

# Players of Shakespeare 5

edited by  
Robert Smallwood



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# Prospero in *The Tempest*

PHILIP VOSS

PHILIP VOSS is an Associate Actor of the Royal Shakespeare Company and played Prospero in James MacDonald's 2000–1 touring production of *The Tempest* at the Pit Theatre (Barbican), at The Other Place in Stratford, and on a national and international tour. A wide range of earlier parts for the RSC has included Shylock, Malvolio, Ulysses, Menenius, Peter Quince, Worcester and the Lord Chief Justice in 1 and 2 *Henry IV*, Bassanes in *The Broken Heart*, Monticelso in *The White Devil*, and Sir Epicure Mammon in *The Alchemist*. Roles for Shared Experience include Dr Dorn in *The Seagull*, Chebutykin in *Three Sisters*, and Kochkaryov in *Marriage*. He has also worked extensively for the National Theatre and for the Royal Court. Among his films is *Four Weddings and a Funeral* and he has done a considerable range of work for television. His essay on his performance of Menenius in the RSC's 1994 production of *Coriolanus* was published in *Players of Shakespeare 4*.

(*O you wonder*)

*The Tempest* has had more labels pinned to it than any other Shakespeare play that I have ever worked on:

- 'It's about colonialism – absolutely.'
- 'Jacobean expansionism – without a doubt.'
- 'It's about Shakespeare laying down his pen.'
- 'It's a play of mystery.'
- 'It's anti-Faustian.'
- 'White magic against black.'
- 'Surely it is about the oppressed gaining their freedom from the oppressors.'

Then there is Prospero:

- 'Is he Shakespeare?'
- 'Is he James the First?'
- 'Definitely Caliban is his dark inner self, Ariel the light.'

It is the first play printed in the first Folio, so I assume Heminges and Condell thought it significant. It is unusual. No one goes mad at the end or dies. There is a betrothal and forgiveness of an unsatisfactory sort. To Antonio Prospero says 'For you (most wicked Sir) whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth' (v.i.130-1). This, preceding the line of forgiveness, doesn't make it seem wholehearted to me; and even 'I do forgive' is followed by the continuing bitterness of 'Thy rankest fault – all of them' (v.i.132). I don't believe Prospero makes that vital self-healing leap of real forgiveness. Nor is there any great event to end the play; just a lonely (old, in my case) man asking for applause.

I was offered the part in the usual way through my agent and accepted without putting down the phone – not always a wise thing to do. It was a tour, I was told: Japan, Portugal, Virginia. I met the director, James MacDonald, for lunch the following day and the details of the tour expanded to include the inner and outer reaches of the United Kingdom – and we were to play in leisure centres *in a module*. Terrific! During the meal I also learned that James intended it to be a company production, working along vaguely Stanislavskian principles. He had seen me many years before in the Shared Experience production of *Marriage* by Gogol and admired it hugely. Was a company production a threat to me, I wondered.

So I was cast and I was hooked. I have used a particular hybrid version of Stanislavsky since discovering the process with Mike Alfreds in 1980. Often I use the system in a secretive sort of way, but with this director maybe I would be able to discuss motives and objectives openly – which, in the event, proved to be the case.

I read the play – four times. When writing about Menenius in *Players of Shakespeare 4* I set out the procedure in fullish detail, and that is the course I embarked on with Prospero – and pretty quickly, for I realized that the opening duologue with my daughter, Miranda, was incredibly difficult. I made my four lists: facts about Prospero; what other people said about me; what I said about myself; and what I said about other people; then the conclusions. I soon learnt the scene with Miranda – out of fright at its complexity. As a rule I would never start to learn anything until at least a couple of weeks into rehearsal. We had six weeks to rehearse, which is too short for my liking. At that time I thought I would be playing a strict disciplinarian, bookish and aloof. I had seen Gielgud at Drury Lane in the mid 1950s – no module for him.



The list of words and phrases I jotted down at that time include ‘absolute power’, ‘control freak’, ‘bully’ and ‘loving father’ – but the last with a question mark. His objective in the play is to get his dukedom back and to go home. His pulse is controlled; his physical centre is the mind. His animal ranged from a golden eagle (I think I had the voluminous Gielgud cloak in mind) to a beaver, a hawk, and finally to an old owl. The super-objective, which is the most important choice I make – because it goes over and beyond the play – was, at first, revenge. Rarely do I change my conclusions once I’ve made them, but in this instance my super-objective changed three or four times.

Revenge is there, of course, strongly, throughout the play, but it is resolved within it. Alonso gives him back the Dukedom of Milan while his brother Antonio, who usurped it from him, famously says nothing. To play ‘revenge’ so strongly would, I assume, have led me to an angry and bitter performance, which I have, indeed, seen more than once. Then I had a brilliant idea: the revenge is achieved through the marriage of his daughter with Ferdinand – the son of the King of Naples. I would create an Italian dynasty; my offspring would rule not only Naples and Milan, but possibly Rome and beyond. About this time I began to read an assortment of prefaces and essays – by Frank Kermode and Harold Bloom, among others. They all referred to the dynastic theme being resolved within the play, so as a super-objective it became valueless, though essential as a course of action.

Rehearsals had begun by now and we sat around the all-too-familiar tables, pushed together to form a whole, to thrash out the meaning of the words. In this case it was little more than a bonding process for a fortnight. Nicholas Day, who is involved with a company that performs Shakespeare by working from a cue-script, gave a talk about punctuation and capitalization in the first Folio. We were, indeed, working from a typed-out script of the first Folio text of *The Tempest* and it has to be said that the ‘corrections’ in the editions we buy from our bookshops were a revelation. For example, the Folio’s ‘. . . Urchins / Shall for that vast of night . . .’ (1.ii.326–7) becomes (in some editions) ‘. . . Urchins / Shall forth at vast of night’. Why? Who decided to improve? Similarly, in the phrase I have chosen as a title for this essay, I see that the latest Arden edition has added a comma and an exclamation mark: ‘O, you wonder!’ Does it need them? In subsequent readings, and during performance, I have found that the punctuation of the first Folio, and particularly

the capitalization of nouns, has been very influential on the way I stress some of the sentences:

The Cloud-capped Towers, the gorgeous Palaces,  
The solemn Temples, the great Globe itself . . .

(IV.i.153-4)

and before that

Are melted into Air, into thin Air.

(IV.i.150)

Look at the way Shakespeare writes and he'll tell you what he wants.

We, the cast, now superficially know one another. My daughter is black; my Ariel is black; my Caliban is fundamentally Indian. The Ferdinand, as far as I can ascertain, is from landed gentry in Cambridgeshire. The rehearsals become individualized and it is the most agonizing moment ever – as ever. I have a daughter that I hardly know at all who comes from Sierra Leone, and I am white. I have a stick – well, it's a staff and it's magic, but in fact it's a broomstick. It is a prop and it feels absurd in my hand. Now we have to begin to explore about the most difficult text I can remember. I don't let on that I already know the lines. The syntax is tortuous. Frank Kermode is so dismissive of the whole episode, saying that Shakespeare was attempting to stay within the unities of time and place (the whole action of the play takes place within four hours) and that his attempt to recount twelve years within a virtual monologue defeated him to such an extent that he had to resort to making Prospero question Miranda's attention span in order to maintain the flow. He has a point, and one that I went along with for a while.

The 'tempest' doesn't exist. It is a fabrication. The tempest is within Prospero: twelve years of repressing resentment, hatred and thoughts of revenge have distorted him. He has tried to speak about the pain, but prevented himself from doing so – many times. He can't let it go. Then . . . his enemies arrive on the island and he knows he has to *let go* – now. 'The very minute bids thee ope thine ear'(I.ii.37). She has to know now that she is a princess and at last he has to divulge the horror of their expulsion from Milan.

Now the difficult syntax becomes dramatic. He has to relive the betrayal; he has to tell his daughter what she is; he has to suppress his anger; and finally he has to admit that fate has handed him the gift of

an opportunity for reprisal. Every performance is hard: if I don't succeed in this I know I shall have nowhere to go. It sets up the evening and the audience must be taken along – and they have to understand it:

I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated  
To closeness and the bettering of my mind  
With that which, but by being so retired,  
O'er-prized all popular rate . . . (1.ii.89–92)

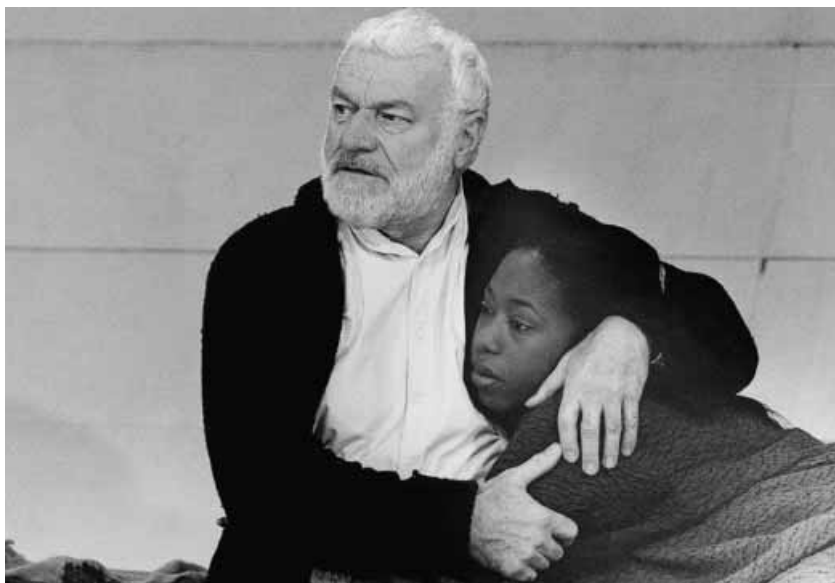
It might just as well be Hungarian; but it has a meaning, although it is tortured. I don't think anyone hearing that for the first time could understand it, but the audience will understand the anguish and the hurt from the actor.

Two things helped me. First, that I was taught to speak verse by John Barton in 1960: spinning off a caesura on to the next thought, end-stopping the line with a short beat; always flowing on. James MacDonald made it his mission to slow me down. 'Give it time', he would say, 'breathe into it.' 'I can't', I would say, 'it slows me down too much.' 'Give it time', he would insist. Eventually I trusted him and took my time and I truly think the audience went with me through every thought. The Barton rules are still in place, but now I dare to examine each thought before going on to the next – though the verse line has more pauses, and I suppose is more broken, than has been my custom.

The second lynch-pin was my daughter. So often work is spoiled by an actor, crucial to one's own performance, being inadequate – unable to speak the verse, or playing for laughs, or in some other way inappropriate. But this is not the case with Nikki Amuka-Bird, who is perfection. She's as scared, if not more so, than I am; and over the next few weeks we work so wonderfully together, and in the process establish a very recognizable father/daughter relationship (for all her black and my white) that we go agonizing, step by step, from incomprehension to a scene of pain, exposition, and revelation. I could never wish for more, nor thank her enough.

There is a flyer that was printed for our production before rehearsals began that seems to suggest that Prospero has no heart. I don't know who dreams up such rubbish. Where do they get it from?

I have done nothing but in care of thee,  
Of thee, my dear one, thee my daughter . . .  
(1.ii.16–17)



1 Philip Voss as Prospero with Nikki Amuka-Bird as Miranda, *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene ii: 'I have done nothing but in care of thee / Of thee, my dear one, thee my daughter.'

– the word *thee* occurring three times in the space of seven words;

. . . he, whom next thyself  
Of all the world I loved . . . (i.ii.68–9)

And to Ferdinand he says

. . . for I  
Have given you here a third of mine own life,  
Or that for which I live. (iv.i.2–4)

He adores her and, as he says, does everything for her.

Miranda and Ferdinand are at the centre of my performance of Prospero. Through them and their offspring I will accomplish my revenge over my brother. 'Heavens rain grace / On that which breeds between 'em' (iii.i.75–6). They have to fall in love, but it must be real and untouched by magic. Each scene has its own objective for Prospero, and there are four sections to the very long establishing scene of Act One, Scene Two. The overall objective is to bring Miranda and Ferdinand together in such a receptive condition that they will fall in love. The

second this is achieved successfully, my project is on course: 'It goes on, I see, / As my soul prompts it' (I.ii.420-1), followed swiftly by 'O you wonder' (I.ii.427). At first sight he has fallen in love.

My objective for the first quarter of the scene is to tell Miranda that she is a princess, but it has to be harder than that. I change it slightly for each performance, so that it becomes a variation of 'I want to release the suppressed horror of our expulsion to my daughter.' It couldn't be more cumbersome, but it produces the right state of anguish and hatred in me.

In the following part of the scene, with Ariel, I want him to bring Ferdinand to me in a highly emotive and aroused state. When he grumbles about wanting his freedom, I remind him of the torment I released him from and when he capitulates – which he does very easily – I send him off on his mission, dressed (invisibly) as a nymph. All Prospero's fantasies are female, the harpy and Ceres being the other two. It must have relevance to his nature.

The episode which follows is with the monster, Caliban. It took me a long time to decide on the objective. Why would he want to take his daughter to see someone she dislikes so much? 'Tis a villain, sir, / I do not love to look on' (I.ii.309-10); and, later, she is provoked into 'Abhorred slave, / Which any print of goodness wilt not take . . .' (I.ii.351-2). Unwillingly I decided that Prospero wanted just that – to remind her of the foulness of the attempted rape and so make her emotionally alive to the first sight of Ferdinand. Ariel, as nymph, lures Ferdinand to the stage, singing, first the seductive song which involves a reference to the strutting cock, Chanticleer; he then follows this up with the sorrowful dirge that reminds him that his father is drowned. Then enter Prospero with his daughter and, in my view, the worst lines Shakespeare ever wrote: 'The fringed curtains of thine eye advance / And say what thou seest yond' (I.ii.408-9). The conditions are well prepared for the two youngsters to fall in love, *for real*: 'O You Wonder'. My daughter's name derives from the Italian adjective *mirando*, meaning 'wondrous', and from the Latin *miror*, meaning 'to wonder' and 'to be astonished at': 'It works' (I.ii.495).

There are rages from Prospero in each section of this scene, but they are all different. The first, in the duologue with Miranda, is a release of twelve years' suppressed anger. The second, with Ariel, is much jokier and is designed to quell the rumblings of a mild rebellion and to get what he wants. The fury with Caliban is genuine. He is the one

element in the play that Prospero cannot control, and in our production I treat him quite brutally here, grabbing the inside of his mouth while I threaten him with physical pain. I use my staff on him and kick him – and then react to my failure and my own anger with self-disgust. The rage with Ferdinand is, of course, faked and produced only to make winning the prize of Miranda more difficult. It is a scene of comedy, though frequently I feel the audience taking me seriously – but, then, they’ve seen me go through several mood swings in the short time since they’ve met me, so I suppose it’s not surprising.

By the end of this long section of the play my plans are spot on course and I give Ariel a smile to thank him for his help. I have been introduced, before giving a talk about the play, as ‘the Prospero that smiled’. And not only do I smile; I also have a sense of fun. The part is full of irony – what Shakespeare character isn’t? – but the grandeur of most Prosperos tends to render them humourless. When I first read the play, knowing that I was going to play the part, the line that I loved most was ‘Come with a thought. I thank thee, Ariel, come’ (IV.i.164). That seemed to me to epitomize the best kind of relationship you can have with anybody: no need for speech; just think, and they know what you mean. In Ariel’s case he is only air, and small enough to loll about in a leaf or suck honey from a flower, so I imagine him just around my shoulder, communicating simply by thought – wonderful!

Very few lines were cut in our production, which means that Prospero is off after the big exposition scene (I.ii) for fifty minutes, including the interval – hence the ‘company show’. One huge benefit is that the lords’ scene (II.i) is given full value. So often it’s difficult to distinguish one person from another and I have seen a production with Alonso wearing a crown, just so that we shall know that he’s a king. I suspect that Gonzalo is frequently cut to shreds, but with us his vision of Utopia remains intact. One other revelatory ingredient that bound us all as a company was the use of a *cappella* music from start to finish. ‘The isle is full of noises’ (III.ii.136) is interpreted literally. The spirits, in soft black garb, are played by actors with remarkable voices, each in their own right. The music was composed by Orlando Gough and the sounds are interwoven on stage and off throughout the action. They create the magic.

I read several books on magic early on. It is an art that enters ‘through the ear’, and it certainly does with us. My broom handle – which, after a

week or so, begins to take on a life – should be a virgin staff of elder, one year old. But the real magic comes from the actors – and the designer.

The set is white, and designed on the theory of chaos. It rises to form a back wall upon which video images, many of them, may be played: sea for the storm, peacock feathers for Juno, a ring of fire for the breaking of the lords' trance, and so on. It falls in a slide to make a series of waves, or humps and troughs. Sometimes it looks like the sea, sometimes like a sheet of paper thrown across a desk. Ariel slides down it. Ferdinand, bemused, is lowered – as though through the sea – onto the shore below. We are dressed around the turn of the twentieth century, a period in which swords are still just about acceptable – for ceremonial occasions, anyway.

With about a fortnight to go my super-objective was still in flux. There was a short period of 'I want to be normal', but that is almost impossible to act. Eventually, and after a couple of walks around the field with the dog, I decided on 'I want to face up to the realities of life without the help of magic.' I don't know if I can make it clear how important these choices are to me: everything I do under the umbrella of the super-objective, or the objective of an individual scene, is affected by it. I want something, and I want it badly: so, for example, in Act Four I want to present my daughter and her future husband with the most wonderful betrothal gift ever, so I summon up Iris, Ceres and Juno, the best in the business for this sort of gift. Shakespeare, you see, never lets you down: he's in there before you, like Chekhov. Who does he give me? Ceres, who represents the fecundity of the cultivated earth (and remember I need grandchildren, sorely). Wheat and barley were sacred to her and she was known as the maternal fertility goddess. Juno is the goddess of light and of childbirth. They are summoned to the celebration by Iris, Juno's special messenger, a sister to the harpies, who could affect all the elements.

Our choreographer is Peter Darling, who worked on the film *Billy Elliot*, so, as an added bonus, James MacDonald had my daughter and her lover perform a joyous and exuberant dance with the help of magic shoes. My present, or my objective, couldn't have been more fulfilled. Then I remember that Caliban is coming to kill me. It is not the fact that I am in danger that makes me end the celebrations so abruptly, but the fact that for once, by enjoying the masque, I have lost control of events and *forgotten* the threat to my life. The course of action has gone

against the objective and caused an explosion inside myself, making me wreck the very thing I set out to achieve. I dismiss the spirits in anger, denounce the futility of all such achievements, and then, realizing my error, I apologize to Ferdinand. Within the ‘Our revels now are ended’ speech, I stress the ‘we’ in

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep (iv.i.156–8)

and the ‘our’ in the last part of the sentence. It makes it more personal and, along with the anger, prevents the speech from becoming just a rather beautiful piece of poetry.

My objective for Act Five was, for many weeks into performance, ‘I want to give up my magic’. But I didn’t. How could anyone want to give up anything so useful and handy? When I changed it to the super-objective then I could give the ‘Ye elves of hills . . .’ (v.i.33) speech the dynamic it needs. I begin by calling to them, softly. It personalizes them and stops it becoming a ‘set speech’.

I think what Prospero does is incredibly brave. He was never the best ruler in the world, retiring and library-bound. He achieves his magic powers through study, but unlike Faust he decides to let them go: letting go of his daughter, letting go of his need for revenge, letting go of Ariel (the best servant in the world), letting go of the island, and, biggest of all, letting go of his magical powers. When does he begin to let go? His answer to Ariel – who says that, if he were human, his feelings would become tender at the sight of the lords’ distress – is only three words: ‘And mine shall’ (v.i.20). Yet, within seconds, he is swearing to break his staff. My feeling is that he starts to let go the moment his enemies set foot on shore, but the real release can begin the minute Ferdinand sees Miranda, falls in love on sight, and addresses her with the phrase: ‘O you wonder.’

My all-important magic cloak is an extraordinary garment. Designed by Kandis Cook, it is based on an old Byzantine priest’s vestment, but made of a very loose-weave linen. The fabric has been stressed throughout and the weave pulled into holes into which have been pushed, and then stitched, soft velours and velvets in muted shades. It has sleeves and is more of a coat than a cloak, but reaching to, and slightly trailing on, the floor. The costume has been embroidered by a craftsman whose normal job is to emboss the clerical robes of the church. He



has decorated the entire garment in gold thread, with accepted magic symbols – trees, medallions, wands, and so on. It is extremely light, which means that I can wear it for longer and more frequently than many Prosperos. It looks as if it might be four hundred years' old and when dropped to the floor it seems to all but disappear.

My general look when being unmagical is of a man wearing his own clothes, clothes that have seen twelve years of wear and tear. So my trousers are frayed, the shirt torn, and I have a cardigan that is full of holes and loose threads. It absolutely fits with my idea of his appearance and seems logical. Only my beard is controlled and trim: it is the old owl.

For the moment when he says to Ariel 'I will discease me and myself present / As I was sometime Milan' (v.i.85–6), Kandis assembled an entire outfit – bow-tie, waistcoat, tail-coat, and overcoat in fake astrakhan. 'I'll never have time to get all that on', I said. 'We'll make time', she said, undaunted. And we do. While singing 'Where the bee sucks' Ariel helps me to dress and I am transformed into a Verdi-looking figure who could well have been the Duke of Milan twelve years since. 'Fetch me the Hat' (note the capital letter), I say to Ariel (v.i.84). And what a hat! – a specially made 1900s topper. The image is complete – well, after Ariel has adjusted the bow: it's not easy to tie a bow in public. I can't recall ever noting the transformation before, but it must always be done. Kandis has turned it into a real coup. I break my magic staff earlier than most Prosperos. I break it while Ariel is getting my ducal clothes, with the lords still coming out of their trance in front of me. When I am rigged out in my finery (I have changed the word 'rapier' (line 84) to 'finery' because in 1900 I would hardly have had a sword of any kind) I make particular use of the three 'So's' that the text provides (v.i.96): on the first I take the hat from Ariel and ask for his approval; on the second I give him my recently discarded magic coat; and on the third he receives the broken staff.

There is still some magic to perform and our thinking is that the relationship between Ariel and Prospero is so close that he performs these favours from love: 'Thy thoughts I cleave to' (iv.i.165) – the answer to my favourite line – and 'Do you love me, Master? No?' (iv.i.48). At the end of the play, when I do release him to the elements to be free, Ariel takes some little time to adjust to the idea that he can in fact go and does so with some reluctance, as if it takes him some time to get used to the idea.



2 Philip Voss as Prospero, *The Tempest*, Act v, Scene i:  
'As I was sometime Milan.'

The Epilogue I have often seen effectively played as a charm offensive on the audience, but I stay within Prospero for most of it: ‘My ending is despair’ (line 15). That is the way I see it: ‘Every third thought shall be my grave’ (v.i.312). By renouncing magic some say he gains inner freedom and becomes a wise old man. I think he renounces magic to face up to the awfulness of life. I don’t think he turns into a good ruler or becomes a much better human being. I don’t fully believe he forgives Antonio:

Since I have my Dukedom got  
And *pardoned* the deceiver . . .  
(Epilogue, lines 6–7; my italics)

He will still try to control. I think he takes Caliban back to Milan with him, poor beast. He can’t be pinched any more, but Prospero will try to come to terms with him – not as his own dark side, though that is there, but as a deformed human being. Maybe Prospero will get to hear the benefits of teaching him his language, so that ‘my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse’ (I.ii.363–4) will develop into sharing something as beautifully poetic as ‘The isle is full of noises’ (III.ii.136).

To return to the labels so assuredly put on this play: yes, Shakespeare knew about the North Virginia Trading Company; the Earl of Southampton, his patron, was a director of the company. He was probably aware of the William Strachey letter, which would give him the background to the island. I do think the play is an answer to Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus*. One of the most significant lines is the word ‘No’. It is the answer to Sebastian, who says ‘The devil speaks in him’ (v.i.129). In the Folio it is the whole line in itself; it neither finishes the line before, nor begins the next. Shakespeare does not do things like that without a reason.

King James loved masques and always joined in the dancing at the end. Ben Jonson was a master of these extravagances; on occasions several were performed in a month, while the number of Shakespeare’s plays presented at court diminished significantly; only three during one particular year. Was Shakespeare resentful? Did he want revenge? Does Shakespeare make Antonio usurp Prospero’s dukedom as Ben Jonson usurped his position at court? What does Shakespeare do? He writes a brilliant masque but breaks it at the point where the audience would normally get up to join in the dance and thus creates a highly dramatic moment. ‘Sod your masques!’ – but it is certainly integral to the action

and could never have been added later, as some claim. I wonder if by this time Shakespeare was in pain with some sort of rheumatism or repetitive stress syndrome: all the tortures in *The Tempest* relate to cramps and pinches and aches, and four years later he could hardly sign his name. As for laying down his pen – he didn't. The play is full of theatrical references: 'art', 'perform', 'the Globe', 'actors', everything is in there. As always, as with every writer (but he's the best), he mixes his ingredients so that it is theatrical, it is political, and, above all, it is human and thoroughly explored psychologically – as if he knew what that meant. Well of course he did. He wrote a play that explored the inner workings of a complex human being. It is a Wonder.