, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, why is the warning Prospero gives to Ferdinand important?
- 2- Why does Prospero conjure a masque in Act 4, Scene 1, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*?
- 3- What is Prospero's reaction to the murderous plot against him in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and what does it reveal?
- 4- Which features of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* might cause the play to be read as a drama of colonialism?

Answers

1- Prospero reveals that his tests of Ferdinand and Miranda "were but my trials of thy love," but he quickly moves on to warning Ferdinand not to "break her virgin-knot before/All sanctimonious ceremonies may/With full and holy rite be administered." Prospero even threatens great ill will come to the couple if they sleep together before the marriage and in the end they would hate it both. This warning reveals Prospero's view of marriage as a holy contract, as well as his acceptance of certain social and religious mores. Although he has been living on an isolated island all these years, he still embraces the moral laws of a "civilized"

society and wants that for his daughter. Prospero also wants to protect his only child, a very innocent girl who has spent her youth far from the rest of the world.

2-After agreeing to the betrothal of Ferdinand and Miranda, Prospero calls for a celebratory masque in honor of the engagement. The masque exemplifies the hopes for this young couple's union, and the mythological goddesses in the performance symbolize fertility, harvest, and eternal love. By blessing the union with the masque, Prospero hopes to bring about abundance within the human relationship as well as in the natural surroundings. The masque also honors the institution of marriage itself as an important and honorable social structure in society. Finally the masque reveals Prospero's own power as a magician, which he tells Ariel: "I must/Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple/Some vanity of mine art."

3-After forgetting "that foul conspiracy/Of the beast Caliban and his confederates," Prospero remembers and stops the masque, so that he can deal with the situation. He sends Ariel to fetch glittering garments, and they string them up outside Prospero's cell. As the men "red-hot with drinking" approach to murder Prospero, Stephano and Trinculo are distracted by the fancy clothing and begin to try different garments on, posturing themselves in their new roles in "King Stephano's" kingdom. Stephano and Trinculo's tendency to be so easily distracted by the garments of nobility, and Prospero's omniscient ability to know they would be, both serve the plot and provide humorous social commentary. The folly of Stephano and Trinculo lends a bit of physical comedy to the play, and it suggests that their intention to murder Prospero was never sincere; that they are nothing more than foolish drunks who humor Caliban. This stands in contrast to the great lengths to which Alonso and Antonio went to attempt to murder Prospero. This contrast underscores the level of humanity Prospero must have to forgive his brother and the king of Naples for their evil deeds.

4-During Shakespeare's time there was a prevailing ethos that colonialism was the white man's burden, meaning that it was the duty of the civilized cultures to conquer "uncivilized" lands and teach the indigenous people how to behave properly by forcing white European culture upon them. It is easy to see that "the foul witch" Sycorax's island represents an uncivilized land, and Ariel and Caliban are its uncivilized indigenous inhabitants. Upon arrival with Miranda, Prospero overthrows Sycorax and takes Caliban and Ariel into his bondage. Caliban is characterized as a dirty, ignorant savage, a description very much in line with the narrative told to justify colonization. In an exchange between Prospero and Ariel, where Ariel asks to be given his freedom early, Prospero demonstrates his personal belief that he is the savior of Ariel (i.e., the one who delivered him into civilization) by reminding Ariel that he was saved from Sycorax's imprisonment in a pine tree by Prospero. The irony, of course, is that Prospero did not save Ariel from imprisonment; he only usurped the prisoner. This pattern of usurpation might

point to conflicts among European countries who sought after the same uncolonized lands to expand their influence and global foothold.