

Storm over *The Tempest*

Stephanie Hopkins Hughes

Roger Stritmatter and Lynne Kositsky: *On the Date, Sources and Design of Shakespeare's The Tempest* (MacFarland and Company, 2013)

This is a terrific book, one that every Oxfordian will want on the shelf next to Richard Roe's 2011 *The Shakespeare Guide to Italy*. Indeed, everyone who has an interest in Shakespeare and his works should buy it, if only because it sheds new light on one of his greatest plays. Roger Stritmatter, an academic with decades of experience in Shakespeare studies, and Lynne Kositsky, a Canadian novelist with a string of awards, spent years researching the play and its provenance. Awakening to its obvious connection with the Spanish *Decades* of Peter Martyr, published in English translation by Richard Eden in 1555, it struck them how unlikely it was that it wasn't until 1611, the date that has stuck to *The Tempest* like a barnacle to an old ship, that Shakespeare got around to writing a play based on Eden's translation.

Orthodox Shakespeare studies is loaded with these barnacles. One such encrustacean, Shakespeare's supposed ignorance of Italy, has been removed with the publication in 2011 of Roe's evidence that in every instance, Shakespeare knew what he was talking about when he described Italy. Now Stritmatter and Kositsky have removed another.

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Will the Academy take note? Probably not, and certainly not officially. Whenever stymied by some glimpse of sixteenth or seventeenth-century reality they generally retreat into public silence, pelting each other with denials couched in turgid Fieldspeak. Following the publication of their original article on *The Tempest* in the fall 2007 *Review of English Studies*, Stritmatter and Kositsky were first accepted, then rudely denied time, to speak at not one but two academic

conferences. This tells us more about the anxieties of orthodoxy than anything said in writing. Evidence of the impact the Stritmatter-Kositsky theory has had are the replies to their *RES* article in academic books and journals. These all, implicitly or explicitly, demonstrate how important and necessary the 1611 date is. Stritmatter and Kositsky deal with these issues in the latter half of their book, knocking them down one by one like round-bottomed ninepins on a slippery slope.

The Strachey Letter

Most readers will know that the dating issue hinges on a document known as the Strachey letter, published in 1625 but supposedly first written in 1610. This private letter gives a detailed account of the 1609 shipwreck of the *Sea Venture* off the coast of Bermuda. The vessel carried recruits for the Jamestown colony established two years earlier. Shakespeare “must have known” the letter, according to the traditional account, because the play performed at Court in 1611 appears to follow it so closely.

Background

After surviving the 1609 storm that destroyed the *Sea Venture*, William Strachey wrote a long letter about the voyage, including his subsequent arrival in Jamestown, addressed to a woman referred to only as “Noble Lady.” She may have been Dame Sara Smith, married to Sir Thomas Smith of the Virginia Company, investors in the enterprise.

But, actually, no, it doesn’t. As Stritmatter and Kositsky make clear with a series of convincing comparisons, if there is any following taking place, it’s more likely that the 1625 version of the Strachey letter followed the play, not the other way around. What the play actually follows is the 1555 Richard Eden translation of Peter Martyr’s *Decades*.

In fact, what seems to have happened is that sometime before 1603 the play was written, based primarily on Eden but including any number of other shipwrecks from literature; then came the hurricane in 1609 that caused the well-publicized shipwreck off the coast of Bermuda; then came the decision on the part of the King’s Men to take advantage of the excitement this caused by mounting another production of *The Tempest* in 1611, the first to be recorded. Then, 200 years later, came the scholars seeking evidence.

Finding the Bermuda shipwreck in history, and the account of it in Strachey’s letter, supposedly from 1610, as published in a book by Samuel Purchase in 1625, the academics were sold. That’s all the further dating interest they took—and still do. But by exploring matters a great deal further, Stritmatter and Kositsky effectively eliminate the Strachey letter scaffolding, and down comes the traditional date.

Why should preserving 1611 as the earliest possible date or *terminus a quo* be so important to the conventional scholars and the Birthplace Trust? First, intellectual inertia. It's part of the creed. A close second is that revising it threatens their number-one reason for dismissing the Earl of Oxford, d. 1604, as author of the canon. Who has not heard, "Oxford can't be Shakespeare because some of the plays were written after he died"? The weasel-word *some* being the standard fudge for *The Tempest* alone. We have no means of establishing a *terminus a quo* for the handful of other late plays like *King Lear* or *The Winter's Tale*. Elsewhere in this issue of *The Oxfordian* Ramon Jiménez makes a strong case for *Lear's* much earlier composition. Until now, with *The Tempest* scholars at least had the sweet security of the Strachey letter and the 1609 Bermuda shipwreck.

Oddly, Stritmatter and Kositsky make little of this, mentioning the Authorship Question only in the final chapter, and then only as the reason why it has been so difficult to get heard and published. Their thesis deals solely with the sources Shakespeare used in creating the play and the fullest possible evidence—given the narrow limits allowed by disregarding its authorship—for when it was performed.

While setting the politically disruptive authorship issue aside is a wise move for scholars like Stritmatter, Kositsky, Roe, Egan, Showerman and Price, who have chosen to fight for recognition within the academic framework, it can limit the extent, not of their inquiry, but of their published exegesis. Forced to remain within the dating boundaries imposed by the Stratford biography as required for consideration by academic critics, Stritmatter and Kositsky are forced to explain the play solely in terms of its purpose. They leave aside any possible reflection of its author's personal viewpoint or satirizing of persons and events at Court: Shakespeare of Stratford famously had no personal viewpoint, and all previous efforts to match persons at James's Court to characters in the play have failed.

A Shrovetide Entertainment?

This leads to what I see as the book's only serious weakness, the attempt by the authors to portray the play as a Shrovetide entertainment. Not that this matters greatly, because their thesis, that the play was written well before the orthodox *terminus* of 1610-11, is not particularly affected by its original purpose. Nevertheless, efforts to prove this hypothesis extend over three full chapters, following which they then refer to the play's Shrovetide origins as a fact. When a weak hypothesis is connected to a strong central thesis, mistrust of the hypothesis can cast a shadow over the entire work, which in this case would be most unfortunate. It's hard to understand why the authors would include what is essentially a side issue, and one that can't be proven within the rubrics they have chosen.

Stritmatter and Kositsky first published on this issue in *The Oxfordian* 2007. "The Spanish Maze and the date of *The Tempest*" offered evidence that the play performed for the Court on "Shrovetide" in 1605, titled by the scribe who

kept the records *Tragedy of the Spanish Maze*, was in fact (as had been suggested earlier by authorship scholar Richard Malim) *The Tempest*. It must be this 1604 performance that caused them to decide that the play was not staged merely as a Shrovetide entertainment, but that it had been originally conceived as such.

Terming it “a liturgical drama,” Stritmatter and Kositsky claim that in its function as a moment of license preceding Lent it had a unique part to play in the cycle of religious ritual, and that the theme of the maze, repeated through the play, points to Shrovetide. But in fact it is far from unique, neither in Shakespeare or in the general run of plays from ancient times on, nor does anything in the play point directly to Shrovetide as opposed to any one of at least six other moments in the year where it would be equally appropriate; nor can plays created for these moments of license be seen as in any way a function of Church liturgy. Quite the opposite, in fact, since plays of this sort were grown from stock deeply rooted in pagan ritual, something that the Church, Protestant even more fiercely than Catholic, was obviously determined to eradicate.

Festal Plays

All of Shakespeare’s so-called comedies and some of his dramas work as festal plays. Their purpose is to replace the wild license of the old “mumming and disguisings” with staged versions. In addition to *The Tempest*, the most obvious are *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, which despite its

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title openly admits to a May Day performance; *As You Like It*, where the love poems pinned on trees suggest a prehistoric mating ritual whose name and significance are lost (the Church was especially eager to rid the world of these); *Much Ado about Nothing* and *A Winter’s Tale*, which both end with revels. In *Much Ado* and *Winter’s Tale* the resurrection of a pure and innocent female suggests the Assumption of the Virgin. Performed in August, when her ritual takes place every year in Catholic communities, these plays would have been particularly meaningful to the believers who no longer dared to attend Mass.

Nor is *The Tempest* unusual as a feature of a period of license preceding a religious ritual. From pagan times through the centuries of Church dominance, solemn moments of worship were frequently prefaced with a period of license, as witness All Soul’s Day on December first, preceded by all Hallow’s Eve, now Halloween, where the ancient mummers parade remains in the form of childrens’ trick-or-treating, or the Feast of St. John on Midsummer’s Day, the 24th of June,

preceded by the sexual hijinks of Midsummer's Eve, as portrayed in Shakespeare's great play. While Shrovetide, or Carnival, is still in many Catholic countries the biggest festal blowout of the year, prelude to the forty days of Lent preceding the longest and most important religious celebration of the year, Easter week, it is only one of several such moments, and its roots go deep into the most ancient of such festivities, the Roman Saturnalia and before it, the Greek Dionysia, when the Greeks performed their tragedies, followed by the satyr play, the oldest form we know of plays like *The Tempest*. The name Shrovetide may be Christian in tone, but it's the only thing about this moment that is.

All of Shakespeare's plays but the histories and tragedies can be seen as plays of this sort: *Much Ado about Nothing* with the revels in the last act; *Twelfth Night* with its battle between the revelers and the puritanical Malvolio; *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with its mating rituals, more relevant to a May Day celebration (despite its title); *A Winter's Tale* with its last act at the fair; *As You Like It* with its mating ritual of pinning love notes to trees; and *The Tempest* with the rituals as described by Stritmatter and Kositsky. There's far more of pagan revelry in all of these than anything Christian, unless satirizing religion counts as religion, for the psychological purpose of these moment of license was to allow the folk a time to blow off steam, to behave the opposite of how they normally were supposed to behave, releasing energies that, if not allowed some form of release, might build

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until they burst out in rebellion.

On the practical side, Shrovetide can also be seen as an excuse to consume whatever meats, sweets and treats remained from the Christmas holidays, banished for the next 40 days, as suggested by the continental term for the holiday, *Carneval*: *carne* meaning meat in Latin, *eval* derived from *vale*, Latin for *farewell*;

thus, "farewell to meat." In stone age times, in northern Europe, the lenten fast came at a convenient time, in late winter/early spring when staples stored from the previous fall harvest were beginning to give out, and fresh produce had not yet begun to appear. Easter has always worn, under its religious garments, the ancient rags of an agrarian people's joy at the appearance of much needed new life in the fields, forests and barnyards.

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and City officials over how parishioners should be spending their free time, a battle that had erupted with the building of the first public theaters in 1576, and that would continue without letup, decade after decade, until 1642 when the puritans finally succeeded in eliminating the Theater altogether.

An Important Book

As for the theme of the maze or labyrinth, which Stritmatter and Kositsky have traced throughout the play, it's much less likely that this reflects a spring ritual than one based on the fall harvest. The maze was a pagan tradition, the labyrinth an echo of the trap Theseus laid for the Minotaur. Throughout the middle ages and well into the Renaissance, country folk at harvest time would create a maze out of a field of unharvest corn grown high enough to hide in, threshing out narrow swaths in a pattern that would lead the folk in any one of a variety of twists and turns. Later the builders of great country houses created permanent mazes by planting thick-growing hedges of yew or boxwood in patterns that, after many years, reached well above the heads of participants. Though performed at Shrovetide for King James in 1605, the 1611 performance took place late in the year, on Hallowmas, at Whitehall Palace, where its acres of gardens would surely have included an elaborate maze.

However interesting, none of this in any way diminishes the importance of this book or its primary objective, to reset the timing of *The Tempest*. Whatever else there is to be said on this subject, the most important facts regarding *The Tempest* dates are established and in print, yet another crack in the citadel that is the Stratford monolith. Hopefully at some point there will be a hardback edition. Meanwhile the paperback, published by MacFarland, is well-designed and a pleasure to read.

The Oxfordian

Submission Guidelines

Deadline: July 31 2014

Up to 10,000 words, negotiable

MLA reference style

Heads and Sub-heads Calibri 12 pt bold

Body Text Times Roman 12 pt, Single Space

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