

Tempest

INTRODUCTION

THE King's Men acted *The Tempest* before their patron, James I, at Whitehall on 1 November 1611. (It was also chosen for performance during the festivities for the marriage of James's daughter, Princess Elizabeth, to the Elector Palatine during the winter of 1612±±13.) Shakespeare's play takes place on a desert island somewhere between Tunis and Naples; he derived some details of it from his reading of travel literature, including accounts of an expedition of nine ships taking five hundred colonists from Plymouth to Virginia, which set sail in May 1609. On 29 July the flagship, the *Sea-Adventure*, was wrecked by a storm on the coast of the Bermudas. She was presumed lost, but on 23 May 1610 those aboard her arrived safely in Jamestown, Virginia, having found shelter on the island of Bermuda, where they were able to build the pinnaces in which they completed their journey. Accounts of the voyage soon reached England; the last-written that Shakespeare seems to have known is a letter by William Strachey, who was on the *Sea-Adventure*, dated 15 July 1610; though it was not published until 1625, it circulated in manuscript. So it seems clear that Shakespeare wrote *The Tempest* during the later part of 1610 or in 1611. It was first printed in the 1623 Folio, where it is the opening play.

Though other items of Shakespeare's reading±±including both Arthur Golding's translation and Ovid's original *Metamorphoses* (closely echoed in Prospero's farewell to his magic), John Florio's translation of essays by Michel de Montaigne, and (less locally but no less pervasively) Virgil's *Aeneid*±±certainly fed Shakespeare's imagination as he wrote *The Tempest*, he appears to have devised the main plot himself. Many of its elements are based on the familiar stuff of romance literature: the long-past shipwreck after a perilous voyage of Prospero and his daughter Miranda; the shipwreck, depicted in the opening scene, of Prospero's brother, Antonio, with Alonso, King of Naples, and others; the separation and estrangement of relatives±±Antonio usurped Prospero's dukedom, and

Alonso believes his son, Ferdinand, is drowned; the chaste love, subjected to trials, of the handsome Ferdinand and the beautiful Miranda; the influence of the supernatural exercised through Prospero's magic powers; and the final reunions and reconciliations along with the happy conclusion of the love affair. Shakespeare had employed such conventions from the beginning of his career in his comedies, and with especial concentration, shortly before he wrote *The Tempest*, in *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *Cymbeline*. But whereas those plays unfold the events as they happen, taking us on a journey through time and space, in *The Tempest* (as elsewhere only in *The Comedy of Errors*) Shakespeare gives us only the end of the story, concentrating the action into a few hours and locating it in a single place, but informing us about the past, as in the long, romance-type narrative (1.2) in which Prospero tells Miranda of her childhood. The supernatural, a strong presence in all Shakespeare's late plays, is particularly pervasive in *The Tempest*; Prospero is a 'white' magician—a beneficent one—attended by the spirit Ariel and the sub-human Caliban, two of Shakespeare's most obviously symbolic characters; and a climax of the play is the supernaturally induced wedding masque that Prospero conjures up for the entertainment and edification of the young lovers, and which vanishes as he remembers Caliban's plot against his life.