
Year 12

English Advanced

Lesson 4: Prospero and Felix

1. PROSPERO



Prospero is a complex figure. His name means “to prosper” the etymological origin of which is the Latin *prosperus* which means “fortunate, successful.” This name is ironic as at the beginning of the play as Prospero is far from successful or prosperous. He has been usurped and is living on a deserted island in the middle of nowhere. At the conclusion of the play, after enacting his revenge upon the Milanese and Neapolitan noblemen, he is returned to power and his daughter, Miranda, is betrothed to the next in line to the Neapolitan throne.¹

This narrative arc does not make Prospero’s character clear. *The Tempest* is an unusual Shakespearean play that does not adhere to the

traditional genres of comedy or tragedy, but mixes them together into what we call tragic-comedy. Much of the difficulty of placing *The Tempest* into a specific genre lies in the ambiguous characterisation of Prospero and his motives: Prospero at times appears as a revenger, but also as a match-maker and peacemaker. Any analysis of Prospero in *The Tempest* begins with questions about his true nature: Is Prospero a nice man? Is he a good father? Is he an avenger? Was he a good ruler? How in control of events on the island is he? Is he written to be a representation of Shakespeare?

PERSONAL REFLECTION

What are Prospero’s most important characteristics in your view so far?

¹ Image Credit: Hamilton, W. 1797. *Prospero and Ariel* (from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*)

From a modern audience's perspective, Prospero commits a number of morally questionable acts. He enslaves Ariel and Caliban, treating Caliban particularly poorly. He conjures the tempest so that the nobility of Milan and Naples think they have been shipwrecked and both Ferdinand and his father, Alonso, believe one another are dead. Prospero then again uses magic to stage a false banquet for King Alonso and his retinue to terrify them with menacing spirits and announce his desire for revenge. He also manipulates the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda and it remains unclear whether this is simply part of his revenge strategy or whether he truly cares about his daughter's happiness.²



In some ways Prospero seems a loving father to Miranda, but he is also a controlling one. During the twelve years that they have resided on the island he has raised her and given her a traditional education, but he has not taught her magic or any other skills that might help her survive if he dies. In addition he has not told her the truth about their situation until this moment in the action. Although Prospero exhibits his anger and strong desire for revenge in telling his backstory, he also admits his shortcomings: "I, thus neglecting worldly ends...".

Prospero's questionable moral character is complicated by the fact that he undergoes a significant personal transformation. He forgives Alonso and reveals that Ferdinand was not dead but merely hidden away. He releases Ariel from his bondage, and possibly Caliban, (although, this is not clear). Finally he "breaks" his staff and "drowns" his book, renouncing magic before giving a monologue to the audience where he seeks applause and thanks the audience.

Let's consider Prospero's contemplation in Act 4, Scene 1, as he contemplates the end of life:

MEDIA VIEWING: Prospero 'Our revels now are ended'

² Image Credit: Buchel, Charles A. 1904. *Lyn Harding (1867–1952), as Prospero* (from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*)

The text is provided on the following page.

Shakespeare, W. The Tempest, Act 4, Scene 1, Lines 148-158

Our revels now are ended; ³ these our actors,	148
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and	
Are melted into air, into thin air:	150
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,	
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,	
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,	
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve	
And like this insubstantial pageant faded,	155
Leave not a rack behind. ⁴ We are such stuff	
As dreams are made on; and our little life	
Is rounded with a sleep.	158

The Arden Shakespeare notes that these lines from Prospero are “often extracted from [their] context and treated as Shakespeare’s farewell to his art”.⁵

CLASS DISCUSSION

What complex ideas is Prospero grappling within this speech? HINT: consider the role of **EXTENDED METAPHOR!**

What qualities does Prospero exhibit in this moment?

³ *Revels* courtly entertainment (Prospero speaks at the conclusion of the masque)

⁴ *Rack* tiny cloud

⁵ Vaughn and Vaughn 2011. *The Arden Shakespeare* p 275

❑ Betrayal and Revenge, Prospero the Medieval Avenger

When we are first introduced to Prospero he seems to be taking on the role of Medieval Avenger. Medieval conventions expected sons to avenge fathers and violent retribution was often seen as just behaviour. If somebody tried to murder an individual and steal their kingdom, then violent revenge was an appropriate path for the wronged to take. However, the Renaissance (c.1300- c.1600) saw a reconsideration of the ethics and legal processes that had gone before. The Humanist movement, in its re-evaluation of classical thought, began to consider the social conventions around the right to rule and filial expectations. This reconsideration can be seen in texts like *Hamlet*, where the protagonist is torn between the medieval conventions of revenge and the Renaissance ideas of legal due process.

The Tempest emerged in a society where the old conventions of medieval practice were still within living memory. A character like Prospero, then, could well be expected to seek vengeance upon those who slighted him, let alone a sibling who tried to murder him and his daughter. (Feuding siblings was a common theme of the Shakespearean stage – this idea is also seen in *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear*.) As such, the audience of *The Tempest* would well have expected Prospero to seek violent revenge upon his usurper, his brother Antonio.

Prospero's quarrel with Antonio is over who has the greater right to rule as duke of Milan. Prospero's rule is based on hereditary right and so he sees Antonio's willingness to rule Milan as a betrayal, even though it arose out of practical necessity (because Prospero was preoccupied with his study). Antonio's usurpation compromises the received order of society at the time, the Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings. As we learned last lesson, the Divine Right of Kings was European convention that argued monarchs had divine authority, conferred by God. As such they were beyond reproach or recrimination.

CLASS DISCUSSION

To what extent do you agree with the interpretation that Prospero is a medieval avenger?

HINT: reconsider the extracts from Act 1 Scene 2 that we analysed in Lesson One.

2. FELIX

Atwood has chosen a more contemporary sounding name for her protagonist but one that is similarly ironic. “Felix” comes from a Roman name meaning “happy,” “lucky” or “successful” in Latin (*fēlix, felicis*). When we first encounter Felix in *Hag-Seed* he is anything but; he is grief stricken, bitter, and miserable, having recently lost his wife, daughter, and job. Like Prospero who is obsessed with his “Art”, Felix Phillips is similarly obsessed with his theatrical art and creative innovation that often goes beyond reason and this obsession has contributed to much of his loss. Like Prospero, Felix has neglected his duties and been usurped by his assistant Tony (Antonio), and so exiles himself to a shack in the country (the Cave) from which he plots his revenge and speaks to his daughter’s ghost. Felix gets a job directing a Shakespeare program at a correctional facility, which enables him to carry out his revenge and sees him returned to his original position as Theatre Director of Makesiweg Festival. He is also able to reconcile his grief and finally let his daughter go. It is clear that Prospero’s and Felix’s stories follow a similar narrative arc of loss, revenge, reconciliation, and redemption.

PAIR DISCUSSION

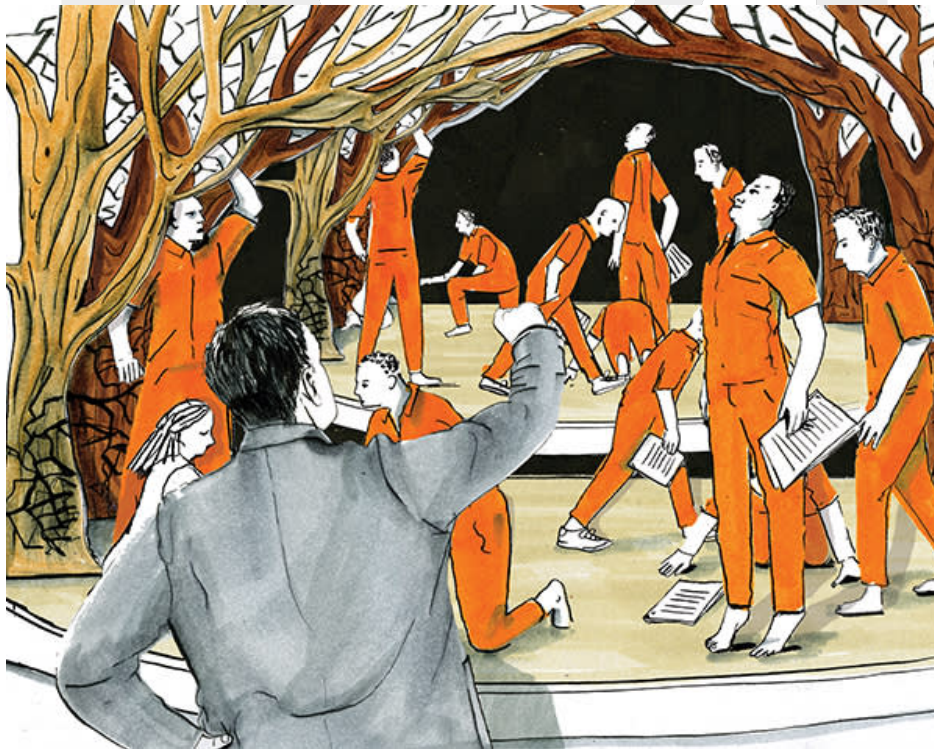
Discuss the differences you see between Prospero’s and Felix’s narratives.

In many ways Felix presents as an even more complex character than Prospero as Atwood adapts him to a contemporary setting and audience. The fact that Felix goes into self-exile brings up concerns of shame and embarrassment that were not evident in the character of Prospero. Furthermore, this self-imposed exile, alongside his dead daughter’s imagined presence and his regular conversations with her, also introduces a modern concern over the effects of grief and loss on mental health. The issue of Felix’s mental health is raised in the opening of the novel when Tony tells Felix that the board have fired him because they’re concerned about his “contact with reality” and believe he has “mental health issues”. Tony also comments on Felix’s outrageous temper.

The concern raised over Felix’s mental health raises similar questions to those surrounding Prospero, about the man’s ability to adequately perform his duties. Was Felix usurped due to

avarice or necessity? Yet it also has the effect of creating greater sympathy for the character amongst contemporary readers. It may seem incredibly unjust to a contemporary audience that a man should lose his job because of mental health concerns, rather than be supported by his workplace and granted sick leave. It is made clear in Part 1, Chapter 3 that Felix is particularly hurt by the fact that they use his grief over the loss of his daughter as the reason for his termination. For contemporary readers this is a more credible and just motivation behind Felix's pursuit of revenge.

This complexity and ambiguity is present in many aspects of Felix's character. He seems to be an incredibly loving father who is deeply bereaved and yet he also seems to have been somewhat neglectful of her when she was alive, having thrown himself into his work to such an extent that he was unavailable when the nanny called to inform him of his daughter's high fever. Furthermore, we also see that while Felix can be kind and considerate, displaying a genuine care for his students, he is also egotistical, short-tempered, and vengeful. He seems to push the limits of what's acceptable, not only terrorising his guests but even illegally drugging them for the purpose of his revenge.



Prospero directs his players, illustration by Clare Mallison⁶

⁶ Image Source: <https://www.ft.com/content/a07b7940-9a93-11e6-8f9b-70e3cabccfae>

Consider the following:

Atwood, M. 2016. Hag-Seed, I. Dark Backward, 6 'Abysm of Time', p 41

He required a focus, a purpose. He gave this much thought while sitting in his deck chair. Eventually he concluded that there were two things left for him – two projects that could still hold satisfaction. After a time he began to see more clearly what they were.

First he needed to get his *Tempest* back. He had to stage it, somehow, somewhere. His reasons were beyond theatrical; they had nothing to do with his reputation, his career – none of that. Quite simply, his Miranda must be released from her glass coffin; she must be given a life. But how to do it, where to find the actors? Actors did not grow on trees, numerous though the trees were around his hovel.

Second he wanted revenge. He longed for it. He daydreamed about it. Tony and Sal must suffer. His present woeful situation was their doing, or a lot if it was. They'd treated him shabbily. But what form could such revenge possibly take?

Those were the two things he wanted. He wanted them more each day. But he didn't know how to go about getting them.

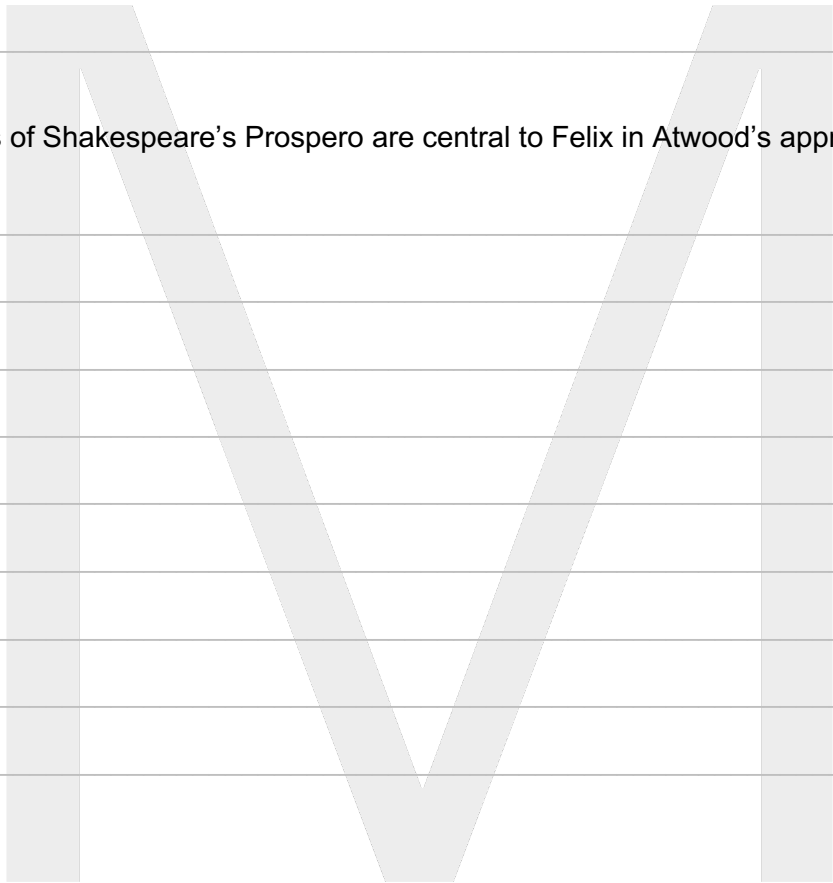
CLASS DISCUSSION

Do you sympathise with Felix and/or Prospero?

FOCUS QUESTIONS

To what extent does the modern concern about mental health increase our sympathy for Felix?

What qualities of Shakespeare's Prospero are central to Felix in Atwood's appropriation?



3. THE RARER ACTION IS IN VIRTUE THAN IN VENGEANCE

Let's consider the transformation of Prospero and Felix to determine their shared values and perspectives. This will also enable us to better interpret their differences as well.

□ Prospero's Transformation

In the final act, Prospero's desire for revenge is tempered by Ariel's remarkably human sense of empathy. He is moved by Ariel's claim that were he a human he would forgive Alonso and the other Italians for their crimes. The following extract is Prospero's response. Annotate the text for techniques as you read.

Shakespeare, W, *The Tempest*, Act 5, Scene 1, Lines 1-57

Enter PROSPERO in his magic robes, and ARIEL

PROSPERO

Now does my project gather to a head. 1

My charms crack not, my spirits obey, and Time
Goes upright with his carriage. How's the day?⁷

ARIEL

On the sixth hour; at which time, my lord,⁸
You said our work should cease.

PROSPERO

I did say so, 5

When first I raised the tempest. Say, my spirit,
How fares the king and's followers?

ARIEL

Confined together

In the same fashion as you gave in charge,

⁷ *How's the day?* What time is it?

⁸ *On the sixth hour* approaching the sixth hour; in the world of the play it has been about three hours since the storm which opened the play.

Just as you left them; all prisoners, sir,
 In the line-grove which weather-fends your cell;⁹ 10
 They cannot budge till your release. The king,
 His brother and yours, abide all three distracted¹⁰
 And the remainder mourning over them,
 Brim full of sorrow and dismay; but chiefly
 Him that you termed, sir, the good old lord Gonzalo. 15
 His tears run down his beard like winter's drops
 From eaves of reeds. Your charm so strongly works 'em¹¹
 That if you now beheld them, your affections
 Would become tender.

PROSPERO

Dost thou think so, spirit?

ARIEL

Mine would, sir, were I human.

PROSPERO

And mine shall. 20

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling
 Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,
 One of their kind, that relish all as sharply¹²
 Passion as they, be kindlier moved than thou art?¹³
 Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th'quick,¹⁴ 25
 Yet with my nobler reason, 'gainst my fury
 Do I take part. The rarer action is
 In virtue, than in vengeance. They being penitent,

⁹ *Line-grove* clump of lime trees; *weather-fends* protects

¹⁰ *Abide...distracted* are all mad

¹¹ *Eaves of reeds* thatched rooves

¹² *One of their kind* also human

¹³ *Kindlier* more humanely, more generously

¹⁴ *Quick* most tender part

The sole drift of my purpose doth extend¹⁵
 Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel. 30
 My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,
 And they shall be themselves.

ARIEL

I'll fetch them, sir.

Exit

PROSPERO

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves,
 And ye that on the sands with printless foot
 Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him¹⁶ 35
 When he comes back; you demi-puppets, that¹⁷
 By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,¹⁸
 Whereof the ewe not bites, and you whose pastime¹⁹
 Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice²⁰
 To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid – ²¹ 40
 Weak masters though ye – be I have bedimmed²²
 The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,
 And 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault²³
 Set roaring war. To the dread rattling thunder
 Have I given fire and rifted Jove's stout oak²⁴ 45
 With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory²⁵

¹⁵ *Sole drift* single aim

¹⁶ *Ebbing Neptune* retreating tide

¹⁷ *Demi-puppets* tiny spirits

¹⁸ *Green sour ringlets* 'fairy rings' in grass. These rings are created by the base of toadstools and were commonly attributed to fairies.

¹⁹ *Ewe not bites* Sheep won't eat the *sour* grass that circles toadstools

²⁰ *Midnight mushrooms* mushrooms that spring up during the night

²¹ *Solemn curfew* bell that signals night has come

²² *Weak masters* The elves and demi-puppets who assist Prospero are subject to the magician yet they are also masters of their own supernatural domains.

²³ *Azured vault* blue sky

²⁴ *Rifted* split; *Jove* Jupiter

²⁵ *Bolt* thunderbolt; *promontory* headland

Have I made shake and by the spurs plucked up²⁶
The pine and cedar: graves at my command
Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let 'em forth
By my so potent art. But this rough magic 50
I here abjure. And when I have required²⁷
Some heavenly music – which even now I do –
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,²⁸
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, 55
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I'll drown my book. 57

²⁶ *Spurs* roots

²⁷ *Abjure* renounce

²⁸ *Airy charm* music

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

What is the meaning of Prospero's line "I'll drown my book"?

What Christian values are reflected in this scene? (Refer to your notes from lesson two if you need to.)

Why must Prospero renounce his magic? Is this necessary for the return to social order that occurs at the end of the play?

What do you think is responsible for Prospero's change of heart? Is it Ariel's attempt at human empathy? Or do you believe that he planned to release the prisoners all along?

CRITICAL THINKING

The word "virtue" occurs a total of four times in the play. Two of those instances refer to Miranda (once by Prospero, and once by Ferdinand), and one of them is where Prospero refers to Miranda's mother. The final instance is in this scene when Prospero decides against vengeance. How is this use of language demonstrative of Prospero's development?

WRITING TASK

Consider the transformation in Prospero's character. How does this reflect Christian values? Use specific textual and contextual evidence to support your response.

