

Shakespeare's Names in *The Tempest*: What Do They Mean?

by

willy@enzor.com

If we look at the meaning of the character names in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* we see why Shakespeare chose the names he did. Although some of these names might not be intentional, others definitely are. It's interesting to find out what Shakespeare meant, and sometimes what he didn't know he meant. The meanings of the character names will be listed in alphabetical order in this essay. In his play *The Tempest* Shakespeare gives his some of characters names that give us clues to who they are.

The name Adrian, for example, means "black, dark" or of the Adriatic, Adria, or the Adriatic Sea region. Before the play takes place, Adrian sails with the other nobles from Naples to a wedding in Tunis. On the way back to Naples, the nobles are shipwrecked on a mysterious island where the play takes place. Although this route does not go through the area we now call the Adriatic Sea, he does sail near the Adriatic Sea.

Alonso's name comes from several languages. It comes from a Teutonic word meaning "eager for war," a German word meaning "noble ready." and a Spanish word meaning "eager for battle." The Teutonic and Spanish meanings of Alonso's name reflect his personality. For example, Alonso draws his sword immediately with all the other nobles when he sees Ariel (Act III, Scene III). Another example is when Prospero calls Alonso "an enemy /To me inveterate" (Act I, Scene II). The German meaning of Alonso's name is a bit ironic, because even though he is a noble, he is not ready in Act II, Scene I, when Sebastian tries to assassinate him!

Antonio's name means "beyond praise". This is ironic because Antonio is a villain. In fact, Prospero says:

My brother, and thy uncle, call'd Antonio-
I pray thee, mark me, - that a brother should
Be so perfidious! (Act I, Scene II)

Ariel's name means "lion of God." In many ways, Ariel is like a lion. He prowls around and spies on people. Ariel also is mighty and fierce like a lion. For example, he says to the nobles

"You fools! I and my fellows
Are ministers of fate; the elements,
Of whom your swords are temper'd, may as well wound loud winds...
...as diminish
One dowle that's in my plume; (Act III, Scene III).

Ariel could also be a play on words, since Ariel is made of air.

Caliban's name is said to be an anagram on can[n]ibal. This makes sense because Caliban is wild and evil. The word cannibal comes from the name of a tribe in the West Indies. Many scholars believe that *The Tempest* is a metaphor about exploration in the New World. Caliban's island was taken from him like the Americas were taken away from the Native Americans. Caliban might also come from the Romany word "*Cauliban*" meaning black. This makes sense since Caliban is a character who is associated with darkness in *The Tempest*. The darkness of Caliban contrasts with the innocence of Miranda.

Ferdinand's name comes from the name Ferdinando, which comes from a Germanic name, composed of "*fardi*" meaning journey and "*nand*" meaning daring or brave. Although Ferdinand does not go on a brave journey in the play, he heroically escapes drowning. Ferdinand is also a handsome prince who falls in love with a beautiful maiden (Miranda). In other stories, princes like Ferdinand go on brave and daring journeys.

Francisco's name is derived from Franciscus. This name was first given to St. Francis of Assisi, who was going to be named Giovanni, but was nicknamed Francesco by his father, who admired the

French. This name does not appear intentional; but we will never know what Shakespeare was thinking when he wrote this play.

Gonzalo's name comes from Gundisalvus, which is Latin for a Germanic name which comes from "*gund*" meaning war, and "*salv*" a word whose meaning is unknown. Although Gonzalo is not warlike, he does get on the other nobles nerves. For instance, when Gonzalo says how fortunate everyone is to survive the shipwreck, Alonso says "Pr'ythee, Peace" (Act II, Scene I). Gonzalo's name could be an example of verbal irony, since Gonzalo is also a very peaceful man. For instance, when Gonzalo is talking about how his colony would be run, he says

All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavor: treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun"(Act II, Scene I).

Miranda is derived from the Latin "*Mirandus*" meaning "admirable, wonderful." Shakespeare made up this name. He wants to emphasize Miranda's innocence. Miranda is the most moral character because she does not vow revenge like Prospero, or draw her sword on someone that means no harm like Ferdinand (Act I, Scene II), or play nasty tricks like Ariel. Although Miranda does hate Caliban, he deserves it for trying to "violate the honor" of Miranda!

Prospero's name is a variant of Prosper, which comes from "*Pro Spe*" meaning "for, as good as, as a reward for, according to." The second meaning "as good as" reflects how Prospero tells Ferdinand to be as good as he needs to be for his new marriage (Act IV, Scene I). The third meaning "as a reward for" reflects how Prospero has promised to free Ariel as a reward for his service. The fourth meaning "according to" reflects how Prospero wants to pay back the nobles **according to** what they have done, and acts **according to** his desire to bring the nobles to repentance. Prospero could also be based on the

word "Prosperity." Prospero puts on a masque for Ferdinand and Miranda's wedding. In the masque, Juno sings:

Honor, riches, marriage-blessing,
Long countenance and increasing,
Hourly joys be still upon you! (Act IV, Scene I)

Juno's song clearly reflects a theme of prosperity. Though Prospero is stranded on an island, he lives somewhat prosperously. Gonzalo, "a noble Neapolitan" provided Prospero with many fine things, and Prospero calls his cell his court (Act V, Scene I).

Stephano's name means "crown; wealth." It is also a variant of Stephan. Even though Stephano is a drunken butler, Caliban says to Stephano: "I'll kiss thy foot: I'll swear myself thy subject." (Act II, Scene II). Caliban was so drunk; he thought Stephano was a god!

It's amazing how much we can learn about Shakespeare's play by exploring the meanings of character names! Shakespeare's plays are not just plays; they have hidden meanings. Many other authors have given their characters names with special meanings. Can you think of any characters in other stories that have special names?

Works Cited

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