



ENGLISH LITERATURE

Bridging Work

The Tempest



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Introduction

A Bridge to A Level Literature

You have already studied *The Tempest*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. Those skills remain important at A Level, but they are developed in new and more sophisticated ways.

At GCSE, you were often asked to explain what Shakespeare presents and how he presents it. At A Level, the conversation broadens. Ideas become more complex and debatable. Analysis of language, form and structure moves beyond methods you might have explored at GCSE and invites you to explore craftsmanship, dramatic constructs and the ways meaning is created for different audiences. Context is no longer a collection of facts used to support an argument, but a lens through which interpretation can be generated, challenged and refined.

You will also begin to think about texts in relation to one another. Shakespeare's late romances do not exist in isolation: they belong to wider literary traditions, theatrical conventions and cultural debates. Comparing texts allows us to explore how writers revisit similar concerns and produce different effects. Ideas such as power, authority, forgiveness, illusion and identity appear across literature, inviting us to consider both continuity and change.

Perhaps the most significant change is that interpretation becomes central. You will encounter the views of critics and scholars, consider how directors and actors make interpretative choices in performance, and explore how audiences have responded to *The Tempest* across different periods. Rather than searching for a single "correct" reading, you will learn to evaluate multiple perspectives and develop arguments of your own.

This booklet uses *The Tempest* as a starting point for that journey. Through contextual reading, critical debate and close textual analysis, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into an A Level one.

How the Booklet Works

You will notice that this booklet does not ask you to write a complete essay immediately. Instead, each chapter focuses on a different aspect of literary study and gradually builds your confidence and understanding.

As you move through the booklet, you will work with the same essay question, the same line of argument and the same analytical paragraph. You will revisit these repeatedly, refining and extending them as each new assessment objective is introduced.

1. **Chapter 1** introduces the shift from GCSE to A Level and explores how literary study becomes increasingly interpretative.
2. **Chapter 2** introduces the assessment objectives and shows how GCSE skills evolve at A Level.
3. **Chapter 3** focuses on AO1 and AO2, helping you construct a line of argument and develop an analytical paragraph through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.
4. **Chapter 4** introduces AO3, showing how contextual reading can deepen interpretation through ideas of Jacobean society, magic, colonialism and power.
5. **Chapter 5** explores AO4 through comparison with *King Lear*, demonstrating how Shakespeare revisits questions of authority, legitimacy and reconciliation across different plays.

6. **Chapter 6** introduces AO5 through literary criticism, revealing that interpretation is an ongoing conversation rather than a search for certainty.

You should complete the booklet in order. Read the extracts carefully, annotate the articles, respond to the reflection questions and write in the spaces provided. Do not worry about producing perfect answers. The purpose of this booklet is to encourage curiosity, exploration and confidence.

You may find that your opinions change as you progress through the chapters. This is not a sign that your earlier ideas were wrong. Instead, it reflects the nature of literary study itself: interpretations develop as we encounter new evidence and new perspectives.

Although much of this booklet focuses on refining a line of argument and developing a single analytical paragraph, this is not the final destination. By the end of the booklet, you should use everything you have learned to produce a complete essay response to the original question.

You may wish to print this booklet and handwrite your work, or you may prefer to type your responses so they are easier to edit and adapt. Whichever you choose, be prepared to submit your essay in September within the first two weeks of starting the course.

Your final essay should include:

1. an introduction containing your line of argument;
2. multiple analytical paragraphs;
3. close analysis of Shakespeare's methods;
4. relevant contextual understanding;
5. comparative insight;
6. engagement with critical interpretations;
7. and a conclusion that draws together your argument.

The paragraph you have developed throughout this booklet should become one part of this larger response.

You are not expected to have all the answers before September. Instead, you are invited to approach literature with curiosity, confidence and a willingness to explore.

Welcome to A Level Literature.

Booklet Key

Key Information

Task instruction

Model/exemplar

Chapter 1

The Question

You have already studied *The Tempest*. You know the plot, the characters and many of the ideas that helped you succeed at GCSE. You have analysed Shakespeare's methods, learnt quotations and developed interpretations supported by evidence from the text.

Those skills do not disappear at A Level.

However, A Level Literature invites you to engage with texts differently. Rather than simply identifying what Shakespeare presents, you begin to explore the ways in which literature generates debate, encourages multiple interpretations and resists straightforward answers.

To experience this shift, begin with two questions.

The GCSE Question

Read the following extract from **Act 1 Scene 2** of *The Tempest*.

At this point in the play, Ariel has reminded Prospero of his promise to give him his freedom and Prospero replies.

PROSPERO Thou best know'st
What torment I did find thee in. Thy groans
Did make wolves howl, and penetrate the breasts
Of ever-angry bears. It was a torment
To lay upon the damned, which Sycorax
Could not again undo. It was mine art,
When I arrived and heard thee, that made gape
The pine, and let thee out.

ARIEL I thank thee, master.

PROSPERO If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak
And peg thee in his knotty entrails till
Thou hast howled away twelve winters.

ARIEL Pardon, master.

I will be correspondent to command
And do my spiriting gently.

PROSPERO Do so;
And after two days I will discharge thee.

ARIEL That's my noble master! What shall I do?
Say what? What shall I do?

PROSPERO Go make thyself
Like a nymph o'th'sea. Be subject to
No sight but thine and mine, invisible
To every eye-ball else. Go take this shape
And hither come in't. Go! Hence with diligence.

GCSE Task

Starting with this conversation, explore how Shakespeare presents **different types of power** in *The Tempest*.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents **Prospero's power** in this conversation;
- how Shakespeare presents **different types of power** in the play as a whole.

The A Level Question

Consider the A Level standard question below. Read the information that follows and respond to the task.

"Prospero's power depends more on control and manipulation than wisdom or justice."

In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of power in *The Tempest*.

This question does not simply ask you to identify examples of power in the play. Instead, it offers an interpretation and invites you to engage with it.

You may agree.

You may disagree.

You may find yourself doing both.

Before deciding what you think, spend some time with the question itself.

Task:

Explore the question:

1. Read the statement several times.
2. Annotate it as you would annotate a passage from the play.
3. Circle, underline or make notes around the statement itself (above).
4. Use the prompts below to help inform your annotation.

Consider:

- Which words seem most significant?
- Which words are difficult to define?
- Which words seem open to debate?
- Which assumptions does the statement make about Prospero?
- Which moments from the play immediately come to mind?

Gathering Evidence

Rather than deciding immediately whether you agree or disagree, begin by collecting evidence. Imagine that you are preparing for a debate. Read the information below and complete the table that follows.

1. Evidence that supports the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Prospero's power depends more on control and manipulation than wisdom or justice?

You might consider:

- his control over Ariel through promises and threats;
- his enslavement and punishment of Caliban;
- the tempest itself and his manipulation of events;
- his use of magic to test Ferdinand;
- his orchestration of the masque and the movements of the shipwrecked nobles.

Use quotations wherever possible.

2. Evidence that challenges the statement

What moments in the play suggest that Prospero's power is ultimately wise, just or restorative?

You might consider:

- his rescue and education of Miranda;
- his liberation of Ariel;
- his decision to forgive Alonso and Antonio;
- his renunciation of magic;
- his restoration of order through reconciliation rather than revenge.

Again, support your ideas with evidence from the text.

3. Looking for Tension

Strong literary arguments rarely emerge from certainty.

As you gather evidence, look for moments that complicate your thinking.

For example:

- Does Prospero use control in order to achieve justice?
- Can forgiveness erase years of manipulation and oppression?
- Is Prospero a benevolent ruler or a colonial tyrant?
- Does Shakespeare present power as something to be exercised or surrendered?

Make a note of any moments that resist easy judgement. These moments of tension are often where the most interesting arguments begin.

Task:

Using the prompts and guidance above, complete the evidence table below.

Evidence to support the statement	Evidence to challenge the statement

From Ideas to Argument

You have now gathered evidence, explored different perspectives and identified points of tension.

The next step is not to choose one side and ignore the other.

Instead, begin to shape your own viewpoint.

Read the examples below.

1. A straightforward response:

Prospero is powerful because he controls the other characters.

2. A more developed response:

Prospero's power depends on control because he uses magic, threats and manipulation to direct the actions of others.

3. A more nuanced response:

Prospero's power often depends on control and manipulation; however, Shakespeare complicates this by showing that Prospero ultimately uses his authority to restore order, forgive his enemies and surrender his magic.

Notice that the final example acknowledges complexity.

It does not abandon judgement.

Instead, it refines it.

Task:

Drawing on the notes you have made, write a line of argument responding to the question. You do not need to completely agree or disagree.

You might begin with phrases such as:

- Although...
- While...
- To some extent...
- However...
- Ultimately...

Remember:

- Your aim is not to produce the perfect answer.
- Your aim is to begin thinking like a literary critic: gathering evidence, weighing interpretations and arriving at a viewpoint that is thoughtful, tentative and supported by the text.

Your line of argument:

Looking Ahead...

You have just begun doing something that A Level Literature students do every day.

You have moved beyond identifying examples of a theme and started to engage with an interpretation.

You have gathered evidence, recognised complexity and begun constructing an argument of your own.

In the next chapter, you will revisit your thesis and begin to develop it further, exploring how literary arguments become increasingly sophisticated through close analysis of Shakespeare's methods.

Chapter 2

The Assessment Objectives

In Chapter 1, you explored an A Level question, gathered evidence from across the play and developed a provisional argument of your own.

Without realising it, you had already begun engaging with some of the skills expected of A Level Literature students.

The Assessment Objectives (AOs) explain how literary thinking develops from GCSE to A Level. They are not simply a checklist for examiners; they describe the different ways in which we engage with texts as readers and critics.

Importantly, A Level does not replace the skills you developed at GCSE. Instead, it elevates them.

GCSE to A Level

GCSE Literature	A Level Literature
AO1: Maintain a critical style and develop an informed personal response. Use textual references, including quotations, to support and illustrate interpretations.	AO1: Articulate informed, personal and creative responses to literary texts, using associated concepts and terminology, and coherent, accurate written expression.
AO2: Analyse the language, form and structure used by a writer to create meanings and effects, using relevant subject terminology where appropriate.	AO2: Analyse ways in which meanings are shaped in literary texts.
AO3: Show understanding of the relationships between texts and the contexts in which they were written.	AO3: Demonstrate understanding of the significance and influence of the contexts in which literary texts are written and received.
AO4: Use a range of vocabulary and sentence structures for clarity, purpose and effect, with accurate spelling and punctuation.	AO4: Explore connections across literary texts.
—	AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

As you read through the table, what do you notice?

Perhaps the most striking changes are:

- GCSE skills are still present, but they become broader and more conceptual;
- AO4 changes entirely;
- A new AO5 is introduced, recognising that literary interpretation is often contested.

You have already begun engaging with AO1. Now, revisit your argument and consider how each of the AOs can deepen and develop it.

AO1: Argument

At GCSE, you developed a personal response supported by evidence from the text.

At A Level, that response becomes more conceptual and sustained.

Task:

Read the line of argument you wrote at the end of Chapter 1.

Does it:

1. move beyond retelling events?;
2. establish a clear viewpoint?;
3. acknowledge complexity?;
4. suggest that alternative interpretations may exist?

You may wish to revise it.

Revised line of argument:

A02: Writer's Craft

At GCSE, you explored how writers use language, form and structure to create meanings and effects. Strong GCSE responses already move beyond simply identifying techniques; they explain what those methods contribute to the audience's understanding of the text.

At A Level, that analysis becomes broader and more ambitious.

You begin to consider how the distinctive features of a text's form shape meaning.

For drama, this means thinking not only as a close reader, but also as a theatre critic:

- Why has Shakespeare chosen to place this moment here?
- How would this scene work in performance?
- What do these dramatic choices encourage audiences to think and feel?
- How do the conventions of romance shape our interpretation of *The Tempest*?
- How do private relationships of service and obedience become public demonstrations of power?

The question shifts from: "What effect does this method have?" towards: "How has Shakespeare constructed meaning through the possibilities of dramatic form?"

Consider the responses below.

GCSE

Prospero's threat to imprison Ariel again shows that he is powerful and controls those around him.

This is a valid observation. It identifies a method and explores its meaning.

A Level

Shakespeare presents Prospero's authority through a striking combination of apparent benevolence and coercion. Positioned early in the play, his reminder that he rescued Ariel from Sycorax quickly gives way to the violent threat to "rend an oak", revealing that his power depends as much upon fear as gratitude. By dramatising this exchange before the audience has fully formed an opinion of Prospero, Shakespeare complicates his role as protagonist and establishes power as a force that can both liberate and oppress, shaping the audience's interpretation throughout the play.

Both responses explore meaning.

The difference is that the A Level response also considers:

- the dramatic placement of the moment;
- Prospero's speech as part of Shakespeare's construction of authority and control;
- the relationship between Ariel's private submission and its effect on an audience;
- how Shakespeare uses the resources of drama to shape interpretation.

Task:

Return to the extract from **Act 1 Scene 2**.

Choose one or two quotations from the table you devised and write a response exploring how Shakespeare constructs meaning through dramatic form.

You might consider:

- where this moment appears in the play;
- how an audience might respond to it in performance;
- what Shakespeare reveals or withholds;
- how speech, staging or dramatic conventions contribute to meaning;
- how this moment contributes to Prospero's presentation as a figure of power.

Remember: you are not looking for techniques to identify.

You are exploring how Shakespeare, as a dramatist, has crafted this moment and shaped the audience's understanding of power.

Your Response:

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AO3: Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often supports an argument.

At A Level, context can deepen, challenge or reshape interpretation.

Consider the examples below.

GCSE

Jacobean audiences believed in a strict social hierarchy and accepted that kings, fathers and masters possessed natural authority. Prospero's control over Ariel and Caliban would therefore have seemed an acceptable expression of his rightful power and status.

A Level

While Jacobean audiences may have accepted Prospero's authority as a legitimate exercise of social and political power, Shakespeare also invites us to question the morality of that authority. Prospero repeatedly describes himself as Ariel's rescuer, yet his promises of freedom are accompanied by threats and coercion. Read in the context of European exploration and colonisation, his relationship with Ariel and Caliban becomes more complex, encouraging audiences to consider whether power is founded on justice or sustained through manipulation and control.

The difference is subtle but significant.

Context becomes a way of thinking rather than a fact to insert.

Task

Look back at the paragraph you have just written.

How might an understanding of Jacobean ideas about hierarchy, authority and colonial expansion deepen your interpretation of Prospero's power?

Develop your response below.

AO4: Connections Across Texts

One of the biggest surprises for many students is that AO4 changes completely.

At GCSE, AO4 rewarded accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar.

At A Level, AO4 asks you to:

- **explore connections across literary texts.**

Literature does not exist in isolation.

Shakespeare's plays often confront similar questions:

- How should power be used?
- What makes a ruler legitimate?
- Can forgiveness restore what betrayal has destroyed?
- What happens when authority is abused?

Later in this booklet, you will compare *The Tempest* with *King Lear*.

For now, simply consider:

- why might reading texts alongside one another deepen our understanding of both?

Task: write down your thoughts

A05: Critical Interpretations

A Level introduces a completely new Assessment Objective.

A05: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

This means recognising that readers do not always agree.

You will encounter:

- academic critics;
- alternative readings;
- directors' interpretations;
- actors' performances;
- audience responses from different periods.

One production might present Prospero as a wise and benevolent ruler who uses his power to restore justice and reconciliation.

Another might portray him as a controlling colonial oppressor who manipulates those around him and only relinquishes power when it no longer serves his interests.

Neither interpretation is automatically “correct”.

Your role is to evaluate them.

Task:

Read the critical interpretation below.

"Prospero's authority depends more on manipulation than wisdom or justice."

How might someone respond to this interpretation?

Write two or three sentences that either:

- support the statement;
- challenge it;
- or qualify it by recognising both perspectives.

You might begin:

- One interpretation of Prospero's power is that...
- However, another reading might suggest...
- Shakespeare may encourage audiences to see...

Your Response:

Looking Ahead...

You may have noticed that the Assessment Objectives do not operate independently.

As you developed your argument, analysed Shakespeare's methods, considered the influence of context, anticipated wider connections and explored alternative interpretations, you were engaging with all of them.

The rest of this booklet will continue to revisit and refine the same question.

By returning to your original argument again and again, you will see how a strong GCSE response can evolve into something recognisably A Level: more exploratory, more nuanced and more attentive to the many conversations that literature invites.

Chapter 3

Developing Your Argument

By this point, you have already begun answering an A Level question.

In Chapter 1, you encountered an A Level-style task for the first time. You gathered evidence, explored tensions within the statement and developed a provisional line of argument.

In Chapter 2, you considered how the Assessment Objectives evolve from GCSE to A Level, recognising that the skills you have already developed are not replaced, but elevated.

The next step is to begin constructing an essay.

Importantly, A Level essays are not written by addressing one Assessment Objective at a time. Nor are they simply a series of analytical paragraphs linked together.

Instead, they are driven by a line of argument: an overall interpretation that develops, deepens and evolves across the essay. Each paragraph contributes to that wider argument.

In this chapter, you will return to the line of argument you developed earlier and begin transforming it into the foundations of an A Level essay.

Returning to Your Line of Argument

At the end of Chapter 1, you developed a provisional response to the question below.

**"Prospero's power depends more on control and manipulation than wisdom or justice."
In the light of this view, explore Shakespeare's presentation of power in *The Tempest*.**

Task:

Read your original line of argument again.

Having explored the Assessment Objectives in Chapter 2:

- Does it still reflect your thinking?
- Does it establish a clear judgement?
- Does it acknowledge complexity?
- Can you now see more clearly how the essay might develop?

Literary study is often a process of revisiting and refining ideas.

You will have the opportunity to revise your original response later.

A Line of Argument: The Roadmap

A line of argument does more than establish your opinion.

It provides the roadmap for your essay.

A strong line of argument should:

- respond directly to the question;
- establish an overall judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- anticipate the development of the essay by alluding to the ideas explored in later paragraphs.

Think of it as answering two questions at once: What do I think? and: How am I going to prove it?

Less Effective

Prospero is powerful because he controls the other characters throughout the play.

This establishes a viewpoint, but gives little indication of how the essay will unfold.

More Effective

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. By combining magical spectacle with threats, forgiveness and self-renunciation, Shakespeare complicates simple ideas of leadership, inviting audiences to question whether true authority lies in the ability to command others or in the willingness to surrender power altogether.

Notice that this line of argument:

- establishes an overall judgement;
- acknowledges complexity;
- hints at the main ideas the essay will explore;
- alludes to wider concerns about authority and reconciliation without relying on detailed contextual discussion.

A reader can already anticipate the likely direction of the essay.

Planning from the Line of Argument

The line of argument above might develop in the following way:

Line of Argument	Paragraph Focus
Prospero's authority is initially established through control, magic and manipulation.	Paragraph 1: Prospero's control over Ariel, Caliban and the events of the island.
His authority becomes increasingly complicated as control exists alongside mercy and forgiveness.	Paragraph 2: The relationship between power, justice and reconciliation.
Shakespeare ultimately suggests that the greatest expression of power is the willingness to relinquish it.	Paragraph 3: Prospero's renunciation of magic and the restoration of order.

At this stage, you are focusing primarily on AO1 and AO2.

You will return to these ideas later in the booklet:

- contextual insight (AO3) will deepen them;
- critical interpretations and productions (AO5) may challenge them;
- comparison with other texts (AO4) will broaden them.

For now, your task is to establish the foundations of your essay.

Line of Argument to Analytical Paragraph

At GCSE, many students use structures such as PEE, PEA or PEAL. These can provide a useful starting point.

At A Level, essays are often less formulaic. Rather than moving mechanically from point to evidence to explanation, paragraphs sustain an argument whilst moving flexibly between textual detail and interpretation, interleaving the Assessment Objectives along the way.

The structure below is not a formula to memorise.

Instead, it reflects how literary arguments often develop.

1. Establish an aspect of your argument.

How does this paragraph contribute to your wider line of argument?

2. Support it with evidence.

Which moments from the text best illuminate this interpretation?

3. Explore Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

- a. How does Shakespeare shape meaning through:
- b. language;
- c. dramatic form;
- d. structure;
- e. placement within the play;
- f. audience response;
- g. the conventions of romance and tragicomedy?

4. Return to the wider judgement.

How does this analysis support, refine or complicate your overall argument?

Task:

Before reading, return to the first strand of the line of argument: **Prospero's authority is initially established through control, magic and manipulation.**

Now consider how this idea develops in the model below.

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. By combining magical spectacle with threats, forgiveness and self-renunciation, Shakespeare complicates simple ideas of leadership, inviting audiences to question whether true authority lies in the ability to command others or in the willingness to surrender power altogether.

Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation because Shakespeare presents him as a figure whose power depends upon the obedience of others. When Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise of freedom, Prospero immediately recounts his rescue from Sycorax before

threatening to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails". Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange shapes the audience's first sustained impression of Prospero's rule, revealing that gratitude and intimidation operate side by side. The contrast between Ariel's respectful "I thank thee, master" and his immediate submission after Prospero's threat demonstrates that obedience is secured through fear as much as loyalty. Shakespeare therefore presents power not simply as the ability to command, but as a carefully maintained performance of authority, encouraging the audience to question whether Prospero's rule is founded on justice or control.

Notice how the paragraph contributes to the wider essay.

1. It develops one strand of the line of argument.

Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation...

2. It selects evidence purposefully.

"...threatening to 'rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails'..."

3. It explores Shakespeare's dramatic craft.

"...Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange shapes the audience's first sustained impression of Prospero's rule..."

Rather than simply identifying repetition, the analysis considers:

- dramatic placement;
- audience experience;
- Shakespeare's construction of authority through the conventions of romance and spectacle.

4. It returns to the wider judgement.

"...encouraging the audience to question whether Prospero's rule is founded on justice or control."

The paragraph contributes to the essay's overall argument.

Your Turn: Part A

Task:

Return to the revised line of argument from Chapter 2.

Do you need to make any final changes before beginning your essay?

Remember:

- establish a judgement;
- acknowledge complexity;
- allude to the ideas your essay will explore.

Revised line of argument:

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Your Turn: Part B

Task:

Choose one aspect of your line of argument and develop it into a paragraph.

As you write, ask yourself:

- How does this paragraph contribute to my overall argument?
- Which quotation best supports this idea?
- How has Shakespeare shaped meaning through dramatic form?
- How does this paragraph return to the wording of the question?

Your paragraph:

Task:

Read your line of argument and paragraph together and reflect on what you're written.

Ask yourself:

- Does my paragraph genuinely develop the argument I established?
- Could a reader anticipate the direction of my essay from my line of argument?
- Have I moved beyond identifying methods to exploring Shakespeare's dramatic craft?
- Have I maintained a focus on the question throughout?

Make any revisions you feel are necessary.

Looking Ahead...

You now have the beginnings of an A Level essay:

- a refined line of argument;
- a developed analytical paragraph;
- a clear relationship between the two.

In the next chapter, you will revisit this same paragraph through contextual readings. Rather than adding historical information for its own sake, you will explore how contextual insight can deepen, challenge and reshape the argument you have already begun to construct.

Your essay has started.

Now it is time to elevate it.

Chapter 4

Integrating Contextual Insight

At GCSE, context often helps to explain a text.

You may have learned about Jacobean beliefs in hierarchy, magic and the supernatural, or about England's growing interest in exploration and colonisation. These ideas can help us understand why Shakespeare makes particular choices in *The Tempest*.

At A Level, however, context becomes something more dynamic.

Context is not simply information to be added into an essay. Instead, contextual reading should deepen, challenge and complicate interpretation.

The question is no longer: What do I know about the period? Instead, ask: How does this reading change the way I understand the text?

In this chapter, you will revisit the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3 and explore how historical, literary and theatrical contexts reshape interpretation.

Returning to the Model

Task:

Remind yourself of the model (below) from Chapter 3 which developed the line of argument and first main analytical paragraph.

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. By combining magical spectacle with threats, forgiveness and self-renunciation, Shakespeare complicates simple ideas of leadership, inviting audiences to question whether true authority lies in the ability to command others or in the willingness to surrender power altogether.

Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation because Shakespeare presents him as a figure whose power depends upon the obedience of others. When Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise of freedom, Prospero immediately recounts his rescue from Sycorax before threatening to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails". Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange shapes the audience's first sustained impression of Prospero's rule, revealing that gratitude and intimidation operate side by side. The contrast between Ariel's respectful "I thank thee, master" and his immediate submission after Prospero's threat demonstrates that obedience is secured through fear as much as loyalty. Shakespeare therefore presents power not simply as the ability to command, but as a carefully maintained performance of authority, encouraging the audience to question whether Prospero's rule is founded on justice or control.

Task:

Now reread the paragraph you wrote in Chapter 3.

Before reading any further, ask yourself:

- What assumptions am I making?
- What do I currently believe Shakespeare is doing?
- Which aspects of my interpretation feel secure?
- Which ideas might become more nuanced?

Keep this paragraph in front of you throughout the chapter.

Reading 1: Power, Hierarchy, & Authority

Historical context enhances interpretation; at A Level, historical knowledge matters because it changes the questions we ask of the text.

Task:

Read and annotate the extract below.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'The Play in Context' (see appendices for full article – page 76)

Class context

Society adhered to a hierarchy at the time where the class system was clearly defined. Shakespeare's play contains nobility, including Prospero, Antonio and the king of Naples, Alonso. This class represented social order and expectation as well as authority.

Another class of characters are the magical beings, including Ariel. These characters show the theme of illusion versus reality and they also demonstrate Prospero's power.

The play also contains a third class of characters, the colonised characters who are treated as inferior. These highlight themes of colonialism, exploitation, and resistance.

By including different classes in his play, Shakespeare is representing society at that time.

The Great Chain of Being

This was a belief held by contemporary society. They believed that everything in the universe had a specific place in a hierarchy. This fixation with social order is reflected in the play: after the chaos of the shipwreck, the characters return to Milan and everyone resumes their rightful place.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How might a Jacobean audience have understood Prospero's authority?
- Could power represent more than personal control?
- How does this context alter your understanding of justice and leadership?
- Does Prospero's authority suggest the restoration of order, the exercise of domination, or both?

Model Revisited

Task:

Read the model.

Notice how it has evolved (see sections in bold) – the contextual insight has been integrated at several points.

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. **Set against a society that believed every individual occupied a fixed place within a natural hierarchy**, Prospero's authority suggests that power carries both responsibility and the potential for abuse, ultimately inviting audiences to question what makes a ruler truly legitimate.

Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation because Shakespeare presents him as a figure whose power depends upon the obedience of others. When Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise of freedom, Prospero immediately recounts his rescue before threatening to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails". **For a Jacobean audience accustomed to a society that "adhered to a hierarchy" and believed that "everything in the universe had a specific place in a hierarchy", Prospero's position as master and rightful Duke would have reinforced expectations of order and authority.** Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange allows the audience to witness a ruler who secures obedience through gratitude and fear alike. The contrast between Ariel's respectful submission and Prospero's threats demonstrates that power can both liberate and constrain. Shakespeare therefore presents authority not merely as the right to command, but as a force whose legitimacy depends upon how it is exercised, encouraging audiences to question whether Prospero governs through justice or control.

Your Turn

Task:

Revisit your own paragraph from Chapter 3.

Integrate some contextual insight informed by this historical lens.

Aim to weave the context into your paragraph, and not simply put it at the end.

Your Response:

Reading 2: Renaissance Theatre

Context also involves understanding how theatre functioned within society and how audiences responded to performance.

Task:

Read the extract below carefully - annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that deepen your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge it;
- ideas that could reshape your paragraph.

Extracts: from 'The Renaissance Theatre' (see appendices for full article – page 78)

Governmental authorities understood the potential disruptions public theatre could cause in a well-ordered cultural hierarchy, so took steps to control the performances of plays from the very beginning. As early as 1574, even before the first theatre was built, the Lord Mayor of London and the Common Council laid heavy restrictions on the times, places, contents and purposes of theatrical entertainments. Although the municipal government was decidedly anti-theatre, its animosity had little effect. Beginning with the construction of the first purpose-built playhouse in 1576 until the closing of the theatres in 1642, theatre's popularity and commercial success steadily increased...

... Many of Shakespeare's plays actually deal with unstable political situations, especially those commonly referred to as the 'great tragedies'. Hamlet's famous indecision originates in the death of Denmark's monarch; Macbeth's plot involves two separate regicides, though both occur offstage. King Lear provides some of Shakespeare's most complex reflections on the nature of kingship. The image of the 'poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old' Lear (3.2.20) wandering mad on the heath may not have unsettled James I, devoted fan of theatre as he was. But it certainly does raise questions about the actual differences between monarch and subject, questions that resonate with performers, critics and students to this day.

Task:

Think about the reading:

- How does this change your understanding of Shakespeare's theatre?
- Why might plays about power and authority have been politically sensitive?
- How might audiences have responded differently from modern audiences?
- Does *The Tempest* become more than a private story about Prospero's power?

Model Reconsidered

Task:

Read the model again.

Notice how it has evolved (see section in bold) – in this case, it is integrated at the beginning.

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. Set against a society that believed every individual occupied a fixed place within a natural hierarchy, Prospero's authority suggests that power carries both responsibility and the potential for abuse, ultimately inviting audiences to question what makes a ruler truly legitimate.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to examine Prospero's authority rather than simply accept it. Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation because Shakespeare presents him as a figure whose power depends upon the obedience of others. When Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise of freedom, Prospero immediately recounts his rescue before threatening to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails". For a Jacobean audience accustomed to a society that "adhered to a hierarchy" and believed that "everything in the universe had a specific place in a hierarchy", Prospero's position as master and rightful Duke would have reinforced expectations of order and authority. Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange allows the audience to witness a ruler who secures obedience through gratitude and fear alike. The contrast between Ariel's respectful submission and Prospero's threats demonstrates that power can both liberate and constrain. Shakespeare therefore presents authority not merely as the right to command, but as a force whose legitimacy depends upon how it is exercised, encouraging audiences to question whether Prospero governs through justice or control.

Your Turn

Task:

Reconsider your revised paragraph.

How might theatrical context broaden your interpretation beyond Prospero as an individual character?

Aim to deepen your interpretation rather than simply adding information.

Revised paragraph:

Reflection: Watching it Evolve

Task:

Compare the three versions of the model.

Version	Development
Original Model	Line of argument & close analysis which developed an interpretation
Model Revisited	Historical context deepened the interpretation through Jacobean beliefs about hierarchy, authority and social order.
Model Reconsidered	Theatrical context broadened the discussion to consider how Renaissance audiences encountered debates about power and authority through public performance.

What has changed?

At A Level, AO3 is not about accumulating facts. It is about recognising that texts exist within wider historical, literary and theatrical conversations.

The strongest essays do not simply mention context. They allow contextual understanding to reshape interpretation.

Looking Ahead...

You have now revisited and refined your paragraph through contextual reading.

In the next chapter, you will encounter another important aspect of A Level Literature:

What happens when critics, directors and audiences disagree about what a text means?

You will discover that literary interpretation is not fixed.

It is debated.

Chapter 5

Exploring Texts and Traditions

At A Level, you begin to recognise that literary texts do not exist in isolation. Writers revisit similar concerns, ask recurring questions and experiment with familiar forms. Reading texts alongside one another allows us to deepen our understanding of both.

AO4 asks you to:

- Explore connections across literary texts.

However, comparison is not simply about identifying similarities and differences.

Instead, comparison allows texts to illuminate one another. It encourages us to ask broader questions:

- What concerns repeatedly interest Shakespeare as a dramatist?
- How do different rulers exercise and relinquish power?
- How do families shape identity, authority and responsibility?
- Does order emerge through control, forgiveness or self-knowledge?

In this chapter, you will encounter another of Shakespeare's great plays: *King Lear*.

As you do so, keep the following question in mind:

- **What happens when those in power fail to understand the responsibilities that accompany authority?**

Prospero uses his authority to orchestrate events and ultimately restore order.

Lear surrenders his authority without understanding its value and descends into chaos.

Both are fathers.

Both are rulers.

Both are forced to confront the consequences of their decisions.

Both invite audiences to consider the uneasy relationship between power, responsibility and human frailty.

Before You Begin

Task:

Based on your study of *The Tempest*, what do you think Shakespeare is interested in exploring through authority and power?

You might consider: power; leadership; responsibility; forgiveness; justice; family; identity; illusion; control; reconciliation; humanity.

Record your ideas:

Introducing *King Lear*

Written around 1605, *King Lear* is one of Shakespeare's most celebrated tragedies.

The play follows the ageing King Lear as he decides to divide his kingdom between his three daughters. Expecting public declarations of love in return, Lear rewards the flattering speeches of Goneril and Regan while rejecting the honest but restrained Cordelia. In surrendering his authority, Lear believes he can retain the privileges of kingship without its responsibilities.

Unlike Prospero, who carefully controls events through planning, magic and manipulation, Lear's tragedy begins with the reckless abandonment of power.

Both protagonists are rulers.

Yet they exercise authority in very different ways.

As you read, ask yourself: **Is true authority demonstrated by controlling others, or by understanding the responsibilities that accompany power?**

Shakespeare offers no easy answers.

Act One

King Lear opens with a public display of power. Lear announces his intention to divide his kingdom according to which of his daughters can most convincingly declare her love for him: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" Goneril and Regan respond with extravagant flattery, but Cordelia refuses to exaggerate her affection, insisting that she loves her father "according to my bond; no more nor less."

Rather than recognising Cordelia's honesty, Lear interprets her restraint as disloyalty. Enraged, he disinherits her, declaring, "Nothing will come of nothing," and banishes the loyal Kent when he dares to challenge the King's judgement. Kent's warning, "See better, Lear," becomes one of the defining ideas of the tragedy, suggesting that Lear's greatest weakness is not a lack of authority but a failure of perception.

At the same time, Shakespeare introduces a parallel plot involving the Earl of Gloucester and his two sons, Edgar and Edmund. Through a forged letter and carefully performed loyalty, Edmund persuades Gloucester that Edgar intends to betray him. Both Lear and Gloucester therefore make disastrous decisions based upon appearances rather than truth, revealing how easily authority can be manipulated when rulers value performance over honesty.

Unlike Prospero, whose authority depends upon maintaining control of both people and events, Lear willingly gives away political power while expecting obedience to remain unchanged. Shakespeare immediately exposes the instability of this arrangement, inviting audiences to question whether authority is something that can simply be possessed or whether it must continually be earned through wisdom and responsibility.

Act One therefore establishes the central conflict of the tragedy.

Lear believes he can surrender power without surrendering authority.

The question is whether he can recognise his mistake before the disorder he has created consumes both his family and his kingdom.

AO4 Reflection

Prospero carefully constructs and maintains his authority, directing those around him through planning, performance and control.

Lear abandons political power while expecting unquestioning loyalty, discovering that authority cannot survive without responsibility.

Task

How does Shakespeare establish different relationships between power and responsibility from the very beginning of each play?

Record your ideas:

Act Two

Act Two explores the consequences of Lear's decision to surrender his authority. Although he no longer holds political power, he expects to retain the respect and privileges of kingship, believing that status alone will guarantee obedience. Shakespeare quickly reveals the flaws in this assumption.

Lear arrives at Goneril's household with his large retinue of knights, only to find that his daughter no longer treats him as an unquestioned ruler. Complaining that his followers create disorder, Goneril challenges both his behaviour and his authority, asking why such a large company is necessary. Outraged by this rejection, Lear curses her, praying that nature will make her barren or grant her a child "that will make thee sigh". His response demonstrates a ruler who continues to rely upon command and intimidation, even as his ability to control others begins to disappear.

Meanwhile, the parallel plot develops Gloucester's own failure of judgement. Edmund carefully manipulates both his father and his brother Edgar, presenting himself as the loyal son while secretly pursuing power for himself. Through deception and performance, Edmund gains Gloucester's trust, forcing Edgar into exile and disguise. Like Lear, Gloucester mistakes appearance for truth, suggesting that authority without wisdom is dangerously vulnerable to manipulation.

Unlike Prospero, whose authority is maintained through careful planning and the orchestration of events, Lear discovers that power cannot simply be separated from responsibility. Having surrendered the duties of kingship, he nevertheless expects unquestioning loyalty, revealing that he values the privileges of authority more than its obligations. Shakespeare therefore presents power as something that must continually be justified rather than merely inherited or proclaimed.

Act Two reveals both Lear's greatest strength and his greatest weakness. He possesses an instinctive belief in justice and loyalty, yet his pride prevents him from recognising honesty or accepting responsibility for his own mistakes.

As his authority begins to crumble, Shakespeare asks whether true leadership depends upon commanding others or upon the humility to understand one's own limitations.

AO4 Reflection

Prospero carefully maintains his authority, directing events and controlling those around him through strategy, performance and illusion.

Lear assumes that authority will survive even after power has been relinquished, discovering instead that leadership cannot exist without responsibility and good judgement.

Task:

Does authority come from the ability to control others, or from the wisdom to exercise power responsibly?

How might Prospero answer this question? How might Lear?

Record your ideas:

Act Three

Act Three marks the dramatic and emotional heart of King Lear. The questions that have shaped the play from its opening scene—what makes a ruler legitimate, whether authority can exist without responsibility, and how power shapes human relationships—become increasingly urgent. It is also the act in which Shakespeare exposes the devastating consequences of Lear's failure to understand the nature of his own authority.

Driven from the homes of both Goneril and Regan, Lear finds himself wandering across the heath during a violent storm. As thunder crashes around him, he challenges the elements themselves: "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!" The tempest reflects not only the collapse of political order but also Lear's own psychological disintegration. Having lost the power to command his daughters, he attempts to command nature itself, revealing both his lingering pride and his growing desperation.

Yet the storm also becomes a place of transformation. For the first time, Lear begins to recognise the suffering of those beneath him, admitting that he has "ta'en / Too little care of this". Confronted by poverty, vulnerability and exposure, he reflects upon the responsibilities he neglected as king. Shakespeare suggests that the loss of political authority may become the beginning of moral insight.

Alongside Lear's story, the parallel plot reaches a similar crisis. Gloucester, having chosen to help the abandoned king, is denounced as a traitor. Edmund's ambition is rewarded with authority, while Gloucester's loyalty leads to brutal punishment. Captured by Cornwall and Regan, Gloucester is tortured and blinded in one of Shakespeare's most shocking scenes. As he loses his physical sight, Shakespeare prepares him to gain a clearer understanding of truth, justice and loyalty.

Unlike Prospero, who carefully orchestrates events from a position of control, Lear and Gloucester are forced into self-knowledge only after losing the authority they once possessed. Shakespeare repeatedly suggests that wisdom emerges not through power but through suffering, challenging audiences to reconsider the relationship between leadership, responsibility and humanity.

Act Three therefore exposes the central paradox of *King Lear*. The king begins to understand the duties of authority only after surrendering the power to fulfil them, while Gloucester learns to see most clearly only after he has been physically blinded.

Shakespeare suggests that power alone cannot create wisdom. Instead, genuine authority may depend upon humility, compassion and an awareness of our shared human vulnerability.

AO4 Reflection

Prospero maintains authority by carefully controlling those around him, using power to shape events and ultimately restore order.

Lear loses authority before discovering the responsibilities that should have guided his rule, gaining wisdom only through suffering and powerlessness.

Task:

Is Shakespeare suggesting that true authority comes from control—or from self-knowledge and responsibility?

How might Prospero answer this question? How might Lear?

Record your ideas:

Act Four

The consequences of Lear's and Gloucester's mistakes begin to unfold rapidly in Act Four. Having lost their authority and certainty, both men are forced into journeys that fundamentally reshape their understanding of power and humanity. Shakespeare suggests that wisdom often arrives only after status, security and pride have been stripped away.

Lear wanders the countryside in the depths of madness, accompanied by the Fool and the disguised Edgar. His fragmented speeches reveal a mind struggling to make sense of a world that no longer reflects the order he once believed unquestionable. Yet amidst his apparent insanity, Lear begins to see with remarkable clarity. Reflecting on the inequalities of society, he recognises the suffering of those he previously ignored and asks, "Is man no more than this?" Confronted with Edgar's apparent poverty and vulnerability, Lear questions the assumptions of rank and status that once defined his rule. Shakespeare transforms the fallen king into a figure capable of compassion and self-awareness, suggesting that humanity may emerge most fully when power is lost.

Elsewhere, Gloucester experiences a similarly profound transformation. After being brutally blinded, he believes his life has become meaningless and resolves to end it. Unaware that Edgar is secretly guiding him, Gloucester is led towards the imagined cliffs of Dover. Edgar's deception is ultimately an act of protection rather than manipulation, allowing his father to believe he has survived a miraculous fall. Through this extraordinary scene, Shakespeare explores the possibility that illusion can restore hope rather than simply conceal truth.

Meanwhile, political conflict continues to intensify. Cordelia returns to England with a French army, determined not to seize power but to rescue her father. Unlike Goneril, Regan and Edmund, whose ambitions are driven by personal desire, Cordelia's actions are motivated by loyalty, forgiveness and responsibility. At the same time, rivalry between Goneril and Regan over Edmund exposes the destructive consequences of authority pursued for selfish ends, as private ambition threatens both family and state.

Act Four therefore broadens Shakespeare's exploration of power and responsibility. Lear gains wisdom only after losing his kingdom.

Gloucester learns to see only after being blinded.

Cordelia exercises authority through compassion rather than domination.

Shakespeare increasingly asks whether true leadership depends upon power itself, or upon the humility, empathy and self-knowledge that power so often obscures.

AO4 Reflection

Throughout *King Lear*, Shakespeare presents a range of responses to power and authority:

- Goneril and Regan pursue power through ambition and cruelty;
- Edmund seeks authority through deception and manipulation;
- Cordelia exercises responsibility through loyalty and forgiveness;
- Lear discovers wisdom only after losing the power he once took for granted.

Prospero, by contrast, carefully maintains authority throughout *The Tempest*, ultimately choosing to relinquish it of his own accord.

Task:

What are the consequences of exercising power without responsibility?

Does Shakespeare suggest that genuine authority depends more upon self-knowledge and compassion than control and domination?

Record your ideas:

Act Five

By the final act of the play, the consequences of Lear's decisions have become unavoidable. Yet Shakespeare slows the pace of the tragedy, creating moments of recognition and reconciliation that encourage both Lear and the audience to reflect upon power, responsibility and the fragility of human relationships.

Lear is reunited with Cordelia after the suffering and madness that have transformed his understanding of himself. Awakening to find his youngest daughter caring for him, Lear is overwhelmed by humility and remorse. No longer the proud king demanding declarations of love, he kneels before Cordelia and admits, "I am a very foolish fond old man." The ruler who once expected absolute obedience now recognises his own fallibility, suggesting that genuine authority begins with self-knowledge rather than control.

For a brief moment, Shakespeare appears to offer the possibility of restoration. Lear and Cordelia imagine a life together in captivity, isolated from political ambition and courtly corruption. Lear declares that they will "sing like birds i' the cage", finding comfort not in power but in love, forgiveness and human connection. The audience is invited to hope that suffering has produced wisdom and that reconciliation may overcome the divisions created in the opening scene.

That hope is brutally destroyed. Edmund's earlier order for Cordelia's execution is carried out before it can be revoked. Lear enters carrying Cordelia's body, desperately searching for signs of life and refusing to accept the finality of her death. His repeated cries of "Howl, howl, howl, howl!" express a grief that overwhelms language itself, reducing the once-commanding monarch to a devastated father. Shakespeare suggests that insight and repentance, however genuine, cannot undo the consequences of earlier mistakes.

Meanwhile, the political conflicts that have dominated the play are finally resolved. Goneril poisons Regan before taking her own life, Edmund dies after acknowledging his crimes, and Albany restores order to the kingdom. Yet these victories provide little comfort. The stage is left scattered with bodies, and the survivors inherit a world permanently altered by pride, ambition and the abuse of authority.

Act Five therefore offers no simple resolution. Lear ultimately gains the wisdom and humility that escaped him at the beginning of the play, but only after losing his kingdom, his family and his sense of certainty.

Shakespeare suggests that self-knowledge often arrives too late to prevent suffering. Understanding the responsibilities of power does not erase the consequences of failing to exercise it wisely, leaving audiences to reflect upon the enduring relationship between authority, humanity and loss.

AO4 Reflection

Both *King Lear* and *The Tempest* present rulers who are transformed by suffering and self-reflection.

Lear recognises the limits of his authority only after losing everything that once defined him.

Prospero chooses to relinquish his magical power, seeking reconciliation rather than revenge.

Yet the outcomes are strikingly different.

Task:

Does self-knowledge redeem the misuse of power?

Can forgiveness restore what authority has damaged, or do some mistakes carry consequences that cannot be undone?

Record your ideas:

Rulers Compared

By this point, you have encountered two very different Shakespearean plays.

At first glance, *The Tempest* and *King Lear* appear to have little in common.

One presents a ruler who carefully controls events and moves towards reconciliation, while the other presents a ruler who gives away power and descends into suffering. One ends with restoration and forgiveness, the other with devastation and loss. One belongs to Shakespeare's late romances; the other is one of his bleakest tragedies.

However, comparison allows us to move beyond obvious differences.

A04 asks us to consider how texts illuminate one another. Rather than asking simply, "What is the same?" or "What is different?" we might instead ask: "What new understanding of *The Tempest* emerges when we place it alongside *King Lear*?"

The table below is designed to help you think comparatively. Notice how each comparison returns us to the central concerns of power: authority, responsibility, suffering and judgement.

Question	<i>The Tempest</i>	<i>King Lear</i>
What initiates conflict?	Prospero has been removed from power and uses the island to regain authority and confront his enemies.	Lear gives away political power while expecting to keep the privileges of kingship.
What role does power play?	Power is exercised through control, magic, performance and manipulation.	Power is misunderstood, surrendered and abused, leading to disorder.
How do the protagonists suffer?	Prospero suffers exile, betrayal and isolation, but remains largely in control.	Lear experiences madness, exposure, humiliation and devastating loss.
When does insight occur?	Prospero gradually recognises the need to forgive and relinquish his magic.	Lear gains wisdom only after losing authority, status and security.
What effect does self-awareness have?	Self-awareness allows Prospero to choose reconciliation over revenge.	Self-awareness comes too late to prevent tragedy.
How should audiences judge them?	Prospero invites both admiration and suspicion.	Lear invites both pity and criticism.
What remains unresolved?	Questions of justice, freedom, colonial power and the legitimacy of control.	Questions of responsibility, suffering and whether wisdom can redeem earlier failure.

Reflection

Comparison does not require us to decide which character is "better" or "worse".

Instead, it encourages us to think more carefully about the questions Shakespeare repeatedly explores through power and authority.

Task

Having encountered both plays, consider the following:

- Does power reveal character?
- Can authority exist without responsibility?
- Is control more admirable than vulnerability?
- Are rulers defined by their choices, their circumstances, or both?
- How should audiences respond to characters who recognise their mistakes but cannot fully repair the damage they have caused?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Throughout this booklet, you have revisited the same model paragraph, allowing it to evolve as your understanding has deepened.

At the end of Chapter 4, you reconsidered your interpretation through contextual reading (AO3).

Now, comparison invites you to broaden that interpretation once more.

Task:

Read the model below from where it was modified with AO3 insight.

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. Set against a society that believed every individual occupied a fixed place within a natural hierarchy, Prospero's authority suggests that power carries both responsibility and the potential for abuse, ultimately inviting audiences to question what makes a ruler truly legitimate.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to examine Prospero's authority rather than simply accept it. Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation because Shakespeare presents him as a figure whose power depends upon the obedience of others. When Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise of freedom, Prospero immediately recounts his rescue before threatening to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails". For a Jacobean audience accustomed to a society that "adhered to a hierarchy" and believed that "everything in the universe had a specific place in a hierarchy", Prospero's position as master and rightful Duke would have reinforced expectations of order and authority. Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange allows the audience to witness a ruler who secures obedience through gratitude and fear alike. The contrast between Ariel's respectful submission and Prospero's threats demonstrates that power can both liberate and constrain. Shakespeare therefore presents authority not merely as the right to command, but as a force whose legitimacy depends upon how it is exercised, encouraging audiences to question whether Prospero governs through justice or control.

Task:

Now read the reconsidered model, with AO4 insight incorporated.

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. Set against a society that believed every individual occupied a fixed place within a natural hierarchy, Prospero's

authority suggests that power carries both responsibility and the potential for abuse, ultimately inviting audiences to question what makes a ruler truly legitimate.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to examine Prospero's authority rather than simply accept it. Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation because Shakespeare presents him as a figure whose power depends upon the obedience of others. When Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise of freedom, Prospero immediately recounts his rescue before threatening to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails". For a Jacobean audience accustomed to a society that "adhered to a hierarchy" and believed that "everything in the universe had a specific place in a hierarchy", Prospero's position as master and rightful Duke would have reinforced expectations of order and authority. Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange allows the audience to witness a ruler who secures obedience through gratitude and fear alike. The contrast between Ariel's respectful submission and Prospero's threats demonstrates that power can both liberate and constrain. Shakespeare therefore presents authority not merely as the right to command, but as a force whose legitimacy depends upon how it is exercised, encouraging audiences to question whether Prospero governs through justice or control. **By contrast, Lear's decision to surrender political authority before he has developed the wisdom to relinquish it plunges both family and kingdom into disorder, suggesting that power cannot be separated from responsibility. Prospero, however, retains control until he consciously chooses forgiveness over domination. As a result, audiences may question the methods through which Prospero exercises authority whilst recognising that his willingness to renounce power ultimately distinguishes him from rulers whose failures produce irreversible tragedy.**

Notice what has changed.

The comparison has not distracted from your interpretation of *The Tempest*.

Instead, it has sharpened it.

AO4 does not ask: What is similar? It asks: How does another text help me understand this one more deeply?

Your Turn

Task:

Return to the paragraph you have been developing throughout this booklet.

Using one carefully integrated comparative sentence, broaden your interpretation through *King Lear*.

Remember:

- Keep *The Tempest* as the focus.
- Use *King Lear* to illuminate your argument.
- Avoid bolt-on comparison.
- Ask yourself what *King Lear* reveals about *The Tempest*.

Revise your paragraph:

Looking ahead...

Before moving on, take a moment to recognise how your thinking has evolved:

- Chapter 3 helped you construct an argument and analyse Shakespeare's methods;
- Chapter 4 deepened that argument through literary and historical context;
- Chapter 5 broadened that argument through comparison.

You have not replaced earlier interpretations.

You have refined them.

In the final chapter of this booklet, you will discover that interpretation itself is contested. Critics disagree.

Directors make choices. Audiences respond differently across time.

Literary study is not about arriving at a single, definitive answer.

It is an ongoing conversation.

Chapter 6

Joining the Critical Conversation

Throughout this booklet, you have gradually developed your interpretation of Shakespeare's presentation of power in *The Tempest*.

1. You began by constructing an argument.
2. You analysed Shakespeare's dramatic methods.
3. You deepened your ideas through context.
4. You broadened them through comparison.
5. At each stage, the same paragraph evolved.

However, A Level English Literature asks something more.

It asks you to recognise that intelligent readers do not always agree.

Two critics may examine the same scene, the same quotation and the same character and arrive at different conclusions.

This is AO5.

AO5: Explore literary texts informed by different interpretations.

Importantly, AO5 is not about finding the "correct" critic.

Nor is it about collecting quotations from critics and attaching them mechanically to the end of an essay.

Instead, criticism should help you:

1. refine your ideas;
2. challenge your assumptions;
3. qualify your interpretations;
4. recognise the complexity of literary debate.

Literature becomes a conversation.

And now, you are invited to join it.

Before You Begin

Task:

Without looking back at your paragraph, complete the statements below.

Prospero's authority is legitimate because...

Prospero's authority is problematic because...

If you found yourself agreeing with both statements, you have already begun thinking critically.

Reading 1: Barbara A. Mowat

Critical interpretations can encourage us to revisit familiar characters from an entirely new perspective.

Task:

Read the extract carefully and annotate it as you read.

Highlight:

- ideas that support your interpretation;
- ideas that challenge your interpretation;
- ideas that could deepen your understanding of Prospero's authority.

Extracts: from 'A Modern Perspective' (see appendices for full article – page 81)

King Alonso's confrontation with the Harpy (3.3.23–133) brings together powerfully *The Tempest's* intricate set of travel stories and its technique of presenting key dramatic moments as theatrical fantasy. The presentation of dancing islanders, a disappearing banquet, and a descending monster is the first big spectacle since the play's opening tempest. The unexpected appearance of these island "spirits," combined with the power of the Harpy's speech, gives the Harpy confrontation a solidity within the story world that seems designed to rivet audience attention. At the same time, audience response to the scene is inevitably colored by curiosity about the "quaint device" that makes the banquet vanish and by awareness of Prospero looking down on his trapped enemies from "the top," commenting on them in asides, and obtrusively turning the Harpy/king encounter into make-believe, first by telling us that the Harpy was only Ariel reciting a speech and, second, by reminding us, just before Alonso's desperate exit to join Ferdinand in the ocean's ooze, that Ferdinand is, at this moment, courting Miranda.

The double signals here—to the powerful moment within the story and to the deliberate theatricality with which the moment is staged—reflect larger doublenesses in this drama.

Unpacking Barbara A. Mowat

Mowat argues that Shakespeare continually reminds audiences that Prospero's authority is a kind of performance. The spectacular illusions, magical entertainments and carefully orchestrated encounters are not simply displays of power but theatrical constructions that Prospero controls like a playwright or director. Rather than allowing audiences to forget they are watching a play, Shakespeare deliberately draws attention to the relationship between illusion and reality.

This perspective encourages us to see Prospero's authority differently. Is he a wise ruler restoring order, or a figure who manipulates others by carefully staging events and controlling what they see? Shakespeare may invite audiences to admire Prospero's power whilst simultaneously questioning the methods through which that power is exercised.

Reflection

Task:

Mowat suggests that Shakespeare deliberately presents Prospero's authority as a form of theatrical performance.

To what extent do you agree?

You may wish to consider:

- Does Prospero rule through genuine authority or carefully constructed illusion?
- How does Shakespeare encourage audiences to become aware of the play's theatricality?
- Does recognising Prospero as a director-like figure change how we judge his actions?

Record your ideas:

Returning to the Model

Task:

Read the model paragraph below.

This is the version developed at the end of Chapter 5 having integrated a comparison with *King Lear*.

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. Set against a society that believed every individual occupied a fixed place within a natural hierarchy, Prospero's authority suggests that power carries both responsibility and the potential for abuse, ultimately inviting audiences to question what makes a ruler truly legitimate.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to examine Prospero's authority rather than simply accept it. Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation because Shakespeare presents him as a figure whose power depends upon the obedience of others. When Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise of freedom, Prospero immediately recounts his rescue before threatening to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails". For a Jacobean audience accustomed to a society that "adhered to a hierarchy" and believed that "everything in the universe had a specific place in a hierarchy", Prospero's position as master and rightful Duke would have reinforced expectations of order and authority. Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange allows the audience to witness a ruler who secures obedience through gratitude and fear alike. The contrast between Ariel's respectful submission and Prospero's threats demonstrates that power can both liberate and constrain. Shakespeare therefore presents authority not merely as the right to command, but as a force whose legitimacy depends upon how it is exercised, encouraging audiences to question whether Prospero governs through justice or control. By contrast, Lear's decision to surrender political authority before he has developed the wisdom to relinquish it plunges both family and kingdom into disorder, suggesting that power cannot be separated from responsibility. Prospero, however, retains control until he consciously chooses forgiveness over domination. As a result, audiences may question the methods through which Prospero exercises authority whilst recognising that his willingness to renounce power ultimately distinguishes him from rulers whose failures produce irreversible tragedy.

Task:

What has been incorporated links to the prior point (about spectators of the play engaging with ideas about power and authority through performance) and is linked to the point that follows (about Prospero's authority, which was the original starting point of this paragraph before it developed).

The sentences have been adapted to ensure it is seamlessly integrated.

It becomes part of the wider discussion.

The additions below have been bolded.

Although Shakespeare frequently presents Prospero's authority through control and manipulation, his power ultimately extends beyond domination towards reconciliation and restoration. Set against a society that believed every individual occupied a fixed place within a natural hierarchy, Prospero's authority suggests that power carries both responsibility and the potential for abuse, ultimately inviting audiences to question what makes a ruler truly legitimate.

Writing for a theatrical culture in which audiences were accustomed to seeing plays engage with politically sensitive questions of power and authority, Shakespeare invites spectators to examine Prospero's authority rather than simply accept it. **Mowat argues that *The Tempest* is characterised by a series of "double signals", simultaneously immersing audiences in Prospero's magical world whilst reminding them that they are witnessing carefully constructed theatrical illusion. Prospero's authority therefore resembles that of a playwright or director, orchestrating spectacle, performance and illusion to shape the responses of those around him.** Prospero's authority is initially established through control and manipulation because Shakespeare presents him as a figure whose power depends upon the obedience of others. When Ariel reminds Prospero of his promise of freedom, Prospero immediately recounts his rescue before threatening to "rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails". For a Jacobean audience accustomed to a society that "adhered to a hierarchy" and believed that "everything in the universe had a specific place in a hierarchy", Prospero's position as master and rightful Duke would have reinforced expectations of order and authority. Positioned near the beginning of the play, this exchange allows the audience to witness a ruler who secures obedience through gratitude and fear alike. The contrast between Ariel's respectful submission and Prospero's threats demonstrates that power can both liberate and constrain. Shakespeare therefore presents authority not merely as the right to command, but as a force whose legitimacy depends upon how it is exercised, encouraging audiences to question whether Prospero governs through justice or control. By contrast, Lear's decision to surrender political authority before he has developed the wisdom to relinquish it plunges both family and kingdom into disorder, suggesting that power cannot be separated from responsibility. Prospero, however, retains control until he consciously chooses forgiveness over domination. As a result, audiences may question the methods through which Prospero exercises authority whilst recognising that his willingness to renounce power ultimately distinguishes him from rulers whose failures produce irreversible tragedy.

Your Turn

Task:

Return to your own paragraph.

Integrate the critical insight into your analysis.

Remember:

- keep your own argument central;
- use the critic to sharpen your interpretation;
- avoid adding criticism mechanically at the end;
- think carefully about where the critical voice naturally belongs.

Your Revised Paragraph:

Looking Back

At the beginning of this booklet, you were invited to think differently about literary study.

Since then, you have learned how to:

- construct arguments (AO1);
- analyse Shakespeare's methods (AO2);
- deepen interpretations through context (AO3);
- broaden ideas through comparison (AO4);
- engage with literary criticism (AO5).

You have also discovered something important.

Great literature rarely produces certainty.

Instead, it invites debate.

It encourages disagreement.

It rewards curiosity.

As you move into A Level English Literature, remember:

- You do not need the "right" answer.
- You need an argument that is thoughtful, supported and open to complexity.

That is what literary study demands.

And that is the conversation you are now ready to join.

What's Next?

You are now to complete your essay – as aforementioned in the introduction, you can hand write or type this.

Important: Whilst this booklet required you to integrate contextual insight (AO3), comparative insight (AO4), and critical insight (AO5) in one main paragraph, you are not expected to include these in all your main paragraphs. You have to be selective and purposeful, avoiding repetition and embedding any of the above just for the sake of it.

Your deadline will be given to you in September, however expect it to be within the first two weeks of the term.

This essay will be marked and feedback will be provided.

Your baseline assessment will be linked to this work where you'll be given a similar essay-style question to respond to – the contextual and critical reading from this bridging unit will be directly relevant for this assessment.

Appendices

The Tempest: The Play in Context

Context relevant to The Tempest

In your controlled assessment it is important you consider the context of *The Tempest*. References to **context should be relevant both to the play and to the argument or theme of your essay**. Context should be explored throughout your essay and not simply 'stuck on' at the beginning or the end.

Below are several aspects of context which you may wish to consider in the preparation of your essay.

Biographical context

Shakespeare lived from 1564-1616.

He went to a grammar school – a privilege not afforded to all. Here he would have learned about classical literature – evidence of which we can see in the play through the characters of Ariel and through the shipwreck, a *motif* found in the Classical literature of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Homer's *The Odyssey*.

The Tempest was written around 1610-1611, near the end of his career. Some critics believe that Prospero giving up magic at the end of the play is symbolic of Shakespeare stepping away from the world of the theatre.

Shakespeare wrote for the King's Men – this was a popular and prestigious acting company who performed not only for the public but also for the royal court.

Social context

Gender and marriage

This play was written around 1610-1611; at this time there were strict gender roles and men held most of the power (as we see in the characters of Prospero, Antonio, and Alonso). At this time, women could only marry with the approval of their fathers. This is why Prospero tests Ferdinand – to make sure he is a suitable match for Miranda:

*All thy vexations
Were but my trials of thy love.*

— Act 4, Scene 1

Class context

Society adhered to a hierarchy at the time where the class system was clearly defined. Shakespeare's play contains nobility, including Prospero, Antonio and the king of Naples, Alonso. This class represented social order and expectation as well as authority.

Another class of characters are the magical beings, including Ariel. These characters show the theme of illusion versus reality and they also demonstrate Prospero's power.

The play also contains a third class of characters, the colonised characters who are treated as inferior. These highlight themes of colonialism, exploitation, and resistance.

By including different classes in his play, Shakespeare is representing society at that time.

Magic and the supernatural

In the **Jacobean era** there was a strong belief in magic and the supernatural. Audiences would have taken Prospero's magic seriously – it would not have been considered fictional.

Race

Ideas about race in society at the time are represented through the character of Caliban. This reflected English attitudes towards indigenous people, who were generally viewed as uncivilised.

Historical context

Jacobean era

The Tempest was written during the Jacobean era (King James reigned from 1603-1625). This was generally a period of political stability.

The Gunpowder Plot in 1605 meant that issues of loyalty and treason were very topical. Rightful roles were also important. There is evidence of this in how Antonio conspires and succeeds in stealing the dukedom from his brother Prospero before the play opens.

Colonisation

There was significant interest in exploration and colonisation at that time. Britain was expanding into other areas of the world including the Americas and Asia. This meant new trade routes, new lands and exposure to different races of people. Unfortunately, indigenous people in these lands were often treated poorly, subject to forced labour, cultural imposition and attempts at religious conversion.

The poor treatment of indigenous people is reflected in how Prospero treats Caliban.

Inspiration for the plot

Some believe that *The Tempest* was inspired by a famous historical shipwreck in 1609. The Sea Venture was caught in a hurricane on the way to Virginia and the crew ended up stranded in Bermuda. Their survival was a story of great public interest in England.

Find out more about [The Sea Venture and The Tempest](#).

The Great Chain of Being

This was a belief held by contemporary society. They believed that everything in the universe had a specific place in a hierarchy. This fixation with social order is reflected in the play: after the chaos of the shipwreck, the characters return to Milan and everyone resumes their rightful place.

Literary / theatrical context

Plot and genre

Interestingly, Shakespeare created the plot for *The Tempest*, unlike many of his other plays where he adapted existing stories.

The Tempest does not fit neatly into one genre; rather it blends various genres within the play:

- **romance** (shipwrecks, magic, reunions, journey from suffering to healing)
- **comedy** (misunderstandings, clowns, the drunken subplot, wedding at the end)
- **tragedy** (betrayal, exile, attempted murder, emotional suffering)
- **pastoral** (idealised nature and harmony)

Literary influences

Shakespeare may have been influenced by a number of literary works. Virgil's *Aeneid* contains a shipwreck and storms. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* details transformation, magic, illusion, and reconciliation, which also run throughout *The Tempest*. Prospero is similar to magicians in Ovid's work such as Medea and Circe.

Shipwrecks and storms are popular themes in literature, as is the exploration of new worlds; all of these can be seen in *The Tempest*.

Theatre

The Tempest is a good example of *metatheatre*, which is when a play draws attention to the fact that it is a play. This is evident when Prospero breaks the *fourth wall* at the end of the play and directly addresses the audience.

Theatre was a popular form of entertainment during Shakespeare's time. All classes of society attended plays. *The Tempest* contains a mix of social groups, so audience members could identify with different characters, and it explores themes such as power, betrayal and magic – all of which were of great interest to audiences at the time.

Jacobean audiences loved spectacle, so the music, magic, storms and *masques* would have been particularly appealing.

At the time, theatres were open-air and contained a mixture of seating and standing areas. Scenery and props were minimal, so the language had to communicate a strong sense of setting. This is evident in the play where Shakespeare uses strong *metaphor* and vivid imagery – for example, Ferdinand describes the chaos and power of the storm in "*All the devils are here*".

When writing, Shakespeare had to be careful not to offend the king, who was his patron.

Actors

It is interesting to note that females were not allowed to act on stage during the **Jacobean** era. Female roles were played by young males whose voices had not yet broken – which created confusion and required elaborate costuming.

The Renaissance Theatre – Eric Rasmussen

In the late summer of 1597, a monster emerged from the humid stench of London's Bankside. News of the monster quickly reached Robert Cecil, Secretary of State to Queen Elizabeth. Cecil determined that the monster was a threat to national security and arranged for its swift destruction. The nest where it had bred was raided and neutralised; the people who had nurtured it were called to account and imprisoned.

The monster in question was a satirical play called *The Isle of Dogs*. Its co-author, Thomas Nash acknowledged that in writing the play he'd created a monster: 'it was no sooner borne but I was glad to run from it'. No copy of the play exists today, so we can only guess at its contents. But the Privy Council clearly viewed it as 'seditious' and ordered not only that the dramatists and actors be imprisoned but that all theatres in the city be closed for months as a punishment. This governmental response may seem like overkill, but the Queen and her enforcers were keenly aware of the potential danger posed by theatre's ability to subvert cultural norms. In Renaissance England, the development of theatre paralleled, and may have helped to spark, dramatic, culture-wide shifts in religious, economic, social, sexual and even political perspectives.

Theatre historian Andrew Gurr has estimated that as many as 50 million people paid to see live theatre in London during the golden age of English Renaissance drama. London loved theatre. And with theatre's popularity came a reorganising of social strata in which class divisions were no longer safe. After all, William Shakespeare, the son of a Stratford glover, earned enough in a decade of playmaking and acting to buy a share in a theatrical company as well as an opulent house in Stratford-upon-Avon. He even applied to the College of Heralds for a coat of arms. When the request was granted, Shakespeare effectively entered the nobility. This social step epitomises the potentially subversive nature of theatre: it allowed the playwright son of an artisan father to style himself a gentleman.

Restrictions

Governmental authorities understood the potential disruptions public theatre could cause in a well-ordered cultural hierarchy, so took steps to control the performances of plays from the very beginning. As early as 1574, even before the first theatre was built, the Lord Mayor of London and the Common Council laid heavy restrictions on the times, places, contents and purposes of theatrical entertainments. Although the municipal government was decidedly anti-theatre, its animosity had little effect. Beginning with the construction of the first purpose-built playhouse in 1576 until the closing of the theatres in 1642, theatre's popularity and commercial success steadily increased.

Subversive playwrights

The successful playwrights who emerged during this period were a decidedly subversive group. There was Christopher Marlowe, accused of being an atheist, suspected of homosexual tendencies, an ex-spy who was murdered at age 29 in the suspicious company of other spies. There was Ben Jonson, who had been apprenticed to his bricklayer stepfather as a youth, soldiered in the Low Countries, killed a fellow actor in a duel and became a Catholic while in prison for the killing. And there was George Wilkins, a thug who had a long arrest record for brutal assaults (including kicking a pregnant woman in the belly). Wilkins was Shakespeare's landlord in London, and collaborated with him on *Pericles*.

When Sir Francis Walsingham formed an acting company under the patronage of Queen Elizabeth, he dictated that plays written for and performed by the Company of Players, the Queen's Men, should feature patriotic representations of English history with wholesome Protestant morals, and ought to be written in stately verse. Although some early playwrights adhered to this party line, Marlowe broke frame to take serious risks: writing about a Mongol warlord, Tamburlaine – in blank verse, no less. More seriously, whereas the government had called for morality plays with English heroes, Marlowe's foreign infidel repeatedly commits heinously amoral acts and is never struck down by the hand of divine justice. And Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* was a runaway success.

Even when Marlowe wrote apparently orthodox plays, he still found ways to push against the government's expectations, as well as societal conventions. *Doctor Faustus*, his best-known work, presents itself as a familiar moral tale of the perils of pride and excessive learning, and yet somehow manages to

question the very legitimacy of that moral dramatic framework. The Massacre at Paris, perhaps Marlowe's most obscure play, disrupts expectations in similar ways. The play promises to be a fairly straightforward, nationalistic condemnation of Frenchness and Catholicism. Unsurprisingly, in the course of the play this expected straightforwardness collapses into recognisably Marlovian political angling and moral shades of grey.

Shakespeare was influenced by Marlowe's subversion of form and subject matter. The two may have collaborated on King Henry VI Parts 1–3, choosing as their subject a weak and ineffectual monarch in a decidedly unpatriotic series of plays. Much like Marlowe's earlier Edward II, Shakespeare's own Richard II deals with the deposition of another inept king. The scene in which Richard is forced to yield his crown was omitted from printed versions of the play throughout Elizabeth's reign, and was perhaps left out in performance as well – no doubt the official government censor, known as the Master of the Revels, did not wish to encourage audiences to contemplate removing a sitting monarch, given the Queen's advanced age and debatable fitness for rule. Indeed, when the Earl of Essex planned a coup to overthrow Elizabeth, his henchmen commissioned Shakespeare's acting company to perform Richard II, presumably to get Londoners in the mood for a forced deposition. Although the rebellion failed, theatre's potential for political subversion was clearly understood.

Many of Shakespeare's plays actually deal with unstable political situations, especially those commonly referred to as the 'great tragedies'. Hamlet's famous indecision originates in the death of Denmark's monarch; Macbeth's plot involves two separate regicides, though both occur offstage. King Lear provides some of Shakespeare's most complex reflections on the nature of kingship. The image of the 'poor, infirm, weak, and despis'd old' Lear (3.2.20) wandering mad on the heath may not have unsettled James I, devoted fan of theatre as he was. But it certainly does raise questions about the actual differences between monarch and subject, questions that resonate with performers, critics and students to this day. The extant manuscript of Sir Thomas More – a play to which Shakespeare contributed a few speeches – gives us a peek of insight into the type of subversive material that the censor was on the lookout for. The Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, has written on the first page of the manuscript 'leave out the insurrection wholly'. The government was obviously concerned that a stage representation of a riot by unemployed Londoners against foreign workers who had taken their jobs might breed real riots in the theatres and the streets of the city.

All plays performed in the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre had to be approved by the Master of the Revels, with the curious exception of those staged by the Children of the Queen's Revels, a company of boy actors under the patronage of Queen Anne, for whom the poet Samuel Daniel was appointed as the official licenser of plays. Dramatists flocked to this company where they (rightly) assumed that a sympathetic fellow writer would be more likely to allow subversive plays to be staged than a rigorous government censor. In 1605, Ben Jonson, George Chapman and John Marston went so far as to make fun of King James's Scottish accent in *Eastward Ho!* (Jonson and Chapman were subsequently imprisoned and 'in danger of having their ears and noses slit' as punishment, all the while blaming the offensive passages on Marston.) In the following year, John Day's *Isles of Gulls*, a thinly veiled attack on the government, occasioned such a scandalous uproar that the playwright and entire cast of boys were imprisoned. Whereas casting conventions called for boys to perform women's roles, the trope of the cross-dressing character called for a female character to don a male disguise. Thus, a boy actor taking the role of Portia in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* would, in the course of the action, cross-dress as a woman for the part of Portia, then cross-dress again (or back?) when Portia adopts the persona of Balthazar. This fluidity leads, in several of Shakespeare's plays, to highly fascinating reflections on the relationship between gender, performance and identity; more importantly to Renaissance London, it would have further ruffled Puritan feathers. But the Puritans would ultimately get their revenge, and certainly the last laugh, when they came to power and succeeded in closing the theatres in 1642.

Religion

Religion was another favoured target of theatrical satire, and one that was seemingly tolerated by the Master of the Revels. Characters such as Zeal-of-the-Land Busy in Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* and Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* exaggerated extremist Puritanism for comedic effect. Roman Catholicism was usually represented with more seriousness, but hardly more concern for psychological realism. In Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*, the outwardly Catholic Duke of Guise reveals in his first soliloquy that he is in fact one of Marlowe's trademark atheist villains. In Shakespeare's *King John*, Cardinal Pandolf acts as the Pope's proxy, repeatedly acting against England's interests. Sometimes, of course, Puritans were represented seriously, and Catholics were represented comedically; for instance, one scene in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* has Faustus use his new magical powers to beat and abuse the Pope, a scene clearly written for laughs. The theatre used humour to skewer Puritans and slander to skewer Catholics: the common denominator was irreverence.

Cross-Dressing

The Puritans deeply disapproved of the theatrical practice of cross-dressing female roles. Women were not part of the theatrical guilds, so acting companies cast boys in most women's parts. This practice represented the ultimate in theatrical deception to religious eyes: boys were not women, and presenting boys in the guise of women misled audiences, both about boys' natures and women's natures. When playwrights and companies realised that this casting habit bothered the Puritans, they predictably leaned into it. With increasing frequency from the 1590s onward, English Renaissance plays deployed not only cross-dressing actors but cross-dressing characters as well.

A Modern Perspective: The Tempest - Barbara A. Mowat

Somewhat past the midpoint of *The Tempest*, King Alonso and his courtiers reach a temporary still point in their journey on Prospero's island. Shipwrecked, they have searched for the lost Prince Ferdinand; now, exhausted, they give up the search. Into this moment of fatigue—and, for Alonso, despair—at the center of what Gonzalo calls their “maze,” enters the maze's monster: a Harpy who threatens them with lingering torment worse than any death. For Alonso, the Harpy's recounting of his long-ago crimes against Prospero is “monstrous”; maddened, he rushes off to leap (he thinks) into the sea, to join (he thinks) his drowned son Ferdinand.

King Alonso's confrontation with the Harpy (3.3.23–133) brings together powerfully *The Tempest's* intricate set of travel stories and its technique of presenting key dramatic moments as theatrical fantasy. The presentation of dancing islanders, a disappearing banquet, and a descending monster is the first big spectacle since the play's opening tempest. The unexpected appearance of these island “spirits,” combined with the power of the Harpy's speech, gives the Harpy confrontation a solidity within the story world that seems designed to rivet audience attention. At the same time, audience response to the scene is inevitably colored by curiosity about the “quaint device” that makes the banquet vanish and by awareness of Prospero looking down on his trapped enemies from “the top,” commenting on them in asides, and obtrusively turning the Harpy/king encounter into make-believe, first by telling us that the Harpy was only Ariel reciting a speech and, second, by reminding us, just before Alonso's desperate exit to join Ferdinand in the ocean's ooze, that Ferdinand is, at this moment, courting Miranda.

The double signals here—to the powerful moment within the story and to the deliberate theatricality with which the moment is staged—reflect larger doublenesses in this drama. They reflect, first of all, major

differences in the temporal and spatial dimensions of the drama's "story" and its "play." *The Tempest's* "story" stretches over more than twenty-four years and several sea journeys; it embeds elements of the mythological voyages of Aeneas and of Jason and the Argonauts, of the biblical voyages of St. Paul, and of actual contemporary voyages to the new world of Virginia. The "play" that *The Tempest* actually presents is, in contrast, constricted within a plot-time of a single afternoon and confined to the space imagined for an island.¹ Through this particular doubling, Shakespeare creates in *The Tempest* a form that allows him to bring familiar voyage material to the stage in a (literally) spectacular new way.

The "story" that *The Tempest* tells is a story of voyages—Sycorax's journey from Algiers, Prospero and Miranda's journey from Milan to the island in the rotten carcass of a butt, Alonso's voyage from Naples to Tunis across the Mediterranean Sea and thence to the island—and, *on* the island, a set of journeys (Ferdinand's journey across yellow sands; Caliban, Stephano, and Trinculo's through briars and filthy-mantled pools, and Alonso and his men's through strange mazes) that lead, finally, back to the sea and the ship and to yet another sea journey. This complex narrative, with its immense span of chronological time, its routes stretching over most of the Mediterranean, its violent separations and losses and its culmination in royal betrothals and restorations, is the kind of story told in the massive novels, popular in Shakespeare's time, called Greek Romances. *The Tempest's* story could have filled one or more such romance volumes or could have been presented in a narrative-like drama such as Shakespeare himself had created in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*. Instead, within the brief period of *The Tempest's* supposed action, the narrative of the twenty-four or more years preceding the shipwreck of King Alonso and his courtiers on the island—worked out by Shakespeare in elaborate detail—is told to us elaborately. The second and third scenes of *The Tempest*—that is, 1.2. and 2.1—contain close to half the lines in the play, and close to half of *those* lines are past-tense narration. Through Prospero, through Ariel, through Caliban, through Gonzalo, through Sebastian, through Antonio, characters in our presence (and our present) tell us their pasts.

If we take the sets of narratives embedded in 1.2 and 2.1 and roll them back to where they belong chronologically, the first story (and the most fantastic) is that of the witch Sycorax, her exile on the island, her "littering" of Caliban there, and her imprisoning of Ariel (1.2.308–47)—twelve years before Prospero is thrust forth from Milan. That thrusting-forth is the subject of the next story (next chronologically, that is): the narrative of Antonio's betrayal of Prospero and of Prospero and Miranda's sea journey and arrival on the island (1.2.66–200). Then comes the story of what happened on the island during the next twelve years, a story in which narratives that tell of Caliban (1.2.396–451), of Ariel (1.2.287–306, 340–47), and of Miranda and Prospero (1.2.205–8) overlap and intersect. Finally comes the story from the most recent past—the story of the Princess Claribel and her "loathness" to the marriage arranged by her father (2.1.131–40), of Claribel's wedding in Tunis (2.1.71–111), of the return journey of Alonso and his courtiers (2.1.112–17), and of the shipwreck as described by Ariel (1.2.232–80).

One of the most powerful features of the form Shakespeare crafted in *The Tempest* is that this detailed, complex narrative, told us in the first part of the play, keeps reappearing within the play's action. The story of the coup d'état that expelled Prospero "twelve year since," for example, is made the model for the Antonio/Sebastian assassination plot ("Thy case, dear friend," says Sebastian to Antonio, "shall be my precedent: as thou got'st Milan, I'll come by Naples" [2.1.332–34]); the story appears at the center of the Harpy's message (3.3.86–93); and it is told yet once again by Prospero when, in the play's final scene, he attempts to forgive Antonio (5.1.80–89). Caliban's story—"this island is mine"; "I serve a tyrant"—is told by him again and again. The story of Sycorax, who died years before the dramatic "now," is alluded to so often—her powers described one last time by Prospero even as the play is ending (5.1.323–26)—that she seems to haunt the play, as does the absent, distant, unhappy Claribel.

As the play reaches its conclusion, each of the stories recounted in the early narrative scenes is conjured up a final time, though the pressure now is toward the future—toward the nuptials of the royal couple, toward a royal lineage with Prospero's heirs as kings of Naples. As that virtual future is created, the

structuring process of the opening scenes is reversed: where narrative was there incorporated into the play, now the play opens back out into the next pages of the narrative from which it had emerged. As we watch and listen, the play we have been experiencing moves into the past, becomes a moment in the tale Prospero promises to tell to the voyagers—"such discourse as . . . shall make [the night] / Go quick away: the story of my life / And the particular accidents gone by / Since I came to this isle" (5.1.361–64). As Alonso notes, this is a "story . . . which must / Take the ear strangely" (5.1.371–72).

By folding the story into the play and then unfolding the play into its own virtual narrative future, Shakespeare creates a form in which past and future press on the present dramatic moment with peculiar intensity. We sense this throughout the play, but see it with special clarity in the confrontation between Alonso and the Harpy. The Harpy brings the past to Alonso as a burden Alonso must pick up—an intolerable burden for Alonso, who goes mad under the simultaneous recognition of his guilt and its consequences, given to him as Time Past, Time Present, and Time Future. In Time Past: "you . . . / From Milan did supplant good Prospero, / Exposed unto the sea . . . / Him and his innocent child" (3.3.87–90); in Time Present: "for which foul deed, / The powers . . . have / Incensed the seas and shores, yea, all the creatures / Against your peace. Thee of thy son, Alonso, / They have bereft" (90–94); and finally, in Time Future: "Ling'ring perdition . . . shall step by step attend / You and your ways, whose wraths to guard you from— / Which here, in this most desolate isle, else fells / Upon your heads—is nothing but heart's sorrow / And a clear life ensuing" (95–101). This pressure of past and future on the present moment—a pressure that is created in large part by the way Shakespeare folds chronological time into plot-time, and that we feel throughout the play in Prospero's tension, in Ariel's restiveness, in Caliban's fury—makes believable in *The Tempest* that which is normally suspect: namely, instant repentance, instant inner transformation. Because the dramatic present is so permeated with the play's virtual past, so pressured by the future—the six o'clock toward which the play rushes, after which Time as Opportunity will be gone—that Alonso's anguished repentance, his descent into silence, madness, and unceasing tears, his immediate surrender of Milan to Prospero and the reward of being given back his lost son—can all take place in moments, and can, even so, seem credible and wonderful.

The interplay between *The Tempest's* elaborate voyage story and its tightly constricted "play" is not the only doubleness toward which the drama's Harpy/king encounter points us. It points as well to two kinds of travel tales embedded in the drama: ancient, fictional voyage narratives and contemporary travelers' tales buzzing around London at the time the play was being written. The Harpy/king encounter is shaped as a sequence of verbal and visual events that in effect reenact and thus recall ancient confrontations between harpies and sea voyagers. In each of these harpy incidents—from the third century B.C. *Argonautica* through the first century B.C. *Aeneid* to *The Tempest* itself—harpies are ministers of the gods sent to punish those who have angered the gods; they punish by devouring or despoiling food; and they are associated with dire prophecies. *The Tempest's* enactment of the harpy encounter is thus one in a line of harpy stories stretching into the past from this island and this set of voyagers to Aeneas, and through Aeneas back to Jason and the crucial encounter between the terrible harpies (the "hounds of mighty Zeus") and the Argonauts.² In replicating the sequence of events of voyagers meeting harpies, combining details from Jason's story and from the *Aeneid*, Shakespeare directs attention to the specific context in which such harpy confrontations appear and within which *The Tempest* clearly belongs—that of literary fictional voyages.

At the same time, he surrounds the encounter with dialogue that would remind his audience of present-day voyages of their own fellow Londoners. Geographical expansion, around-the-world journeys, explorations of the new world of the Americas had heightened the stay-at-homes' fascination with the strange creatures reported by travelers. Real-world creatures like crocodiles and hippopotami, fantastic creatures like unicorns and griffins, reported monstrosities like the men whose heads grow beneath their shoulders—all were, at the time, equally real (or unreal) and equally fascinating. The dialogue preceding the Harpy's descent in *The Tempest* centers on such fabulous creatures. When the supposed "islanders"—creatures of "monstrous shape"—appear, bringing in the banquet, Sebastian says: "Now I will believe /

That there are unicorns, that in Arabia / There is one tree, the phoenix' throne, one phoenix / At this hour reigning there." "Travelers ne'er did lie," says Antonio, "Though fools at home condemn 'em." Gonzalo adds, "If in Naples / I should report this now, would they believe me? / If I should say I saw such islanders . . ." (3.3.26–36). It is into this dialogue-context that the Harpy descends—that is, into a discussion of fantastic travelers' tales and fabulous creatures.

When the Harpy—one of these creatures—actually appears, claps its wings upon the table, and somehow makes the food disappear (3.3.69 SD), she is very real to Alonso and his men—as real as the harpies were to Jason and to Aeneas; as real as the hippopotami and anthropophagi were to fifteenth-century explorers; as real as is Caliban, the monster mooncalf, to his discoverers Stephano and Trinculo. The attempts to kill the Harpy are classical responses—that is, they are the responses of Jason and Aeneas when confronted by the terrible bird-women. The response of Stephano and Trinculo to their man-monster is a more typically sixteenth-century response to the fabulous. When, for example, Stephano finds Trinculo and Caliban huddled under a cloak and thinks he has discovered a "most delicate monster" with four legs and two voices, he responds with the greed that we associate with Martin Frobisher and other sixteenth-century New World explorers who brought natives from North America to England to put on display: "If I can recover him," says Stephano, "and keep him tame and get to Naples with him, he's a present for any emperor that ever trod on neat's leather. . . . He shall pay for him that hath him, and that soundly" (2.2.69–81). Trinculo had responded with equal greed to his first sight of the frightened Caliban:

What have we here, a man or a fish? . . . A strange fish. Were I in England . . . and had but this fish painted, not a holiday fool there but would give a piece of silver. There would this monster make a man. Any strange beast there makes a man. When they will not give a doit to relieve a lame beggar, they will lay out ten to see a dead Indian. (2.2.25–34)

While the finding and subjugating of "wild men" was a feature that ancient and new-world voyage stories held in common (for example, Jupiter promises that Aeneas, as the climax of his sea journeys, will "wage a great war in Italy, and . . . crush wild peoples and set up laws for men and build walls"³), Prospero's subjugation of Caliban has a particularly New World flavor. The play itself, no matter how steeped it is in ancient voyage literature and no matter how much emphasis it places on its Mediterranean setting, is also a representation of New World exploration. While it retells the stories of Aeneas and of Jason, it also stages a particular Virginia voyage that, in 1610–11, was the topic of sermons, published government accounts, and first-person epistles, many of which Shakespeare drew on in crafting *The Tempest*. The story, in brief, goes as follows: A fleet of ships set out in 1609 from England carrying a new governor—Sir Thomas Gates—to the struggling Virginia colony in Jamestown. The fleet was caught in a tempest off the coast of Bermuda. All of the ships survived the storm and sailed on to Virginia—except the flagship, the *Sea-Venture*, carrying the governor, the admiral of the fleet, and other important officials. A year later, the exhausted and dispirited colonists in Jamestown were astounded when two boats sailed up the James River carrying the supposedly drowned governor and his companions. The crew and passengers on the flagship had survived the storm, had lived for a year in the Bermudas, had built new ships, and had made it safely to Virginia. News of the happy ending to this "tragicomedy," as one who reported the story called it, soon reached London, and many details of the story are preserved in *The Tempest*.

Among the details may be the disturbing picture of the relationship of the "settlers" and the "Indians" in Jamestown, represented perhaps in Caliban and his relationship with Prospero. In one of the documents used by Shakespeare in writing *The Tempest*, William Strachey describes an incident in which "certain Indians," finding a man alone, "seized the poor fellow and led him up in to the woods and sacrificed him." Strachey writes that the lieutenant governor was very disturbed by this incident, since hitherto he "would not by any means be wrought to a violent proceeding against them [i.e., the Indians] for all the practices of villainy with which they daily endangered our men." This incident, though, made him "well perceive" that "fair and noble treatment" had little effect "upon a barbarous disposition," and "therefore . . . purposed to be revenged." The revenge took the form of an attack upon an Indian village.⁴

As we read Strachey's account today, we find much in the behavior of the settlers toward the natives that is appalling, so that the account is not for us simply that of "good white men" against "bad Indians," as it was for Strachey. In the same way, whether or not this particular lieutenant governor and these treacherous "Indians" are represented in *The Tempest*, Shakespeare's decision to include a "wild man" among his island's cast of characters, and (as Stephen Greenblatt notes) to place him in opposition to a European prince whose power lies in his language and his books,⁵ raises a host of questions for us about the play. *The Tempest* was written just as England was beginning what would become massive empire-building through the subjugating of others and the possessing of their lands. European nations—Spain, in particular—had already taken over major land areas, and Shakespeare and his contemporaries had available to them many accounts of native peoples and of European colonizers' treatment of such peoples. Many such accounts are like Strachey's: they describe a barbarous people who refuse to be "civilized," who have no language, who have a "nature" on which "nurture will never stick" (as Prospero says of Caliban). Other accounts describe instead cultural differences in which that which is different is not necessarily inferior or "barbarous." When Gonzalo says (at 2.1.157–60), "Had I plantation [i.e., colonization] of this isle . . . And were the King on 't, what would I do?" he answers his own question by describing the Utopia he would set up (lines 162–84), taking his description from Montaigne's essay "Of the Cannibals." In this essay, Montaigne ("whose supple mind," writes Ronald Wright, "exemplifies Western civilization at its best"⁶) argues in effect that American "savages" are in many ways more moral, more humane people than so-called civilized Europeans.

As with so much of *The Tempest*, Caliban may be seen as representing two quite different images. Shakespeare gives him negative traits attached to New World natives (traits that seem to many today to smack of racist responses to the strange and to the Other) while giving him at the same time a richly poetic language and a sensitive awareness of nature and the supernatural. He places Caliban in relation to Prospero (as Caliban's master and the island's "colonizer"), to Miranda (as the girl who taught Caliban language and whom he tried to rape), and indirectly to Ferdinand (who, like Caliban, is made to carry logs and who will father Miranda's children as Caliban had wished to do). Shakespeare thus creates in the center of this otherworldly play a confrontation that speaks eloquently to late-twentieth-century readers and audiences living with the aftereffects of the massive colonizing of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and observing the continuing life of "empire" in the interactions between the powerful and the formerly colonized states.⁷ As many readers and audiences today look back at the centuries of colonization of the Americas, Africa, and India from, as it were, Caliban's perspective, *The Tempest*, once considered Shakespeare's most serene, most lyrical play, is now put forward as his representation, for good or ill, of the colonizing and the colonized.⁸

This relatively new interest in the colonization depicted in *The Tempest* has had a profound impact on attitudes toward Prospero. For centuries seen as spokesman for Shakespeare himself, as the benign, profound magician-artist who presides like a god over an otherworldly kingdom, Prospero is now perceived as one of Shakespeare's most complex creations. He brings to the island books, Old World language, and the power to hurt and to control; he thus figures an early form of the colonizer. But he carries with him other, complicating associations. He is, for example, a figure familiar in voyage romances popular in Shakespeare's day. The hermit magician (or exiled doctor, or some equivalent) in Greek Romance tales comes to the aid of heroes and heroines, protects them, heals them, often teaches them who they really are. In such stories, the focus is always on the lost, shipwrecked, searching man or woman—that is, on the Alonso figure or the Ferdinand or the Miranda figure. In *The Tempest*, Prospero, the hermit magician, is center stage, and the lost, shipwrecked, and searching are seen by us through him and in relation to him. Prospero thus carries a kind of power and an aura of ultimately benevolent intention that complicates the colonizer image.

Prospero is also the creator of the maze in which the other characters find themselves—"as strange a maze as e'er men trod," says Alonso (5.1.293)—and thus carries yet other complicating associations. The scene of the Harpy/king encounter opens with Gonzalo's "Here's a maze trod indeed through forthrights and

meanders,” a statement that picks up suggestively Ovid’s description of that most infamous of mazes, created by Daedalus to enclose the Minotaur. The Daedalus story has unexpected but rich links with *The Tempest*. Daedalus, the quintessential artist/engineer/magician, built the maze to sty the monstrous creature that he had helped to bring into being. (It was sired by a bull on King Minos’ queen, but it was Daedalus who had lured the bull to the queen, encasing her, at her urgings, in the wooden shape of a cow.) Having built the maze, Daedalus (in Golding’s 1567 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*) “scarce himselfe could find the meanes to wind himself well out / So busie and so intricate” was the labyrinth he had created (Book 8, lines 210–20).

The story of the maze and its Minotaur is a familiar one, involving the sacrifice of Greek youths to the bloodthirsty Minotaur, an annual horror that stopped only with Theseus’ slaughter of the Minotaur and his escape from the maze through the aid of King Minos’ daughter, Ariadne, whom Theseus marries and then abandons. Less familiar is the connection between the story of the maze and that of Daedalus and his son Icarus’ flight from the island of Crete:

Now in this while [when Theseus was overcoming
the Minotaur] gan Daedalus a weariness to take
Of living like a banisht man and prisoner such a time
In Crete, and longed in his heart to see his native Clime.
But Seas enclosed him as if he had in prison be.
Then thought he: though both Sea and land King
Minos stop fro me, I am assured he cannot stop the Aire and open Skie...

It is at this point that Daedalus turns to “uncoth Arts” (i.e., magic), bending “the force of all his wits / To alter natures course by craft”—and he constructs the famous wings that take him home, at the cost of the life of his son, who falls into the sea and drowns.

When Prospero stands “on the top,” looking down and commenting on the trapped figures below him, he to some extent figures the magician/artist Daedalus. Throughout the play he, like Daedalus, is almost trapped in his own intricate maze, an exile who “gan . . . a weariness to take / Of living like a banisht man and prisoner such a time,” who “longed in his heart to see his native Clime,” and who thus bent “the force of all his wits” and his magic powers to find a way to get himself and his child home. The associations of Prospero with Daedalus, his maze, and his magic flight are less accessible to us today than they would have been to a Renaissance audience. But the sense of Prospero’s weariness, of his hatred of exile, of the danger facing him as he heads back to Milan having abjured his magic—these complicating emotional factors, even without a specific awareness of the Daedalus parallels, are available to us. We notice them especially in Prospero’s epilogue, where he begs our help in wafting him off the island and safely back home.

Like *The Tempest* itself, then, Prospero is complicated, double. He, like the play, is woven from a variety of story materials, and like the play he represents a particular moment, the moment at which began a period of colonizing and empire-building that would completely alter the world, leaving a legacy with which we still live. But he, like the play, also embodies ancient stories of travel and exile and the emotions that accompany them. And *The Tempest*’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century retellings and sequels (Browning’s “Caliban on Setebos,” Aimé Césaire’s *Une Tempête*, Auden’s “The Sea and the Mirror,” and such film versions as *Forbidden Planet* and Peter Greenaway’s *Prospero’s Books*, to name but a few) suggest that those stories and emotions have continued to intrigue. The magician fascinates, the journey and the maze still tempt, despite the near certainty that magic—like all power—tends to corrupt and that islands and labyrinths hold as many monsters as they do “revels.”