The Art of Tale-Telling in William Shakespeare’s The Tempest

Abstract

The author draws attention to the fact that in William Shakespeare’s plays characters tell their stories and tales with varying degrees of credibility. In his paper he makes an attempt to reconstruct the actual circumstances of both the storm and shipwreck in The Tempest by analysing all the relevant accounts in the play. While investigating the reliability of the characters’ narratives, the author suggests that Ariel is a spirit whose report of the raised tempest and subsequent shipwreck is partly a trustworthy account and partly a fictitious and misleading tale, which is demonstrated in the course of comparing his words with the other characters’ assertions of what happened in the initial storm.

According to Plato, “there is one kind of poetry and tale-telling which works wholly through imitation, […] tragedy and comedy; and another which employs the recital of the poet himself” (qtd. in Pfister 2–3).1 Bearing this distinction in mind, Manfred Pfister draws a distinction between “dramatic texts” and “epic or narrative texts” by saying that the former ones “are consistently restricted to the representative mode, the poet [or a fictitious narrator] never allowing himself to speak directly” (3). Even though the critic does not define them as examples of the “epic communication structures,” Pfister notices the use of such narrative utterances in drama as messengers’ accounts and expository speeches which serve as means of transmitting information about past events “that determine the dramatic present” (83, 86). It is no surprise then that Shakespeare’s plays often have characters who share with others, indirectly also with the audience, their knowledge about what happened in the past: Egeon describes the circumstances of his arrival in Ephesus, while actually uttering “the story of [his] life” (Err. 1.1.31–95, 98–120, 124–139; cf. 5.1.346);2 Othello recalls frequently telling his “story” to Brabantio and his daughter (Oth. 1.3.129–146; cf. 1.3.159, 172); a mariner offers his “tale” of the off-the-scene naval battle between the English and French forces (E3 3.1.141–184) and Belarius reminds Guiderius and Arviragus of “tales [he has
told them] / Of courts, of princes; of the tricks in war” (Cym. 3.3.14–15) as well as he offers the “story” of his banishment from Cymbeline’s court (3.3.55–73). All these *tales* and *stories* seem to be reliable accounts of past events, since there is nothing in the texts of the plays to undermine their credibility.

However, Shakespeare occasionally makes his characters to recount tales in order to deceive other figures on the stage. For example, Iachimo attempts in vain to win Imogen by telling his slanderous “tale” about Posthumus (Cym. 1.7.56–155), whereas Tranio succeeds in convincing a “credulous” merchant to “trust [his] tale” and to play the role of Vincentio, Lucentio’s father (Shr. 4.2.68–122). This suggests that a character’s “tale” in Shakespeare’s plays may be a true relation of events which occurred in the past (*OED*, n.1, I, 4a, e) as well as a mere falsehood (*OED* I, 5a). Interestingly enough, in *The Tempest* both Prospero’s and Caliban’s accounts of what occurred in the past are called *tales* (Tem. 1.2.106, 140; 3.2.47, 81; 5.1.129)3 and *stories* (1.2.137, 307, 148; 5.1.117, 305, 313). Moreover, it should also be noted that the word “lie” (in various forms) to denote *not telling the truth* (*OED*, “lie,” v.2 1a; “lie,” n.1 1a, 2) occurs in this play 17 times, i.e. more often than in any other work in the canon. While taking into account that many characters offer their own versions of past events, while accusing others of lying (1.2.102, 257, 345; 2.1.67–68; 3.2.181–9, 24, 27–28, 43, 60, 73–75) as well as the fact that one can point to three quite obvious lies on the part of Ariel and Prospero in the play (1.2.397–403; 3.3.75–76; 5.1.147–148, 153), the reader/viewer of *The Tempest* is undoubtedly invited to investigate the reliability of the characters’ narratives by comparing one to another. My aim in this paper is to reconstruct the circumstances of the storm and shipwreck, while analysing all the relevant accounts in William Shakespeare’s play.

As soon as the staging of a storm in the first scene finishes, Miranda voices feelings of pity for those who, as she believes, have certainly died in the shipwreck (1.2.5–13, 15). At this point, her feelings are apparently the same as both the audience and the passengers of the rest of the royal fleet. According to Ariel, after having been dispersed, the ships “all have met again, / [...] / Bound sadly home for Naples, / Supposing that they saw the King’s ship wrecked / And his great person perish” (1.2.233, 235–237; cf. 5.1.316–317). In fact, as Prospero asserts, the vision of the ship being “Dashed to pieces” (1.2.8) was only “The direful spectacle of the wreck” (1.2.26), since he knows well that his invisible agent Ariel was supposed to raise the tempest without any harm to the passengers of the vessel (1.2.193–194). Having guaranteed his master about the safety of them (1.2.216–217), Ariel says that “In troops [he has] dispersed [all the shipwrecked people] ’bout the isle” (1.2.220), which proves true as soon as the spectators can see King Alonso and a part of his retinue (2.1; 3.3) as well as his servants Stephano and Trinculo (2.2; 3.2) wander across the island safe and sound until they meet together at the end of the play (5.1). Likewise, Ariel’s assertion that “The King’s
son [has he] landed by himself, / Whom [he] left cooling of the air with sighs, / In an odd angle of the isle, and sitting, / His arms in this sad knot” (1.2.221–224) mirrors Ferdinand’s own account of how he was guided by a musical “sweet air” across the sea and how he grieved for his allegedly dead father, while sitting on the beach (1.2.390–394). In addition, the spirit’s narrative about the physical condition of the ship’s crew is confirmed by the boatswain’s “We were dead of sleep / And – how we know not – all clapped under hatches” (5.1.230–231; cf. 1.2.230–232 and 5.1.98–101). All in all, Ariel’s report of the final condition of the shipwrecked lords and mariners seems highly credible.

The focus should now be on the first part of the spirit’s account. As Ariel delineates his presence on Alonso’s ship during the recent tempest, he points to the part of his spiritual substance – fire:

I boarded the King’s ship: now on the beak,
Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin
I flamed amazement. Sometime I’d divide
And burn in many places – on the topmast,
The yards and bowsprit would I flame distinctly,
Then meet and join. Jove’s lightning, the precursors
O’th’ dreadful thunderclaps, more momentary
And sight-outrunning were not; the fire and cracks
Of sulphurous roaring, the most mighty Neptune
Seem to besiege and make his bold waves tremble,
Yea, his dread trident shake. (1.2.196–206)

It is fairly easy to notice that Ariel’s wording echoes Miranda’s mention of “the fire” (1.2.5), even though the spirit’s “roaring” (1.2.204) seems to slightly differ from the boatswain’s “roarers” (1.1.17) in that the spirit appears to evoke a crack of thunder, whereas the mariner apparently means the sound of raging waves (Vaughan 167n17; cf. Lindley 93n15 and Kermode 5n16). Still, even though Ariel’s description refers primarily to his presence on the King’s ship as “Jove’s lightning” (1.2.201), at the same time it draws attention to the fact that the tempest may have been enacted not only by means of sound, but also visual effects.

Indeed, stage directions in 1.1.0.1 read “A tempestuous noise of thunder and lightning heard.” One might assume, as Andrew Gurr does, that these instructions “call only for thunder and crashing noises offstage, not for flashes of lightning” (95). Yet, it should be noted that critics generally agree that Ralph Crane, the scrivener to the King’s Men, “had some influence on the texts of certain plays in the First Folio of Shakespeare,” including The Tempest (Roberts 213). As John Jowett notices, “it is known that Crane did in fact interfere with stage directions. On occasion he omitted, reworded or added words and phrases” (109). While
commenting on the above-mentioned stage directions in Shakespeare’s play among others, Jeanne Addison Roberts argues that “the logical implication is that authorial stage directions were expanded by someone preparing the text for the printer” (216). This seems obvious especially in the light of the evidence that many words and phrases without any dramatic value have been apparently interpolated into the text of *The Tempest*, which suggests the interference of an editor, presumably the scrivener Ralph Crane, who wished to give the stage directions “some descriptive flavour for a reader” rather than indicate a possible staging of the play (Roberts 215–216). After all, as Jowett pointedly argues: “What will make Shakespeare’s authorship doubtful is new stage direction vocabulary which has no dramatic reference. Novelty without exactness, descriptive or non-dramatic novelty, will not be thought to characterize Shakespeare” (111).

In fact, the word “tempestuous” in the phrase: “A tempestuous noise of Thunder and Lightning heard” (1.1.0.1) was “new Shakespeare stage-direction vocabulary […] and makes an obvious but literary allusion to the title of the play” (Jowett 111) without offering any dramatic reference. Yet, one might still infer that the author applied the phrase “A […] noise of[…] heard” in order to indicate that the play was staged at a hall theatre such as the Blackfriars, where the technical aids to create a storm “were amounted to little more than offstage noises,” rather than at an amphitheatre such as the Globe, where “fireworks or rosin for lightning flashes” were also available (Gurr 95). One could ask then why Shakespeare changed the standard “Thunder” – which is purely a sound effect (Dessen, “thunder”) – into the superfluous “a noise of thunder heard” (2.2.0.2). As a matter of fact, the phrases *Thunder and Lightning* and *Thunder* were “the conventional stage language – or code – for the production of effects in or from the tiring house” (Thomson 11, 12). They were primarily sound cues and “as such [they] should be grouped with *flourish, alarum, sound, noise, trumpet*, and *music*” (Thomson 14). As far as the effects are concerned, “probably the thunder was usually produced by drums and the lightning by fireworks” (Thomson 14). The directions for such effects were popular with Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights who repeatedly employed them in their plays (Thomson 16), including Shakespeare who, with the exception of the two instances at *Tem*. 1.1.0.1 and 2.2.0.2, uses *Thunder and Lightning* and *Thunder* six and ten times, respectively. Hence, it seems reasonable to argue that the above discussed stage directions of *The Tempest* at 1.1.0.1 and 2.2.0.1 are probably nothing but the editor’s elaborated versions of the standard directions such as *Thunder and Lightning* and *Thunder* which were used by such an experienced playwright as Shakespeare to give laconic and practical directions for production of his plays (see Roberts 215 and Thomson 14).

Interestingly enough, there is further evidence to argue that *The Tempest*’s storm was really performed with the use of fireworks in order to create not only sound, but also light effects in the opening scene of the play. In his description of the tempest, Ariel mentions “the fire and cracks / Of sulphurous roaring” (1.2.203–
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204), which seems to imply the bad odour of detonated explosives containing sulphur. Jonathan Gil Harris notes that among the fireworks used in the early modern theatre were both rosin powder and squibs which, apart from producing the visual and acoustic effects, were the source of stink (465–466). In particular, squibs “became a virtual synonym for bad odour” since they “combined foul-smelling ingredients – sulphurous brimstone, coal, and saltpeter – that reeked all the more when detonated” (Harris 466). Therefore, it seems hardly a coincidence that, except for Ariel, also other characters of Shakespeare’s plays use “sulphurous” in the context of the stage directions for enacting a storm: the apparition of Sicilius Leonatus describes the descent of Jupiter “*in thunder and lightning*” at Cym. 5.4.92.1 by saying that “He came in thunder; his celestial breath / Was sulphurous to smell” (5.4.114–115) and King Lear invokes the “fretful elements” of the raging tempest *(Lear 3.1.4)*, while calling on “sulphurous and thought-executing fires, / Vaunt-couriers of oak-cleaving thunderbolts, / […] And thou, all-shaking thunder” *(Lear 3.2.4–6).* In addition, as Jonathan Gil Harris argues,

Squibs, perhaps in tandem with rosin powder, were almost certainly used at the beginning of *Macbeth* to produce the effect of its famous stage direction: “*Thunder and lightning*” (1.1 sd). The controlled detonation of fireworks would have helped to create not only the necessary sound and light effects for the opening scene, but also the poor air quality described in the three witches’ bizarre incantation, “Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.11). In its first performances, then, the play most likely started not just with a bang, but also a stink, which would have persisted through the first scene as the fireworks’ thick smoke wafted across the stage and into the audience. Even in the open-air Globe, the smell would have been strong; if the play was performed indoors at court for King James, the odor would have been stifling. (466)

It should be noted that as soon as the storm scene of *The Tempest* comes to an end, Miranda looks up and states that “The sky, it seems, would pour down stinking pitch / But that the sea, mounting to th’ welkin’s cheek, / Dashes the fire out” (1.2.3–5). As David Lindley explains this passage, “The blackness of the sky suggests that it will disgorge tarry pitch. […] except that the violence of the storm pushes waves up to the sky to douse the flames” (97n3–5; cf. Vaughan 171n3). Still, it should not escape our notice that Miranda’s vision of the storm clouds in the sky comes immediately after the enactment of the storm in 1.1. Apparently, she no longer hears a crack of thunder, nor does she see a flash of lightning since “the sea […] / Dashes the fire out” (1.2.4–5). The only thing she now seems to perceive as the remainder of the initial tempest is the black sky (1.2.3) and the stormy waters which she begs her father to allay (1.2.2). For this reason, we may conjecture that the dark clouds may be actually as black as pitch smoke hanging in the air after the detonation of the fireworks which, like those employed in the opening scene of *Macbeth*, were used to “produce the effect of […] [the] stage
direction: “Thunder and lightning” (Harris 466), and then left behind the inevi-
table stink of the detonated explosives containing sulphur (1.2.3; cf. 1.2.204). The
stage directions in 1.1 are therefore indicative of a probable use of fireworks to
perform both the visual and acoustic effects of the storm in the first scene of *The
Tempest* at least in its early performances, which seems to be implied by Ariel’s
description of his fiery presence on the King’s ship as well as Miranda’s vision of
the black sky after the initial tempest.

After depicting himself as a spirit of fire, Ariel describes the seeming influ-
ence of his flames on the ship’s passengers:

> Not a soul
> But felt a fever of the mad and played
> Some tricks of desperation. All but mariners
> Plunged in the foaming brine and quit the vessel;
> Then all afire with me, the King’s son Ferdinand,
> With hair up-staring (then like reeds, not hair),
> Was the first man that leapt, cried ‘Hell is empty,
> And all the devils are here’. (1.2.208–215)

As a matter of fact, Ariel makes here an attempt to persuade Prospero, but indi-
rectly also the audience, that it was he that drove the passengers off the ship into
the sea by frightening them with his fire. According to his report, Ferdinand was
the first who “Plunged in the foaming brine” because of being horrified by the
surrounding flames (1.2.211–215). Then, the rest of the nobles were set to do
the same. Unlike Prospero, the audience can, however, compare the spirit’s ac-
count with what was presented in the first scene of *The Tempest*. Even though the
lords and mariners may notice Ariel’s presence on the King’s vessel as flashes of
lightning in the storm, none of them abandons the ship, being threatened by the
destructive power of fire. Instead, all the passengers treat the stormy waters as the
only threat to their lives. Indeed, beginning with the boatswain who indicates that
the raging waves, “these roarers,” do not care for “the name of king” (1.1.16–17),
the characters repeatedly mention a possibility of drowning in the sea (1.1.28, 38,
43, 45, 51, 57, 63). Strangely enough, at least the ship’s crew seem to be aware of
the vicinity of land since the master instructs the boatswain: “Fall to’t yarely or
we run ourselves aground” (1.1.3–4), whereas the boatswain shouts to the mari-
ners: “Lay her a-hold, a-hold! Set her two courses *off to sea again!* Lay her off!”
(1.1.48–49), while “trying to keep the ship from crashing on the shore” (Vaughan
169n48–49; cf. Lindley 95n42). Yet, none of the mariners decides to save his life
by swimming to the shore. Most of the passengers seek help in prayers (1.1.50,
52), and eventually the scene finishes with the apparent splitting of the vessel
(1.1.60, 62), which is accompanied by the characters taking “leave of” the others
shortly before their expected death (1.1.61, 64).
As we already mentioned, Ariel’s fiery presence on Alonso’s ship, noticed by the other characters as flashes of lightning in the tempest, was seen by the audience perhaps as detonated fireworks. However, no matter whether the stage direction for “Thunder and Lightning” (1.1.0.1) at the beginning of the play was realized as offstage noises or both sound and light effects, that was a signal for a pre-Restoration audience “to expect the supernatural” (Thomson 14, 21). In other words, even a sound cue for thunder and lightning would give the spectators a hint that from the very beginning of the first scene of The Tempest it is a supernatural being who is responsible for having raised the storm rather than that being a natural phenomenon. As soon as the audience see Ariel in 1.2 as the creator of the tempest, it is perfectly clear for the spectators that the effects of “Thunder and Lightning” in 1.1. represents the spirit’s fiery presence in the vicinity of Alonso’s ship. Still, the audience do not notice any moment when the passengers of the vessel are horrified by the presence of Ariel as flashes of lightning. Thus, since no one can observe Ariel’s alleged influence on the passengers in the first scene which finishes with the splitting of the vessel, it is fairly unlikely that it is Ariel’s fiery substance which drives the nobles and some others off into the stormy waters. If the spirit made them abandon the ship by means of his fire, he would do so presumably before the ship began dashing to pieces – the moment when the passengers are willy-nilly bound to plunge “into the foaming brine” (1.2.211). What is more, if Ariel really did so, the shipwrecked people would relate a single story of the lords or others being threatened and then driven off the vessel by the surrounding flames. On the contrary, no survivor of the shipwreck mentions anything about the fire having such influence on the lords or other passengers of the vessel. Gonzalo comforts Alonso, saying that he has “cause / (So have we all) of joy, for our escape / Is much beyond our loss” (2.1.1–3). Then, Stephano assures Trinculo that he “escaped upon a butt of sack, which the sailors heaved o’erboard” (2.2.119–120), whereas his companion is said to have “Swum ashore […] like a duck” (2.2.125). The shipwrecked people use the word “escape” six times in the context of their survival (2.1.2; 2.2.58, 111, 117, 119, 124), but they all confirm that they escaped from a sinking vessel rather than being forced to do so by the surrounding flames. As a matter of fact, Stephano states that he “scape[d] drowning” (2.2.59; cf. 2.2.107–108, 110), which demonstrates that despite bolts of lightning in the storm only the raging waters were a potential danger for those on the King’s ship.

Furthermore, while assuring Prospero about the safety of the passengers, Ariel says: “Not a hair perished; / On their sustaining garments not a blemish, / But fresher than before” (1.2.217–219). As Naseeb Shaheen notices, “Shakespeare’s lines at 1.2.217–219 seem to be patterned on the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, whom Nebuchadnezzar cast into the fiery furnace. In each case, “not an heare of their head was burnt’ nor did their garments have any trace of fire” (741). In other words, while continuing his report about the people
surrounded by his fiery substance on the ship, Ariel appears to present himself as an angel who spares them of the consuming fire in the same manner as the angel sent by God to rescue Daniel’s three Hebrew companions cast into the fiery furnace (see *King James Bible*, Daniel 3.19–28). Interestingly, the spirit’s assertion that the lords’ garments are “fresher than before” (1.2.219) echoes Gonzalo’s severally reiterated statement that their “garments are now as fresh as when [they] put them on first in Africa, at the marriage of the King’s fair daughter Claribel to the King of Tunis” (2.1.70–72; cf. 2.1.97–99, 103–104, 106). However, whereas Ariel claims that there has been “not a blemish” on the lords’ garments due to the destructive power of his fire, Gonzalo asserts that their clothes “being, as they were, drenched in the sea, hold notwithstanding their freshness and gloss, being rather new-dyed than stained with salt water” (2.1.63–66). In fact, Ariel’s suggestion that the lords’ garments have not been damaged by his fire seems to be contradicted by Gonzalo’s assertion that they avoided the destructive power of “salt water” (2.1.66).

In addition, the spirit also claims that Ferdinand “Was the first man that leapt” off the King’s vessel. Yet, at the end of the play Alonso notices two important facts: (1) the lords “three hours since / Were wrecked upon this shore” (5.1.136–137) and (2) Ferdinand’s “eld’st acquaintance [with Miranda] cannot be three hours” (5.1.186). If Ferdinand had escaped the sinking ship as the first one, he would have presumably swum to the shore as the first one of the survivors,11 and then his acquaintance with Miranda may have been longer than three hours, which would have obviously refuted his father’s assertion. However, there is no reason to doubt Alonso’s statement, which seems to be another signal of Ariel’s untruthfulness.

In conclusion, the spirit’s account of the tempest and shipwreck appears to combine a truthful story with a fictitious and misleading tale. While capitalizing on Prospero’s apparent inability to verify the spirit’s reports, Ariel presents correctly the final condition of the shipwrecked people dispersed in different parts of the island, while offering a manipulated account of both his activities on the King’s vessel and their influence on the ship’s passengers. As a matter of fact, his fiery presence near Alonso’s ship amounted to nothing but the flashes of lightning in the storm, which perhaps may have been observed by the spectators as detonated fireworks in the first scene of *The Tempest*. Though, in spite of the spirit’s bolts of lightning in the tempest, it is the raging waves that the passengers of Alonso’s vessel see as the only threat to their lives. Moreover, none of them recounts a story of his being threatened or driven off the ship by the surrounding flames. On the contrary, all of them confirm that they escaped from the sinking vessel, while avoiding drowning in the sea. In addition, Gonzalo’s assertion about the lords’ garments being “as fresh as when [they] put them […] at the marriage of […] Claribel” (2.1.70–72) instead of being “stained with salt water” (2.1.66) contradicts Ariel’s statement that he spared the passengers and their clothes of the consuming fire in the manner of the angel sent by God to rescue Daniel’s three
companions cast in the fiery furnace. Finally, the spirit’s claim that Ferdinand was the first lord who abandoned the ship appears to be refuted by his father’s account of the shipwreck. Thus, the reader/viewer of the play seems to be invited to compare Ariel’s words with the accounts of the others, and by implication notice a number of signals that the seemingly benevolent spirit should not be completely trusted.

Notes

1  Except for stage directions, each occurrence of emphasis in the quotations is mine.
2  This paper employs only the abbreviations of the titles of Shakespeare’s works as adopted in the New Cambridge Shakespeare editions. All references to Shakespeare’s works, unless quoted, are from John Bartlett’s concordance. Since it does not contain references to the stage directions in William Shakespeare’s plays, I quote them from particular editions of the plays.
3  From now onward, unless otherwise noted, all quotations and references are from the third Arden Shakespeare’s edition of The Tempest.
4  For the identification of Ariel as a spirit of air and fire, see Siddall 80.
5  Leslie Thomson states that “Of the more than 500 plays written between 1580 and 1642, thirty-eight have stages directions for thunder and lightning, often repeatedly, and twenty-nine have directions for thunder alone – some are the same plays, making the total about fifty” (16). Certainly, the stage directions may have been included in the texts of the plays either by the authors themselves, or bookkeepers annotating the texts for performance (Thomson 14).
6  Shakespeare uses Thunder and Lightning at Cym. 5.3.156.1; 2H6 1.4.40.1; JC 1.3.0.1, 2.2.0.1; Mac. 1.1.0.1; Tem. 3.3.52.1.
7  The directions for Thunder alone can be found at 1H6 5.2.25.1; JC 1.3.100.1, 2.1.333.1; Mac. 1.3.0.1, 3.5.0.1, 4.1.0.1, 4.1.67.1, 4.1.75.1, 4.1.85.1; Tem. 3.3.82.1.
8  The tempest in King Lear is prompted by the stage directions at 2.2.472, 3.1.0.1, 3.2.0.1, 3.4.3, 61 and 158 (only in the First Folio). For the use of the adjective “sulphurous” to evoke the god-like nature of a lightning or the image of a storm without explicit stage directions to enact a tempest, see MM 2.2.111–118 and Per. 3.1.4–6. Cf. Ham. 1.5.2–4.
9  According to Ariel, the mariners were “all under hatches stowed” and “left asleep” (1.2.230, 232; cf. 5.1.230–231), which probably occurred shortly after they “gave split,” i.e. cried that the vessel was splitting (5.1.223; cf. 1.1.60, 62). In contrast, all the rest of the passengers abandoned the ship.
10  Being drunk, Stephano offers another version of the story of his survival at
3.2.12–14, but he still perceives the stormy waters as the only threat to his life, though he assures that “the sea cannot drown” him (3.2.12).

11 Cf. Francisco’s narrative of Ferdinand swimming to the shore at 2.1.114–123. The courtier’s description “may derive from Virgil’s report of serpents ‘breasting the sea’” (Vaughan 213n115–22), and, by implication, be only a means of comforting Alonso, instead of being a factual account of the events.

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