

# MAGIC SEA-SOUNDS MAKE HIS WORKS BEWITCHING

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Throughout the work of Shakespeare we are never, much further from the sound of that sea-music than is the heart of the little island itself. We may wander through his enchanted woodlands, thinking that all we hear is the sigh of the leaves; and suddenly, through an arch of green boughs and ferns, as through some exquisite magic casement, we catch a glimpse of the moonlit foam. What an exquisite glimpse is that which Oberon and Titania give us, for instance, in the very heart of "A Midsummer Night's Dream":

Oberon—I do but beg a little changeling boy To be my henchman.  
Titania—Give your heart as rest:  
The fairy land buys not the child of me. His mother was a votaress of my order; And, in the spiced Indian air, by night Full often hath she gossip'd by my side, And sat with me on Neptune's yellow sands, Marking the embarked traders on the flood, When we have laugh'd to see the sails conceiv'd  
And grow big bellied with the wanton wind; Which she, with pretty and with swimming gait Following—her womb then rich with my young squire— Would imitate, and sail upon the land, To fetch me trifles, and return again, As from a voyage, rich with merchandise.  
Indeed, the whole magic of the play is drawn from that perilous foam; and, if one required a philosophical justification for such magic, one would only have to point through the vistas of the forest to that infinite mystery of the sea, where Oberon, sitting on a promontory, heard the sea maid's music.

"Thou rememberest," he says to Puck, "once and twice," and Puck replies, "I remember":  
"That very time I saw," says Oberon, "but thou couldst not.  
Flying between the cold moon and the earth, Cupid all arm'd; a certain aim he took At a fair vestal throned by the West, And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow, As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts;

the full tempest of those things that war against the soul, as he did in the four supreme tragedies. In these can we not describe Shakespeare himself, wandering through the darkness of that universal sea in quest of some one steadfast thing, as Dante wandered through Hell and Purgatory and Heaven in quest of Beatrice? This is what distinguishes his work from that of all other Elizabethan dramatists—the burning passion, the devouring passion, that he had in a world of lies and shams, for the steadfast and unshaken harmonies of the Eternal. Is it not this great struggle that raises to the sublimest heights of tragedy the pitiful story of Othello? It is not by a mere accident that Shakespeare, at the moment when Iago's poison runs riot in the veins of the Moor, sets the wild elements of that uncertain sea raging around them, and through them, and makes Iago their prophet. At the very moment when Othello, hot for the owl and certainty left to him, utters that awful and almost smothered cry for vengeance:

O blood, blood, blood.

Iago whispers to him, "Patience, I say; your mind, perhaps, may change." And then the storm rolls in like thunder:

Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic sea, Whose icy current and compulsive course Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on To the Propontic and the Hellespont, Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace, Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love. Till that a capable and wide revenge Swallow them up. Now by yond marble heaven, In the due reverence of a sacred vow, I here engage my words.  
Iago—Do not rise yet.

Witness, you ever-burning lights above, You elements that clip us round about,— Witness that here Iago doth give up The execution of his wit, hands, heart, To wrong'd Othello's service!

In "Macbeth" Shakespeare ventures to



Annie Russell as Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream Act II, Scene II. — I'll put a girdle round about the earth In forty minutes



Imogen Painted by Louise Starr

must know the worst. It is impossible to return; he must plunge further into that sea of blood. Once more he cries to those secret black and midnight hags:

I conjure you, by that which you profess,— Howe'er you come, know it, answer me!— Though you untie the winds and let them fight Against the churches; though the yeast waves Confound and swallow navigation up; Though bladed corn be lodged, and trees blown down; Though castles topple on their warders' heads; Though palaces and pyramids do slope Their heads to their foundation; though the treasure Of nature's germes tumble all together, Even till destruction sicken,—answer me To what I ask you.

And the very truth that thunders in his ears deceives him. Never shall he be vanquished till the forests of the earth shall come against him; till Birnam Wood shall come to Dunsinane. The forests at least are anchored in their place; and for a while he is able to find some certainty in that. Yet, like as the waves make toward the pebbled shore, so do his minutes hasten to their end. There is nothing serious left in mortality. And with what a solemn music does Shakespeare usher in that last note of the angry sea:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, To the last syllable of recorded time, And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow. A poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.

[Enter a messenger.] Thou comest to use thy tongue; thy story quickly.  
Mess.—As I did stand my watch upon the hill, I looked towards Birnam, and anon, methought, The wood began to move.

The power of that tremendous dramatic moment can never be fully realized on

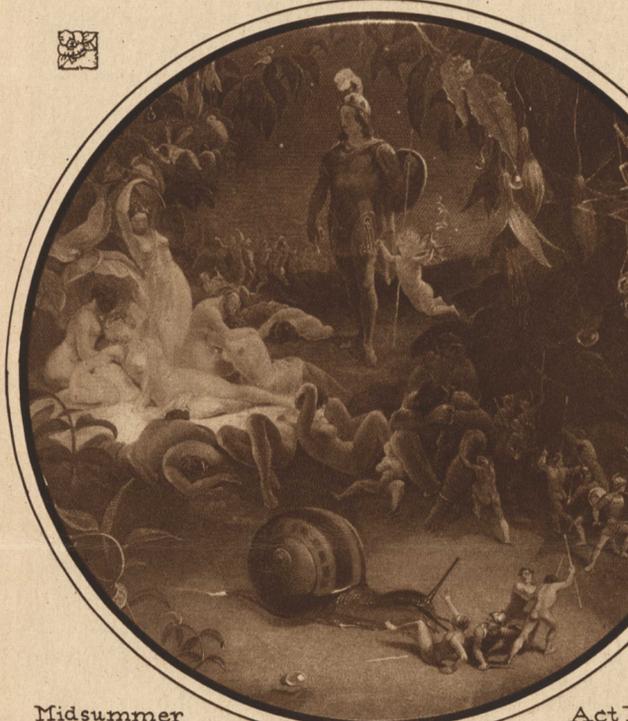
man pause for the infirmity of his age; but I prefer to find the last word of the play in its last moments—the epilogue—where the old man himself asks for pardon in lines that have a peculiarly moving undertone, as if they were, indeed, the farewell of Shakespeare:

Gentle breath of yours my sails Must fill, or else my project fails,— Which was to please. Now I want Spirits to enforce, art to enchant, And my ending is despair, Unless I be relieved by prayer, Which pierces so that it assaults Mercy itself and frees all faults.

Those are the last words, perhaps, of Shakespeare to the world. But the essence of the play is concentrated in one lyric, an air so bewitching that we can well believe it to have been overheard in Faerie:

Come unto these yellow sands And there take hands, Curs'd be he that ever after, The wild waves whist, Foot it feathery here and there, And sweet sprites the burthen bear. . . .

No lyric of the sea can be compared with it for the sheer magic of color and sound that are compressed into its short lines. It has all the lucid lights and shadows of the world below the sea, and a spell beyond that, a haunting suggestion that we are at the back of things, watching the changes in the crucible of the universe, watching the secret of the annual resurrection of the Spring, the transformation of dust into flowers, of fishes into birds, of apes into men, of men into angels, in the twinkling of an eye, at the turning of a tide, like a change from the minor to the major key in a solemn music. Here, though we cannot seize it and hold it, is something abiding in the universal ebb and flow of things. And the miraculous part of the stanza with which I shall end is that Shakespeare conveys all this by hardly more than the note of a bell—the stop at



Midsummer Night's Dream Act V, Scene I. Oberon and Puck find Titania asleep Photo by Byron

But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft Quenched in the chaste beams of the watery moon, And the imperial votaress passed on In maiden meditation, fancy free. Yet marked I where the bolt of Cupid fell; It fell upon a little western flower, Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound, And maidens call it love-in-idleness. Fetch me that flower; the herb I showed thee once: The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid Will make or man or woman madly dote Upon the next live creature that it sees. Fetch me this herb; and be thou here again Ere the leviathan can swim a league."

"I'll put a girdle round about the earth In forty minutes," cried Puck; and well he might, in the power of that wizardry. For surely, though it has scarce even been noticed by the critics, it is one of the most exquisite touches of the Master-poet's art that has girdled his magic flower with this fairy ring of seashine. The wand of Merlin himself could hardly have worked so potent a spell, or evoked so marvelous a vision as that ring of white fire, from the mermaid singing on the dolphin's back to the mysterious shadow of leviathan vanishing away into the darkness of the sea.

This magic casement opening through an arch of leaves in the forest gives us one more brief glimpse of the boundless sea-world beyond at the moment when Oberon decides to break the spell that he had cast upon the mortals in the power of that sea-drawn magic:

But we are spirits of another sort. I, with the morning's love have oft made sport And, like a forester, the groves may tread, Even till the eastern gate, all fiery-red, Opening on Neptune with fair blessed beams, Turns into yellow gold his salt green streams.

Incidentally one may remark that this is one of the very few instances in Elizabethan poetry of a feeling for the natural beauty of the sea, or of its treatment with so rich a sense of color. There in that sea is the infinite treasure house of his power; and there is the horizon that surrounds the dreams, the fairy tales, of our brief night with mystery and closes them in peace.

It is with something of the same visionary power that in the fourth scene of "Richard III." Shakespeare suddenly opens a magic casement in the solid walls of the world and bids us gaze into the mysteries of the sea, as into some wizard's crystal. It is one of the most wonderful sea pictures in the whole of literature, both in its inner and outer significance, which the doomed Clarence, walled about with stone, in the Tower of London, suddenly opens to Brackenbury. Half way through the passage it will be noted once more how Shakespeare leaves the sea behind him, or rather uses it as a means for representing something vaster, the "tempest of a soul."

But marvelous as is that glimpse of the deep where false fleeting visions come and go, around a mind "hot for certainties," the Master-poet had not yet come to the height of his power, not yet encountered

explore those terrible midnight seas even further. The witches that cast their wild shadows over this tremendous tragedy have no kinship with those poor old crones whom Christian people so recently burned at the stake. They have something universal in them. They are more than evil. They are personifications of those wild tempests which wreck the soul on its eternal quest; those wild storms of change, and ruin, and seemingly purposeless mockery in the world, which baffle the most earnest steersman. Just as in the sonnets, there is a basis of direct reference to the sea, and then imagery and a great undertone of sea-music sweeping through the whole universe.

There are moments in the play when the whole world seems to become a seething witches' cauldron, their bubbling, midnight sea. And had some of our modern dabblers in darkness rightly understood the profound symbolism of this one great tragedy there would be fewer of those childish attempts to startle the world by padding on the fringe of its dark waters.

1st Witch—When shall we three meet again In thunder, lightning, or in rain?  
2d Witch—When the hurly-burly's done, When the battle's lost and won.  
All—Fair is foul and foul is fair, Hover thro' the fog and filthy air.

Throughout we are given terrible glimpses of the titanic tempest, a battle as terrible as that of the archangels, which is being waged by the soul of Shakespeare, behind and through and beyond the action of the play. At the opening we have the wounded soldier bringing his report of the earthly battle of Malcolm:

Doubtful it stood As two spent swimmers, that do cling together And choke their art.  
Of the enemy he says that: "The multiplying villainies of nature do swarm upon him"; and of Macbeth's valiant action he says, with the very sound and motion of the sea in his words: "As whence the sea gives his reflection, Shipwrecking storms and direful thunders So from that spring whence comfort seemed to come Discomfort swells!"

Then, with supreme power, the master dramatist carries us to the thunders of the North, brings the great theme to a head, sums it up, and utters it through the mouths of the Witches in one of the wildest strains of sea-music that ever fell on mortal ears.

1st Witch—Where hast thou been, sister?  
2d Witch—Killing swine.  
3d Witch—Sister, where thou?  
1st Witch—A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap, And munched and munched and munched,— "Aroint thee, Witch," the rump-fed ronyon cries. Her husband's to Aleppo gone, Master o' the Tiger; But in a sieve I'll tither sail, And, like a rat without a tail, I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.  
2d Witch—I'll give thee a wind.  
1st Witch—Thou'rt kind.

3d Witch—And I another.  
1st Witch—I myself have all the other, And the very ports they blow, All the quarters that they know I'll drain him dry as hay; Sleep shall neither night nor day Hang upon his pent-house lid; He shall live a man forbid; Weary sev'n nights nine times nine Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine. Though his bark cannot be lost, Yet it shall be tempest-toss'd. Look what I have.

2d Witch—Show me, show me.  
1st Witch—Here I have a pilot's thumb, Wrecked as homeward he did come.  
3d Witch—A drum, a drum. Macbeth doth come.

Into the hands of these fleeting, inconsistent powers Macbeth delivers himself, and thenceforward he has no pilot, no certainty, no repose. At the very climax of the murder scene, beyond the knocking at the gate, and infinitely more menacing to the soul, we hear as it were the deep baying of the bloodhounds of that sea from which there is no escape:

"Whence is that knocking? What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out mine eyes. Will all great Neptune's Ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather The multitudinous seas incarnadine, Making the green one red."  
The thumb of the pilot had been cast into the cauldron, and henceforward Macbeth is at the mercy of the elements. No longer can he say with Banquo:

Fears and scruples shake us: In the great hand of God I stand. He has abandoned all stability, lost his sheet anchor. "But let the frame of things disjoint," he cries:

Better be with the dead, Whom we to gain our peace have sent to peace, Than on the torture of the mind to lie In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave. After life's fitful fever he sleeps well. It is the tempest of the soul that tosses him here; but his prayer for sleep is only a tragic deepening of the same sea-music which we heard from the lips of another king. For in all these great moments of all the sonnets and poems and plays there is really only one soul speaking, the soul of Shakespeare, boundless as the universal sea in compassion:

Will't thou upon the high and giddy mast Seal up the ship-boy's eyes, and rock his brains In cradle of the rude imperious surge, But some certainty he must have. He

And in the visitation of the winds Who take the ruffian billows by the top, Curling their monstrous heads and hanging them With deafening clamour in the slippery clouds That, with the hurly, death itself awakes? Canst thou, O partial sleep, give thy repose To the wet sea-boy in an hour so rude And in the calmest and most stillest night Deny it to a king?

Through all the sound and fury of those darker storms of tragedy we hear, in every lull between the gusts, that deep-sea music:

Duncan is in his grave, After life's fitful fever he sleeps well. But Macbeth is called upon to be wise, amazed, temperate, and furious, loyal and neutral, all in a moment, and he knows that it is as impossible as to bridle the sea. No sooner is one wave surmounted than another comes on:

"Fleance is 'scap'd." Then comes my fit again: I had else been perfect, Whole as the marble, founded as the rock. But there is no rock to which he can cling in this wild tide. He cannot reduce to order this chaos of his own creation. There is no harmonious universe possible for evil, no security, no peace. Banquo is safe, he is told, with twenty trench'd gashes in his head, the least a death to nature. But for Macbeth the only reply is: "Get thee gone; tomorrow we'll hear, ourselves, again." And as he turns to the feast he meets the ghostly accuser, and the waves overwhelm him:

Which of you have done this? . . . Thou canst not say I did it; never shake Thy gory locks at me. The times have been That, when the brains were out, the man would die, And there an end; but now they rise again, With twenty mortal murders on their crowns, And push us from our stools.

All things have lost their certainty for him. It is not only evil and good that shift their forms in that sea; but there is nothing definite left for him under the sun. All is Protean, and it is to Proteus, god of the sea, that he prays:

Approach thou like the rugged Russian Bear, The arm'd rhinoceros or the Hyrcan tiger, Take any shape but that, There is nothing in that Protean nature that he can trust: It will have blood; they say, blood will have blood. Stones have been known to move and trees to speak. . . .

the stage. It is fraught with all the wonders and terrors that were implied in the strange old word—panic. In its effect upon the mind of Macbeth it bears no relation whatever to its material cause. It is as if, moved by some great hand behind the universe, the mountains themselves were coming to obliterate the wrong that forbade them to rest.

I shall not attempt to pluck the heart out of the mystery of that most enchanting of all sea-tales, "The Tempest." The first suggestion of it was undoubtedly in one of those fairy tales that the Elizabethan seaman brought home to the Mermaid Tavern—tales about men whose heads stood in their breasts, islands that were full of airy voices and dissolving visions. Shakespeare seized upon the idea of such an island and made it, as it were, the magic crucible of the universe, the centre of all its chemistry, spiritual and material, and all its changes.

Those who have wronged Prospero are cast upon it by the sea; and Ariel tells them when they draw their swords that

The elements Of whom your swords are tempered, may Wound the loud winds, or with bemocked At stabs Kill the still closing waters.

They committed Prospero and his child to the sea, for which foul deed

The powers delaying, not forgetting, have Incensed the seas and shores, yea, all the creatures Against your peace.  
They are confronted, in short, with the same problem as Macbeth when the forests came against him. For all these creatures, as Ariel tells them, are ministers of Fate, from whom there is no escape but in "heart sorrow and a clean life ensuing." Alonso is overwhelmed by this discovery that the universe is not a dead thing:

O it is monstrous, monstrous! Methought the billows spoke and told me of it, The winds did sing it to me and the thunder, That deep and dreadful organ-pipe, pronounced The name of Prosper; it did bass my trespass. Therefore my son's life is coz bedded, and I'll seek him deeper than e'er plummet sounded.

The solution of this play, however, is found in their "heart sorrow" and their forgiveness by Prospero, who has attained not only to mastery of the elements but to mastery over himself. His most famous speech dismisses the whole material world: These our actors, As I foretold you, were all spirits, and Are melted into air, into thin air. And, like the baseless fabric of this vision, The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces, The solemn temples, the great globe itself, Yea, all which inherit, shall dissolve, And, like this unsubstantial pageant faded, Leave not a rock behind. We are such stuff As dreams are made of, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.

And there Shakespeare makes the old

end of the third line, which gives so wizard-like a swell to the music of the fourth and so full a cadence through the fifth and sixth. The juxtaposition of the two heavy syllables at the end of the fifth line delays the music, as if, indeed, some mysterious lids were at the turn; and the two adjectives which close this brief masterpiece of song seem in their context to be proof that one Master-thief, at any rate, has broken down all the bars of mortality, and overheard Ariel singing:

Full fathom five thy father lies, Of his bones are coral made, Those are pearls that were his eyes. Nothing of him that doth fade But doth suffer a sea-change Into something rich and strange.

But no—I cannot end there—not in this hour of trial for that island which Shakespeare loved, that England of which he is the supreme spirit, the keeper of the freedom of more than even her seven seas. We have heard much, lately, of the sins of England. It has been the privilege of our intellectuals, blind to history and the long struggle for freedom that gave them that privilege, to tell us of her sins. It has been the pleasure of her enemies to take the indictment literally. We may find a new significance, then, in the words that show how Shakespeare loved her, and threw around her, as if it were his own royal mantle, the splendour of his own sea-music. Nor is he afraid to speak of "her reputation through the world" in words that two years ago would have been regarded as beneath the dignity of quotation by our moderns, unless as one more jest at the "tribute paid to virtue" by the greatest intellect of England and the world.

But the rich mine of his words and phrases runs as deep in literature as the Grand Canyon in nature; and nobody can read those lines today without realizing that he has chosen the simplest words in this case because they were the truest to his thought. There's not a senate of free men on earth today but echoes the deep-sea music of England. Newer, because truer, than any originalities or disloyalties of the hour, new as the day-spring of the unoriginal sun, are the words of Shakespeare to his country. For Shakespeare means old John of Gaunt, too, criticise his countrymen; but he criticises them only for being unworthy of England. And for England herself was there ever such a cry of sheer love—

This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars, This other Eden, demi-paradise, This fortress built by Nature for herself Against infection and the hand of war; This happy band of men, this little world, This precious stone set in the silver sea, Which serves it in the office of a wall, Or as a moat defensive to a house, Against the envy of less happier lands, This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England, . . . as far from home For Christian service and true chivalry As is the sepulchre . . . Of this land of such dear souls the dear, dear land, Dear for her reputation through the world, England, bound in with the triumphant sea.

And there Shakespeare makes the old