

Shakespeare's Prospero becomes Prospera

By Susannah Carson, December 25, 2010



The transformation of the bard's most majestic role in a new version of 'The Tempest' represents centuries of preparation. Helen Mirren's inhabiting a part traditionally acted by a man reflects a new social reality.

In Julie Taymor's film adaptation of "The Tempest," Shakespeare's most magical and majestic role — a role traditionally played by a man — is played by Helen Mirren. Prospero becomes Prospera.

There is nothing worse than novelty for the sake of novelty, but this transformation is not a gimmick: It says something about Shakespeare, and it says something about who we have become. It's a quick slip of the pen, changing that "o" to an "a", but it represents centuries of preparation.

The history of gender and performance goes back to the very beginning. Boys will be boys — and boys will be girls too. Women were not allowed to play female roles until the Restoration, decades after Shakespeare's death. More recently, Fiona Shaw took female stage prerogatives a step further by playing a male role: Richard II, the weak king who abdicated his throne. The fact that she was a woman allowed her to imbue the role with a certain kind of effeminacy. Mirren, as Prospera, is after a different effect: The fact that she is a woman allows her to infuse the role with a certain kind of strength.

Shakespeare's original Prospero is the exiled duke of Milan, who uses magic to rule over the remote island world, control the spirit Ariel and the creature Caliban, conjure the tempest of the title, bring his old enemies to shore, redress old wrongs and unite his daughter with the son of the king of Naples.

"The Tempest" is magical in its matter, and it is magical in another sense too. Generally regarded to be Shakespeare's last play, it is believed to be his farewell to the theater. Because we know so little of Shakespeare beyond his plays, "The Tempest" is made to do the extra work of metaphorical autobiography. According to tradition and wishful-thinking, Prospero, whose magic comes from his books, stands in for Shakespeare, whose magic is in his plays. The disgruntled slave Caliban says of Prospero: "I must obey: his art is of such pow'r." Similarly, we are moved to say that Shakespeare's "art is of such pow'r" because his plays, as Yale University professor Harold Bloom says, have influenced, and even invented, a great deal of our current modes of expression, thought and being.

If Shakespeare is the dead white male author, then Prospero is the classic white male protagonist. They wield an awesome, fearsome power that comes from being well read and eloquent; they struggle with issues of justice and the proper use of their own authority; they brood on a future without them in it — a future on which they would like to leave an indelible mark. These have traditionally been concerns of those in positions of authority, not those of subordinate cultures — and not of women.

Prospera reflects a new social reality that could only happen at this point in history, when we are in the happy position of being able to take much of the work of early feminists for granted. That new reality is this: The issues a strong woman faces at different times of her life are increasingly similar to the issues a strong man has always faced: power, legacy, justice, knowledge and authority.

In other words, many of the issues Shakespeare raises for his male characters, and many of the issues Shakespeare himself seems to have confronted, are now just as relevant and interesting to women. When Mirren takes up Prospero's books, she is not making a statement; she is simply speaking the lines of "The Tempest." Similarly, when she takes up his staff, she is simply stepping into a role that it now makes sense for her to fill. She is giving us — all of us, but especially women — just a little bit more of Shakespeare than we had before.

To some degree, it has always been possible for a woman to glean some truths of human nature — truths applicable to her own, specifically female human nature — from Shakespeare's male characters: Romeo, King Lear, Feste, perhaps Falstaff, and certainly Hamlet (less from Titus, and much less from Petruchio). Surely male readers have always been able to get something out of the heroines too, and not just because they were played by men and, in the comedies, frequently disguised as men. The heroines, again as Bloom notes, are often the superiors of their heroes in terms of intelligence, wit and generosity: Viola, Rosalind, Juliette, Cleopatra. They are creations who inspire imitation in their readers, regardless of gender.

We can now add Prospera to this list. In this role, Mirren achieves a greatness that does not depend on "unsexing" herself, in the tradition of Lady Macbeth, but on embracing everything it is that makes her a woman — she is herself, and that is enough.

In this way, "The Tempest" addresses the topic of gender in a manner that is thought-provoking, which is unforced, and which, one imagines, would earn Shakespeare's full consent. In the corpus, there are notoriously few roles for older women, whereas men get to look forward to the progression from Hamlet to Macbeth to Lear. Perhaps sometime in the near future it will make sense for women to play these roles as well.

Ian McKellen has written that Shakespeare has the wonderful ability to adapt to whatever concept of reality is in vogue. It would be nice to say that strong women are more than simply a fashion. Let us hope that, thanks to Taymor, Mirren and all the men and women who made Prospera possible, this new view of women will become a permanent part of our social reality.

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