



A Closer Look at

"Our revels now are ended..."

This speech is spoken by Prospero in Act 4, Scene 1 of *The Tempest*.

Who's Prospero?

Long before the events of the play begin, Prospero was the Duke of Milan. However, the dukedom was stolen by Prospero's brother, Antonio. Antonio's thugs forced Prospero and Miranda (Prospero's two-year-old child) onto a boat and set it adrift. The boat landed on an island that seemed to Prospero to be nearly deserted. However, the island was home to Caliban (a character who features prominently in the play) and many magical spirits.

With the aid of some mysterious books, Prospero uses magic to command and control Caliban, Miranda, and the spirits on the island, threatening them and sometimes even delivering painful punishments for perceived misbehaviour. At the beginning of the play, Prospero takes revenge on Antonio and others by magically creating a storm that shipwrecks them on the island.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

With the help of spirits, elves, nymphs, and naiads, Prospero has just staged a huge spectacle called a masque to honour the upcoming marriage between Miranda (now a young adult) and young Ferdinand, who was shipwrecked on the island. Before the masque has finished, Prospero remembers that Caliban is conspiring with two others from the shipwreck. They plan to murder Prospero and take over the island. Prospero disrupts the performance and commands all the spirits to depart. Prospero then speaks these words, offering these insights to Miranda and Ferdinand before parting company with them to thwart Caliban's plot.

PROSPERO:

Our revels now are ended. 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-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

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Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **revels** – an entertainment, often associated with merrymaking and celebration
- **foretold** – here it means 'told previously' or 'told before'
- **baseless** – without substance or lacking a foundation
- **fabric** – nowadays it mostly means cloth, but it once meant any product of skilled work, like a building
- **solemn** – here it means 'related to religious observation'
- **the great globe itself** – this can mean both the earth and/or the Globe Playhouse, where Shakespeare's company performed
- **Yea** – another way of saying 'yes', similar to 'yeah'
- **which it inherit** – which takes possession of it or dwells upon it
- **insubstantial** – lacking substance; imaginary or unreal
- **pageant** – a show or play, often part of a celebration or religious observation
- **rack** – here it means a wisp of cloud or vapour
- **stuff** – substance or material required to create something
- **rounded** – finished or completed

Explore the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- What's the effect of this language?
- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change? What might this tell you about what's happening for the character?



Explore the ideas

In this passage, Prospero makes observations about the nature of theatre that could also apply to life itself.

- For you, how is theatre different from other ways of telling stories?
- What does the image of the actors 'melting into air' mean to you?
- When Prospero mentions towers, palaces, and temples, what does each one look like for you? Do you think of a real place for each of these, or do you imagine something else? What informs your ideas?
- What does it mean to you to be 'such stuff as dreams are made on'?
- What does 'our little life is rounded with a sleep' mean to you?



Explore the character

Some people compare Prospero to Shakespeare, and think that this speech is Shakespeare's farewell to the theatre. While it seems clear that Shakespeare wrote this play near the end of his career, there are several plays that were likely written later than *The Tempest*.

- From what you know about Shakespeare and Prospero, what do you think they have in common? How are they different?
- Based on what you know, do Shakespeare and Prospero have admirable qualities? What are these qualities? Do they have qualities you don't admire or want to challenge? What are they?
- If you could find out more about Prospero as a person, what would you want to know?
- If you could find out more about Shakespeare as a person, what would you want to know?
- If you had magical powers, how would you use them?

Make it your own

Performance

Learn some or all of the speech by heart and perform it. Discover what it all means, and what it means to you, so you can truly make it your own. If you like, think about staging, costuming, props, lighting, etc. Share your work with an audience of family and/or friends.

Ask someone to film your performance so you have a record of it. They can either film your live performance, or you can create a special opportunity for filming. Collaborate to find the best location, lighting, camera angles, sound, titles, etc. for what you'd like to create.

Art

Create a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the speech means to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

Music

Express what the speech means to you through music. Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the speech. Decide how you'd like to share what you've created.

Creative Writing

Compose your own poem, speech, or story inspired by the speech. What are your thoughts about the temporary nature of either theatre or life? How would you put your thoughts into words? How would you convey your feelings about it?

How would you respond? Prospero suddenly calls an end to the performance to share these thoughts, sending both the spirits (the performers) and Miranda and Ferdinand (the audience) away. How do you imagine they might respond?