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Using *Matilda* as a Lens Through Which to Understand *The Tempest* as a Work for Young Audiences

Matilda by Roald Dahl, was published for the first time in 1988 and tells the story of a young precocious child with miraculous telekinetic powers. *The Tempest* is one of Shakespeare's shortest and most fantastical plays, but it still is not often thought of as a text for children. However, if educators and parents want to instill their children with a love of Shakespeare, it is imperative that it starts when the children are young. *The Tempest* may seem inaccessible, since it deals with themes of colonialism, slavery, and the protagonist is an old man who used to be a duke. Teachers could question if this is the best text to start with teaching children about Shakespeare's works. *The Tempest*, while not an obvious choice for children, is a story that is wonderfully suited to a young audience due to its strong central character, supernatural elements, use of the sensory pleasures of descriptive words, scenes of spectacle, and elements of a coming-of-age story. I seek to back up this claim by showing the similarities *The Tempest* shares with *Matilda*, an established tried-and-true classic that children have loved for thirty years. A teaching approach that uses these similarities will help children enjoy *The Tempest* the way that children enjoy texts instead of intimidating them by trying to influence their experience to be one of tiny adults.

The Tempest is different from *Matilda* in many ways. *The Tempest* is a play, written by Shakespeare near the end of his life, contextually based in the early seventeenth century and in

the form of the stage play. Of course, the ideal way to experience *The Tempest* is on a stage, but it still retains its place in the textual study of Shakespeare's works. On the surface, it may not seem to have much in common with *Matilda*: they have different intended audiences, different forms and genres, and were written centuries apart. However, they are both short texts with few characters and a straightforward plot. *The Tempest* even follows the classical dramatic unities, taking place in a few hours on one day on one small island (Vaughan and Vaughan). But a close look at not only the structures of the texts, but the themes and plot can show us that the texts are more similar than one would think and that *The Tempest*, despite its intended audience of seventeenth century adult theatre-goers, could effectively be understood and enjoyed by contemporary grade-school children, the audience *Matilda* is currently serving.

A necessary element for any text for children is a strong central character for the audience to connect to (Richmond). This is one of the reasons that ongoing series like Junie B. Jones, Nancy Drew, and Curious George are so successful with young audiences (Richmond). *Matilda* is a strong central figure in her own story, she is almost the only character in the whole story who is not a "two-dimensional villain" or another relatively flat stereotype. As readers, we get insight into her feelings and reactions by the narrator (Beauvais 278). She is even more of a strong figure because she is isolated. Her family sees "her as a scab they wish to be rid of" (Dahl 10). She is isolated as the precocious and gifted child which makes her unlike the other children—she is not understood by her family, and then her secret and miraculous telekinesis power pushes this isolation further (Dahl 176). When she is brought to the role of saving Miss Honey, she becomes the magical helper figure in her own story (Thacker 23). Comparing this key element to *The Tempest* leads to the conclusion that, as personalities go, Prospero is an even stronger central figure in his story, constantly imposing his will upon the narrative of the story

(Vaughan and Vaughan). As the most powerful person on an island with only three other people, he takes further control of his story through the power of exposition (Carlson 2). “One of the lengthiest expositions in all Shakespearean drama,” told to Miranda in the second scene of the play, recounts the story of how they ended up on the island, then, in Act 5, he promises to tell the shipwrecked character “The story of my life,/ And the particular accidents gone by/ Since I came to this isle” (5.1.305-307). Not only does he use the power of words to shape his story, he is also a Renaissance Magus, a traditional figure of a time when there was little distinction between magic and science (Carlson 8). His power is based in both his “own library with volumes that/ I prize among my dukedom” (1.2.167-168) and his staff, which he uses to cast spells and the elements, causing the storm, a “product of Prospero’s “Art” meant to put his enemies in his power” (Davidson 234; Carlson 8). Similar to Matilda, Prospero is the only one in the play with these sorts of powers. Every other character in the play can be related to Prospero and his story as he causes the storm and then regains his dukedom, which simplifies and centralizes the narrative, making it easy for children to follow.

Children need to be able to relate to the protagonists of what they are reading, and there is a reason that children love coming-of-age stories. Considering this emotional progress that Matilda and Prospero make over the course of their stories, I would argue that both of these works portray a kind of unconventional coming-of-age story. By strictest Oxford definition, a coming-of-age story, or a bildungsroman, will follow a protagonist from “infancy to early adulthood” (Baldick) and deal with crises of late adolescence (Baldick). However, in a more thematic way, a coming-of-age story “traces the progress of a young person toward self-understanding and a sense of social responsibility” and “growth to a certain stage of completeness” (Swales 92). Though Prospero is an old man and Matilda is a five-year-old girl,

both of these protagonists experience journeys that are thematically, if not structurally, linked to an unconventional coming-of-age narrative.

In the case of *Matilda*, the beginning of the story involves Matilda using her cleverness to “devise and dish out these splendid punishments” (49) on her parents, caught up in her clever retributive justice more so than in actually having the punishment fit the crime (Dahl 49; Beauvais 284). In addition, her supernatural powers first show up when Matilda is “so unbearably angry that something was bound to explode inside her very soon” (Dahl 164). Matilda’s first act of telekinesis is when she knocks over a glass onto Mrs. Trunchbull, an act purely done to avenge her being “accused of a crime that she definitely had not committed” (Dahl 162; Worthington 129). Matilda is caught up in her own desires and power in the first part of the book, but the turning point comes for Matilda as a character after “witnessing the near starvation of Miss Honey,” when she decides to “avenge the wrongs done to Miss Honey” (Dahl 204; Thacker 23). Matilda moves away from only seeking satisfaction for herself, she seeks justice for those who she is capable of freeing from the terrifying Trunchbull. This character shift shows her growth as a person, something that children appreciate since so many child characters in literature do not make emotional progress.

In *The Tempest*, part of the satisfaction comes from seeing Prospero, though he is old, make emotional progress as well. Prospero was deposed because he was so “rapt in secret studies” (1.2.77) that he, “neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated/ to closeness and the bettering of my mind” (1.2.89-90) left himself vulnerable to his brother, upon whom he had “cast the government” (1.2.75). While on the island, he still studies spells and enchantments as well as ordering Ariel around to “performed to point the tempest that I bade thee” (1.2.194). Partway through the play, he realizes that he has been so involved in the “vanity of mine Art” (4.1.41)

that he has left himself vulnerable to Caliban's plot, a near-repeat of his original fall from political power (Carlson 9). Prospero comes to the understanding that his "Art" takes up too much of his time to allow him to be an effective ruler. His choice to relinquish the magic, to "break [his] staff" (5.1.54) and "drown [his] book" (5.1.57), shows emotional maturity because he comes to an understanding of his own limits. This loss of powers in the end for both figures makes sense to children as a symbol for the emotional progress that Matilda and Prospero have made, which uses fantasy as a way to help children relate to the protagonists' emotional progress.

One of the reasons that *Matilda* is so successful as a children's novel is because of its supernatural elements. *Matilda* functions as a well-executed magical realism text, operating in a realistic mode until there is suddenly a 'turn' or realization that something supernatural is occurring (Beauvais 277). Children love fantasy for the same reason they love fairy tales, because they give them a break from the expected, stoke the imagination, and teach them how the world works through a lens of the impossible events of the story (Lewis 36). *Matilda* is not strictly 'magical,' but precociously intelligent, "sensitive and brilliant" child (Dahl 10). "The only power Matilda had over anyone in her family was brainpower" (Dahl 49). Her giftedness, in the lack of proper intellectual challenge, channels itself into her developing telekinetic powers "surging up behind her eyes" to move things just by focusing on them (Dahl 225). *Matilda* is magic realism, but it never shifts solely into the space of genre fantasy that is so popular with children. *The Tempest* stays solidly in this space from beginning to end. *The Tempest* is not quite a fairy tale, but it is certainly the Shakespeare play that contains the most magic and supernatural elements, "the one drama that puts the practice of magic itself center stage as more than a dramatic device" (Carlson 7). *The Tempest* is related to the genre fantasy that most young readers

are already familiar with, books with wizards, fairies, and princesses fill the shelves of young readers' libraries. Simply approaching *The Tempest* as a fantasy is a strong enough case for many young readers to gain a gateway into appreciating this play.

Another reason *Matilda*, as well as a most of Roald Dahl's works, has met with such long-standing success on the children's literature scene is his writing style (Talbot). Full of sensory details and vividly visual, the prose seems to take pleasure in grotesque and exaggerated details (Talbot). Mrs. Wormwood's hair is not merely blonde, it is "dyed a brilliant platinum blonde, very much the same glistening silvery colour as a female tightrope-walker's tights in a circus" (Dahl 56). Mrs. Trunchbull is not just a large and scary woman, she is "a mighty female giant" (Dahl 161). Children react to these types of details because they connect to the deeply sensory and physical experiences transcend the literary experience as the words jump off of the page into the world of physical sensations (Lewis 31; "Children's Literature"). In addition, particularly young children learn new words in the most fun way possible in books like *Matilda*. "Gormless?" Where else would a child under the age of twelve encounter the word "gormless?" But there it is, on page 10. The most amazing words in *Matilda* are used in a scene where Mrs. Trunchbull is accusing young Bruce Bogtrotter, calling him a "foul carbuncle," a "poisonous pustule," a "denizen of the underworld" and a "suppurating little blister" (Dahl 120). Granted, this is terrible behavior from Mrs. Trunchbull and makes her more villainous, but there is a certain sensory pleasure in the words themselves. Great words like this are all through *The Tempest*, particularly as curses, and children love them. The pleasure children find in new words (even if they "don't know quite what they mean") for children is perfectly captured by Holling Hoodhood, the main character of *The Wednesday Wars*, Gary D. Schmidt's Newbery Honor-

winning novel about a seventh-grader whose teacher makes him read Shakespeare in study hall (Schmidt 51). Holling says this of *The Tempest*,

It was surprising how much good stuff there was... Caliban—the monster in the play—he knew cuss words. I mean, he really knew cuss words...

I decided to learn them all by heart.... For the Caliban curses, it's a lot better to say them loud and fast, like:

The red plague rid you! [1.2.365]

and:

Toads, beetles, bats light on you! [1.2.341]

and:

As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed with raven's feather's from unwholesome fen drop on you. [1.2.322]

Every night after supper I practiced in front of my bedroom mirror.... And I got the timing just right—even the little bit of spit on the “beetles.”

(Schmidt 50-51, 54, citations to Shakespeare are mine)

Holling perfectly sums up the pleasure of good language that children have, and *The Tempest*, as Holling quotes, is chock-full of wonderful phrases that are sensory and fun to pronounce. This appeal is heightened by the fast pacing of *The Tempest*, where the dialogue is so often back-and-forth with many shared lines of verse between the characters (Vaughan and Vaughan). The words themselves are a huge draw for reading Shakespeare with kids, and the words of *The Tempest* are particularly delightful.

In addition to the sensory and fun words that fill *Matilda*, the story is also full of highly visual and entertaining scenes which offer the child practice in using their imagination to

visualize events with which they are unfamiliar. An example of this is the extended charade of Mr. Wormwood trying to get his hat off after Matilda has, unbeknownst to him, superglued the rim to his head (Dahl 30-37). Nearly all of the third chapter consists of an almost farcical telling of Mr. Wormwood's day with his hat on. We, as readers, are transported even to Mr.

Wormwood's car garage, a place where Matilda does not go, to witness how silly he looks "fiddling with the mileages of cars" with a "casual attitude" (Dahl 32). Not only are the scenes highly visual, but they are exaggerated and impossible, including when Mrs. Trunchbull swings a young child around by her pigtails and throws her so "Amanda [goes] sailing like a rocket right over the wire fence of the playground and high up into the sky" (Dahl 115). Children love visual scenes, and *The Tempest* is full of them. *The Tempest* is based on the idea of spectacle, on offering something for the audience to look at while they experience this piece of theatre (Carlson 8). The title, the storm in the first scene, the masque scene in act three, and the magic and Prospero controlling the elements throughout the play are all based on spectacle (Vaughan and Vaughan). The use of spectacle is related to why the play did so well in its original context as a play in late-Renaissance England (Carlson 3). Seventeenth-century audiences were familiar with the masque tradition, so watching *The Tempest* play out in the theatre, with whole sequences meant solely to wow the senses (S. Wells). The spectacle of a good performance of *The Tempest* adds a layer to appreciation of not only spectacle's role in entertainment, but in the complicated nature of stage effects, making it far more than a play with mostly characters talking back and forth (Carlson 3). Children love to see amazing spectacles that are fun to watch, even when they are not engaging with a text in the literary ways that adult readers do. The reason that children love action movies and animation with bright colors is because they offer something to look at while following the plot (op de Beeck x).

Books for children have had illustrations since the first big collections of fairy tales in the eighteenth century (op de Beeck x). Children enjoy books with pictures because they help tell the story, and carry with them an “expectation of entertainment” in a way plain text does not (op de Beeck x) When it comes to the books of Roald Dahl, Quentin Blake’s illustrations seem to the modern reader as integral to the novels as the pictures are to any picture book (op de Beeck xiii; Talbot). Some editions of *Matilda* have almost one hundred illustrations, which support Dahl’s narrative tone with their sketchy, emotive, cartoon-like qualities that “underscore the comical and absurd sides of Dahl’s work” (Appendix A; Talbot). *Matilda* offers a visual experience in the literary text, which children love, and *The Tempest* offers the same thing. Theatre is a visual medium that is ideally heard and seen as much as it is read, which is why theatre is so consuming and wonderful for children, since it is a full experience. Away from the stage there are other adaptations that bring this text to audiences in a visual moving-image media. The visuality of a text like *The Tempest* is especially suited to animation in the same way fairy tales are, since the “more open vocabulary of animation accommodates” the elements of spectacle, therefore lending *The Tempest* naturally to a form that is already generally associated with young audiences (P. Wells 63). Animated productions of *The Tempest* have been successful at capturing the spectacle and fantasy of this play (Hubert Humphrey). They also are able to portray the physical characters of such minor characters as Stephano and Trinculo to be so distinctive that the otherwise difficult-to-follow character dynamics of the group of castaways, such as the distinction between Stephano and Trinculo, becomes much easier to grasp for any audience member, but especially children (Hubert Humphrey; Appendix B). The world of animation, with its simple shapes and bright colors, or, in the case of The Animated Tales adaptation, what appear to be intricate stop-motion puppets with simple facial expressions, are able to draw viewers into a world of fantasy,

a world clearly existing on a plane different from our own (P. Wells 63). Children like this and it helps them understand what is going on, when the nuances of human facial expression is smoothed into only the most basic emotions and gestures required to move the story forward and help the audience understand the text (Appendix B).

An overview of *The Tempest's* qualities that appeal to children shows it is a great text for young audiences and one that they will likely really respond to. *The Tempest* contains a strong personality at the center who experiences a coming-of-age or emotional progress. It is full of exciting and fun language that stimulates children's brains, along with many fantastic and spectacular elements to which children respond. *The Tempest* has all of this in common with *Matilda*, which is evidence that it could be widely successful as a text for children just like *Matilda* has been. In conclusion, *The Tempest* should be used as a child's first introduction to Shakespeare because it is the play that children are most likely to enjoy and connect with.

Appendices

Appendix A:



Blake, Quentin. "Amanda went sailing like a rocket." Roald Dahl. *Matilda*. Viking Penguin, 1988. Page 115.

Appendix B:



[16:35]

Hubert Humphrey. "[Shakespeare: The Animated Tales] The Tempest." *YouTube*, 5 January 2017. *YouTube.com*. Date Accessed 9 December 2017.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kAZKIpWGN_Q



[11:27]

Hubert Humphrey. "[Shakespeare: The Animated Tales] The Tempest." *YouTube*, 5 January 2017. *YouTube.com*. Date Accessed 9 December 2017.
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