

“Lightning and Thunder Heard”: The Integral Role of Performing Meteorological Phenomena in *The Tempest*

Tyler Graham

English

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Paige Reynolds

The lack of “dramatic action” in *The Tempest* does not minimize the turbulence accentuated by the stormy atmosphere of both the setting and the characters. By creating an ominous and foreboding mood, the weather not only sets the stage for the play, but catalyzes events and actions of the characters. In regards to production value, meteorological phenomena portrayed through sound effects play an integral role in delivering action, perpetuating the plot, and encapsulating the audience. In *The Norton Shakespeare*, Brett Gamboa writes, “*The Tempest* is conspicuously lacking in dramatic action...Directors therefore must engage audiences without legitimate conflict or dramatic uncertainty” (3214). Gamboa goes on to state that directors consider this problem with several alternatives, including “visual and auditory effects” to compliment the “near-constant soundscape” (3214). In Shakespeare’s theatre, the effects of the play were meant to be heard rather than seen. This idea is reiterated in Shakespeare’s *Henry the Fifth*, where the chorus finalizes their prologue by stating, “Gently to hear, kindly to judge our play” (Prologue, 34). In this way, the performance of weather on stage through auditory effects is crucial in countering the lack of dramatic

action, enhancing the progression of the plot, and enchanting the audience in the mysticism of the play.

The balance between the relatively uneventful physical plotline and the limitations of performing the natural world contribute to the complexity of performing *The Tempest*. The lack of significant action in *The Tempest* was a dramaturgical problem even during Shakespeare's day since his company was restricted to an indoor theatre and limited in mimicking the chaos of the atmosphere. Consequently, Shakespeare had to carefully configure a way to balance the performance of weather with the drama of the play.

This idea begins with the first stage direction of the play: "Lightning and Thunder Heard." While Shakespeare knew that lightning and thunder were two different observations of the senses (visual and auditory), his restrictions led him to combine the two into one faculty (heard, or auditory). According to Tiffany Stern, *The Tempest* was actually written for the indoor Black Friar's theatre, and consequently vivid visual effects, such as fire, were unable to be used indoors (39-40). Therefore, Shakespeare would have treated lightning and thunder as auditory features and this would have essentially been performed as just thunder. As a result, the inhibition of lacking visual effects was substituted with intrusive auditory effects. Along with the auditory power of vocalization and language, this would have been accomplished with music or the rolling of a cannonball across the roof of the theatre (Stern 42). By utilizing the sense of sound, Shakespeare was able to control the audience with the inclusive nature of sound in the same way Prospero controlled the characters, and the audience to an extent, with the power of magic.

The "Lightning and Thunder Heard" stage direction is better understood with historical context of medieval practices of meteorology. The study of the atmosphere in Shakespeare's day was extremely primitive and based primarily on observations. The physics

behind atmospheric processes were hypothetical, and it would be hundreds of years later before this science would become a legitimate field of study. Weather in the Renaissance was also linked to the study of mythology and the spiritual realm and, consequently, the premise for the occurrence of different weather conditions was correlated with changing mythological or spiritual conditions. Consequently, Shakespeare had “no certainties for the weather” and his information on the weather was derived from several and often “contradictory” sources (Chiari 15). The correlation of thunder and lightning, similarly, was something that was commonly accepted by Shakespeare and his contemporaries (Stern 41). In fact, the observation that lightning was the cause for thunder would not be developed until the French Academy would define it as “the sharp noise caused by the explosion of electrified clouds” in 1854 (Remillard 245). Consequently, Shakespeare was able to combine this gap in knowledge with artistic creation to link the visual qualities of lightning with the encompassing sound of thunder.

According to Stern, there are three distinct storm scenes in the play which are denoted by stage directions, in which the first two are important in terms of the passionate language (48). Each of these scenes encompass dialogue that parallels the intensity of the speech. Examining the dialogue of the characters emphasizes the strength that the audibility of vocalization has as a device to develop action and draw the audience in. As Kate Chopin’s “The Storm” parallels the life cycle of a thunderstorm to the actions of passionate romantic engagement, *The Tempest* parallels the power of a storm to the power of sound through language.

The play begins in disarray as Boatswain attempts to control his ship amidst a terrible storm. Boatswain is not only brash and boisterous, but also knowledgeable of the sea and of the boat. The first line of the play is an exclamation from the Master calling for Boatswain, giving the

narrative chaos, urgency, and excitement from its beginning (1.1.1). From there, Boatswain's exclamations and the rest of the crew's inquisitions imply a state of linguistic chaos as insecurity clashes with Boatswain's anxiety. The confliction in this scene arises from the obstinate Sebastian, who argues with Boatswain and insults him with vulgar comments, such as "A pox o' your throat, you bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog!" to which Antonio chimes in with more violence, declaring, "Hang, cur! Hang, you whoreson insolent noise-maker!" (1.1.35-39). Act I, Scene I ends in the crew's complete despair as the ship is aimlessly tossed on the stormy sea. Throughout this scene, the screaming and yelling of characters fearing for their lives juxtaposed with the torrents of thunder and wind creates a cacophony from the first line of the play.

Caliban's introduction in Act II, Scene II is followed by the sound of thunder and the consequential approach of yet another storm. Caliban curses Prospero, declaring "All the infections that the sun sucks up/From bogs, fens, flats, on Prosper fall, and make him/By inchmeal a disease!" which is followed by the stage direction for the storm to approach (2.2.1-3). This introduction to Act II, Scene II continues with Caliban's monologue as he curses Prospero. In the second half of Caliban's monologue, the diction pairs well with the elemental characteristics of the brewing storm. High-frequency words, such as "fright," "trifle," "bid," "bite," and "pitch" are all indicative of intensity and building stress. Caliban also makes reference to "hearing" and "chatter" which audibly pairs with thunder, while the phrase "firebrand in the dark" is symbolic of lightning (2.2.6). This monologue is filled with examples of auditory language and combines well with the swells of thunder called for by the stage direction.

While the sounds of storms drive action and create an unstable atmospheric foundation for the play, music directly connects the audience with the emotional drive of the characters.

Another device for sound used in productions of this play is the utilization of music. The power of music adds a unique emotional dimension that is lost in productions absent of this musical element. David Lindley denotes in his essay "Music, Masque, and Meaning in *The Tempest*," that "*The Tempest* employs more music than any other Shakespeare play" (187). Music provides a channel that dives into the characters of the play and, through the dialogue of the songs, gives the audience insight into the characters. Lindley elaborates on the significance of music, stating that it is "an outburst of individual feeling," and that these moments allow an "audience to submerge [themselves] in an identification with the singing voice" (189).

The idea of music as a force derives from neo-platonic origins, where the audience willingly gives power to Prospero (almost like magic) simply because, in the words of Lindley, "we are able to supply for it the necessary conventional symbolic significance" (189). In his doctoral thesis, Sebastian Tornese elaborates on the relationship between Neoplatonism and music, stating that, "Neoplatonic music is consequently understood as an encompassing phenomenon, which mirrors the encompassing nature of Neoplatonic philosophy" (3). Combining the ideas of Lindley and Tornese, the power of music acts as a force that emotionally connects the character to the audience and encompasses the audience with the drama on stage.

The character of Ariel possesses the most musical inclination in the play. Ariel is by far the most lyrical of the characters and his songs add a musical dimension to the play. According to the article by Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, Ariel's musicality is integral in "driv[ing] the play's plot" since his songs have an effect on the environment and characters around him (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust). In this way, music actually progresses the plot forwards through manipulation of the reactions of the characters of the play. An excellent example of this perpetuation of the plot is Ariel's song just after the ship has crashed on

the island in Act I Scene II. Ariel sings, denoted by the stage directions, “Come unto these yellow sands, / And then take hands. / Curtsied when you have, and kissed, / The wild waves whist. / Foot it featly here and there, / And sweet sprites bear / The burden” in order to calm the raging ocean as well as to calm and guide Ferdinand farther onto the island (Shakespeare Birthplace Trust). These assonant words create a soothing and bouncing rhythm that starkly contrasts the raging wrath of Prospero. Ariel’s music leads the bewildered Ferdinand to pursue help and consequently thicken the plot. Throughout the play, these episodic bouts of music interact with the characters in a seemingly atmospheric way since Ariel is never physically present when the other characters hear music. These songs allow the plot to progress by creating even more complexity on a micro-scale level as characters begin to hear songs and express feelings, moods, or motives that otherwise might not have been expressed.

The most important transition from Renaissance performance to modernity is the advantage of increased technology. The modern stage draws on more advanced technology to express the same idea that Shakespeare did long before projectors, engineering, and the audio and visual effects that we use today. Unlike Shakespeare’s productions, which used cannon balls rolled across the roof of the theatre to mimic thunder, modern productions both in the theatre and on film highly rely on technological and electrical effects for both auditory and visual senses (Stern 42). For example, Act I, Scene II from the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2017 production of *The Tempest* utilizes vivid and detailed projections, special lighting, contrasts between light and dark, ambient sounds, and moving lights to capture the audience in the moment (Royal Shakespeare Company). Despite the lack of action in this scene, the lighting and sensory effects pulls the audience in regardless.

Nevertheless, modern and Renaissance theater have one thing in common; they both are live. With no benefits of post-production, theatrical productions are dependent on the delivery of effects and action in the present. The 2014 production by the Savage Rose Classical Theatre Company of the play illustrates the modernized version of the play without the benefits of film editing, engineering, and post-production. Nevertheless, modern technology greatly enhances the violence of the storm and enhances the action and dialogue of the characters. The action of Act I, Scene I is well balanced in this production between the frenzy of the cast and the special effects on the stage. Thunder roars through a recording of actual thunder and a blinking spotlight mimics lightning. A mundane and grey-blue light gives the ambiance of rain at sea and the sound of rain and even wind coats the audience in an atonal roar. This is all of the special effects for this production, but it is very well balanced and compliments the yelling and scurrying of the cast across the stage. As for the characters, the actors stumble, mimicking the act of walking on a boat at sea, and scream and yell at each other. Actors swing buckets against the stage floor to give the illusion that the boat is overtaken with water.

Sound in this Savage Rose production plays an important role. The role of sound in this play inherently creates cacophonous dissonance. Roaring thunder, screams, stomping feet, clanking buckets, and pouring rain all create a dissonance that draws the audience into the action and fearing for the lives of the characters. This production does an excellent job, as stated by Stern, of not just entertaining the audience, but encasing the audience in the scene's drama (41). With this production, the tempest that is generated through effects compliments the vivacious and chaotic scene on the boat.

The benefit of film production lies in the ability to add electronic effects in post. Jack Bender's 1998 film version of the play utilizes the sensory elements of weather immensely. While there is no actual ship

scene due to a change of plot, the storm that is used in the film is significant with loud thunder and vivid strikes of lightning. Prospero's control of the weather is also significant in that it takes a large amount of physical energy to compose and keep the storm going. He is seen swaying about, grimacing, as he carries the storm seemingly in his hands (Bender 1998). In this way, Bender seems to justify the significance of the storm through Prospero.

Bender's film does not neglect the auditory senses despite the complexity of the scenes and visual aspects of the film. In the case of film, a movie theatre or living room would create a contrast between visual and audio effects. While visual effects are appealing to a modern audience, they strike directly at the audience from the screen to the eyes. Auditory effects, such as thunder, have a more mystical and encompassing power as sound invades all directions and engulfs the audience rather than strikes at the audience. In this way, the audience is under the "spell" of sound as it invades and surrounds the ear.

Sound through performance of weather plays an additional role in progressing the plot forward through minimizing the lack of dramatic action. By paralleling the tempestuous relationships between the characters in the play through stormy weather, the play gains a sort of perpetual motion that carries the drama between characters and, consequently, moves the plotline of the play forward despite any significant action. In the conclusion of the chapter on the performance of storms in Shakespeare's plays, Stern claims that the combination of staged effects and language are detrimental "so that a storm can continue to resonate when the fireworks have faded and the cannonballs are still" (50). This illustrates the momentum that sound carries in the play, where the energy of the play derives from the ambient sound of nature, to the language fueled by the conflicts between characters, to the evolution of the play from one scene to the

next. The sounds of storms resonate in the minds of the audience even when there is no staged storm.

Sound is a force of inclusion and encompassment, projecting outward and pulling listeners in like waves washing over sand. In *The Tempest*, sound is a device for driving action and perpetuating the plot, but it is also a force that draws in the audience and helps to bridge the gap between the audience and the characters. The mechanization of sound from the natural world allows for a world of imaginative possibilities that fills the void of dramatic action and enhances the delivery of a play jammed with language. The recreational sound of storms is essential for accentuating the spoken dialogue throughout the play. Musicality extends this inclusive concept even further by connecting the audience to the internal and implicit emotions of characters. While modern performances rely heavily on visual effects in order to transfix a modern audience, visual effects alone would fail due to the lack of the encompassing properties of sound. Despite the modern marvels of post-production, technological advancements, and engineering, the significance of sound has not changed since the performances of *The Tempest* during the Renaissance. Without the proper acknowledgement and performance of sound, the essence of inclusion, the counter to dramatic inactivity, and the development and procession of plot would be lost; the magical aura of the play would flash before the audience's eyes leaving the anticipated encompassing reverberation to never be realized.

Works Cited

- "Act 1, Scene 2 The Tempest Royal Shakespeare Company." *YouTube*, uploaded by The Royal Shakespeare Company, 23 June 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3bjrx0xlPMg>
- "Ariel: Shakespeare's Most Musical Character." *Shakespeare Birthplace Trust*, 29 Mar. 2013, www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/blogs/ariel-shakespeares-most-musical-character/.
- Chiari, Sophie. "Climate as Climax in Shakespeare's Plays." *Shakespeare in Southern Africa*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2017, p. 1. oi:10.4314/sisa.v29i1.2.
- Gamboa, Brett et al. *The Norton Shakespeare (Performance Note for The Tempest)*. 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.
- Lindley, David. "Music, Masque, and Meaning in The Tempest." *The Tempest William Shakespeare*, edited by Peter Hulme and William Sherman, W.W. Norton & Company, 2014, pp. 187-200
- Remillard, Wilfred J. "The History Of Thunder Research." *Weather*, vol. 16, no. 8, Aug. 1961, pp. 245-253., doi:10.1002/j.1477-8696.1961.tb02626.x.
- Shakespeare, William. "The Life of Henry the Fifth." *The Norton Shakespeare*, Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.
- Shakespeare, William. "The Tempest." *The Norton Shakespeare*, Edited by Stephen Greenblatt, 3rd ed., W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.

Stern, Tiffany. *Shakespeare's Theatres and the Effects of Performance*. Bloomsbury, 2012.

The Tempest. Directed by Jack Bender, NBC, 1998.

"The Tempest-Full Play." *YouTube*, uploaded by savagerosetheatre, 10 July 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czFoUWwd6mI>

Tornese, Sebastian. "Philosophy of Music in the Neoplatonic Tradition: Theories of Music and Harmony in Proclus' Commentaries on Plato's *Timaeus* and *Republic*." PhD Doctoral Thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2010.