

**EVELYN
GLENNIE**

LISTENING

TO

THE TEMPEST

A TALE TO

CURE DEAFNESS

tempest

**LIVING
SHAKESPEARE**

A collection of essays.

FOREWORD

CIARÁN

DEVANE

The abiding facts of human life and the core themes of Shakespeare's plays – identity, power, faith, meaning, humanity itself – are central to every age and in this respect the presence of political and emotional insight is no surprise. Indeed, it seems that whatever facet of humanity is sought, it may be found in Shakespeare's works.

Shakespeare's language also has an exceptional capacity to express human experience, as demonstrated in Evelyn Glennie's essay, *Listening to The Tempest, A Tale to Cure Deafness*.

As the world's first full-time solo percussionist, who also happens to be profoundly deaf, Evelyn Glennie is drawn to explore the world of sound in Shakespeare's play. Here you will find a fresh take on *The Tempest* along with her own remarkable insight into what it means to hear.

This essay is part of a collection, for which we asked some exceptional public figures – Nobel Laureates and best-selling authors, musicians and politicians, actors and activists – to reflect on Shakespeare's continuing relevance to today's burning issues. The collection is part of *Shakespeare Lives*, our extensive, year-long programme marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

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INTRODUCTION

SHAKESPEARE

IN BRITAIN

Shakespeare has such a central position in British culture that he is almost taken for granted. His image is displayed on pub signs and his plays appear regularly on screen as well as on the stage. He has become a symbol of British identity and practically synonymous with the English language itself. But Shakespeare has not always been held in such high esteem.

For nearly a century after his death in 1616, Shakespeare was a relatively unfashionable writer and people thought his language was old-fashioned. When his plays were staged, they were often heavily rewritten. His plots were altered – *King Lear*, for instance, was given a happy ending – and his language was modernised. It was only during the 18th century, with the intervention of cultural champions like the actor and celebrity David Garrick, that Shakespeare became the 'immortal bard'. Thereafter, his works have been made available to all levels of society through the publication of cheap editions. With the advent of mass literacy and cheap book pricing in the 19th century, Shakespeare's plays were widely read throughout British society. Shakespeare began to enter the school curriculum towards the end of the 19th century. Since then, generations of British children have been introduced to his works in the classroom.

While he's a central figure in our national cultural identity, the British Council's global survey in 2015 on attitudes to Shakespeare suggested that the playwright's popularity may be even greater outside than inside the United Kingdom.

LISTENING TO *THE TEMPEST*, A TALE TO CURE DEAFNESS

by Evelyn Glennie

As I thumb through the works of William Shakespeare, I find myself feeling sounds, a subject close to my heart. I learnt to use my body to feel music when I began to lose my hearing as a child. When I reached *The Tempest*, the words positively shouted sound to me – even the title has a strong resonance. The island of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* is physical and responsive. Here Prospero, the rightful Duke of Milan, speaks:

'To cry to th' sea that roar'd to us; to sigh
To th' winds, whose pity, sighing back again,
Did us but loving wrong.'¹

The language here takes me back to my homeland. I lived on a farm at the top of a hill in Aberdeenshire, where a walk on the cliffs forces me to face the winds, and I can feel the sound on my cheeks. When recounting the story of how Prospero and his daughter Miranda came to be on the island, Miranda reminds us about the feeling of sound we get when we cry:

'I, not rememb'ring how I cried out then,
Will cry it o'er again; it is a hint
That wrings mine eyes to't.'²

I can still feel the sting of the tears as the North Sea wind catches my eyes, for when I was upset, tears would trickle down my cheeks, and I would feel them slowly descending towards my lips.

I wonder if Shakespeare knew what I have discovered and shared? That the whole body can hear? Reading his work, I could almost feel the sound of the pen scratching at the paper – etching out the narrative in such a way, sound becomes paramount to the play. Each character echoes sound, and Shakespeare entices us into their tales, using sound to colour their characters.

For me sound is about depth of feeling. I have found a way to substitute for my hearing loss. I immerse myself into the senses within my skin, bones and muscles. I discovered a whole new set of hearing tools through ambient vibration. Shakespeare's *The Tempest* plays to my sensory world. He uses sound to describe emotions: humour / pride / anguish / shame / authority and subservience - throughout the tale. For example, Antonio, who we are told usurped his brother's position, shouts at the sailors, 'Hang, cur! Hang, you whoreson insolent noise-maker!'³ Now I am tempted to replicate the emotions' meanings through my percussion instruments!

^{1,2} *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2

³ *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 1

The use of sound colours what we most enjoy as the play unfolds. I wonder if actors relish the opportunities to express themselves through the sounds of the characters? I have spent most of my life encouraging people to engage in a richer world of sound, by tuning into the 'pretence' of silence. It is my belief there is no such thing as silence. To experience this we need to turn off all surrounding sound and contemplate the remaining chasm, which should be silence. You will discover thus another sound world, where you can truly begin to understand how to tap into a different way of listening. By putting your hand on your chest, you can feel your own beating heart. I have learnt to interpret those feelings throughout my body. Shakespeare slows the tempo down as he brings the gentle Miranda and Ariel to us. Miranda makes the profound statement to her father, 'Your tale, sir, would cure deafness.'⁴ Now I am really hooked!

One of the reasons sound is so central to *The Tempest* is tightly bound up with the fate of Ariel, an airy spirit, who is earning his freedom from Prospero by performing great feats for his master. The play opens with the great storm Ariel has raised, and the consequent shipwreck brings to the island Prospero's ancient enemy, his brother Antonio. In order to realise his schemes, Prospero requires Ariel to become invisible:

'Go make thyself like a nymph o'th' sea. Be subject
To no sight but thine and mine, invisible.'⁵

The only trace of the invisible is the sounds they make. That's why sound is centre stage in *The Tempest*, and in his invisible state, Ariel sings and plays his song full of earthly sounds:

ARIEL: 'Come unto these yellow sands,
And then take hands.
Curtisied when you have, and kissed.
The wild waves whist.
Foot it feately here and there,
And sweet sprites bear
The burden.

SPIRITS: Hark, hark! Bow-wow!⁶

I imagine a twinkle or glint as Ariel flits from pillar to post, weaving in and out of the players, singing his song, while Ferdinand, son of Alonso, the King of Naples, asks, 'Where should this music be? I' th' air or th'earth?'⁷ I like the idea of music being around and within us. I have spent my life learning to experience sound to enable my body to transfer the impact of the feelings I get from sounds, which most hear via the ears, to my brain.

⁴⁻⁷ *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2

How can I deny Shakespeare intended us to read the most musical sounds into his play when he presents us with the second verse of Ariel's song? I reach for yet another bell to accompany his words!

'Hark, hark. I hear
The strain of strutting Chanticleer
Cry, cock-a-diddle-dow.'⁸

The Tempest is a vibrant mix of many sounds of land and sea and wind and surf. Rhythm is present throughout the text and lyrics. Passion is deeply embedded within the emotions. I am perhaps more sensitive to the passion and emotion of sounds because of my hearing loss. I have had to learn what each sound represents, rather than taking them for granted. My whole body is similar to an ear, every surface has learnt to become a conduit, bringing meaning and sense to my brain. Whereas Shakespeare crafts his words, I sense he is wanting his audiences to experience them in their completeness. He uses his wordcraft to immerse and engage us, as if we were actually participating in the play.

Every paragraph resounds,

SPIRITS: Ding dong.
ARIEL: Hark, now I hear them.
SPIRITS: Ding dong, bell!⁹

My own senses are jumping between the emotional words of Ferdinand as he fears the loss of his father. Perplexed, he listens to Ariel,

'... nor no sound
That the earth owes. I hear it now above me.'¹⁰

Shakespeare leaves us to imagine the horrific sounds of the storm that left King Alonso, Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo, Adrian, Francisco and members of the crew stranded on another part of the island.

For me there is a space to imagine instruments I might select to recreate the sound of the waves crashing onto the wooden decks of the predestined shipwreck. I feel the creaking of the wood as it breaks on the rocks, slapped by the canvas sails splitting the rigging. I ponder, and reach for a mallet; I grasp the wood firmly. As I embrace the scene, it is the same as when I raise my arm to strike the bar. As soon as my arm falls, it is that moment the waves begin to crash onto the rocks – that place of no return. The mallet will strike and the waves will crash.

Amidst the cries of lost souls tossed to a watery grave, I steel myself to introduce the complex sounds from water. I think about creating the sounds of splashing water surfaces, frothing crests and, perhaps, thrusts of water pulling and pushing sand across the beach. Francisco tells the distraught Alonso that he saw his son Fernando:

⁸⁻¹⁰ *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2

'...beat the surges under him
And ride upon their backs. He trod the water
Whose enmity he flung aside, and breasted
The surge, most swol'n, that met him. His bold head
'Bove the contentious waves he kept, and oared
Himself with his good arms in lusty stroke
To th' shore, that o'er his wave-worn basis bowed,
As stooping to relieve him. ...'¹¹

I consider the rhythm of Fernando's arms thrashing, time and time again, against the water that threatens to drag him down to depths, ending only when the pressure of the water exhausts his final breath. I am reminded of the way a frantic musical performance comes to an end: I catch my breath and bow. But Shakespeare wants not for glory, in this scene he is asking us to experience loss. The waves are deadened and quiet and have left their trail of destruction, lifeless on the beach, with only the swishing hand of the ebb and flow to cover their shame.

As I approach the plotting of Antonio and Sebastian (the brother to Alonso), in which they agree to kill the king so that Sebastian can take up the throne, I feel the breath of whispers in the night:

'... Here lies your brother,
No better than the earth he lies upon
If he were that which now he's like – that's dead –
Whom I with this obedient steel, three inches of it,
Can lay to bed forever; ...'¹²

The weighty silence of conspiracy pounds upon my chest cavity, until Ariel sings a warning into the ear of Prospero's friend Gonzalo:

'While you here do snoring lie,
Open-eyed conspiracy
His time doth take.
If of life you keep a care,
Shake off slumber and beware.
Awake, awake!'¹³

The tension in my body rises, as Gonzalo stirs to find a sword drawn above Alonso. Those bleary moments are screaming out to me to escape and run, heart pounding. But no, Shakespeare is a master of wordcraft, and amidst the evil atmosphere in split seconds, his faithful servant Gonzalo speaks:

'Now, good angels preserve the King.'
And the startled King responds:
'Why, how now? Ho! Awake! [The others awake]...
[to Antonio and Sebastian], 'Why are you drawn?'...
[to Gonzalo], 'Wherefore this ghastly looking?'¹⁴

¹¹⁻¹³ *The Tempest, Act 2, Scene 1*

¹⁴ *The Tempest, Act 2, Scene 1. Stage directions the author's own suggestion*

In those few words I feel the sound of a sword being dragged from its sheath, a sharp sound against the dead night, the air heavy with intent and surprise. Oh what magnificent sounds I should create to feel that sinister look upon Sebastian's face as the King wakes from his slumber, and Sebastian's evil intent is thwarted!

The stage directions introducing Caliban combine images of servitude with the sounds of tempests. His plight reminds me of the way we are hostage to sounds. We cannot rest our ears, therefore we must find ways to escape overloading them. My heart goes out to Caliban as he describes his lot, and I feel sounds ooze from the very bellows of the bog that entraps him:

[A noise of thunder heard].
[Prospero's] spirits hear me,
And yet I needs must curse...
Sometime like apes that mow and chatter at me
And after bite me; then like hedgehogs, which
Lie tumbling in my barefoot way and mount
Their pricks at my footfall; sometime am I
All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues
Do hiss me into madness.¹⁵

Apes' chattering teeth, hedgehogs' pricks, and adders' fangs: I trawl my arsenal of percussion to find something to create these sounds. I want to offer a sound sense of his miserable existence, and to try and bring him a cheerful note. Perhaps Trinculo the jester can do that for me?

Shakespeare interrupts Caliban's complaints about his enslavement with the jolly sea shanty of Stephano, the drunken butler. Music has the ability to lift the spirits, and Shakespeare utilises its benefits to transform the atmosphere, the warm sound of the small accordion suddenly lifting the mood. I identify especially with Ariel, as (like him) I try to use sound to make something invisible, visible. Caliban's response to music is one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches:

'Be not afeard: the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again; and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me, that when I waked
I cried to dream again.'¹⁶

¹⁵ *The Tempest, Act 2, Scene 2*

¹⁶ *The Tempest, Act 3, Scene 2*

I am propelled back to the 2012 London Olympics, where these immortal lines were performed. As I prepared for my own performance there, caught up with the moment, I felt separate but not alone. Later, the thought of the audience, both local and global, was brought home to me when I watched the ceremony on television. Through it all though, I held Caliban's injunction 'Be not afraid' close to me, a distillation of my own *raison d'être*: to help others develop their own understanding of sound and listening. As I follow Shakespeare's tale of love and forgiveness, I sense that Shakespeare, like me, loved life, honesty and friendship.

As a performer I have always searched for ways to create emotion; each time I lift my arm, I am pulling emotion from the chord up through the body, and releasing it as I begin the approach to the next strike. When I perform 'A Little Prayer', which I wrote as a child, I communicate the deepest emotions by the striking of notes. Shakespeare's medium is words, but his words simultaneously evoke sounds, and they communicate the most powerful emotions. The 2012 Olympic opening ceremony provided the greatest stage, and I like to imagine Shakespeare turning in his deadly slumber as his words echoed and reached millions around the world. The final lines of *The Tempest*, spoken by Prospero, signal the happy succession of the tempestuous with the calm:

'...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.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free.'¹⁷

Possibly the last words written by Shakespeare. He requests that his sails are filled and he is released. The tempest has waned, emotions are calm, and forgiveness abounds. He takes a bow and leaves the stage. It has been 400 years and his words are still spoken and recognised around the world. It is clear to me Shakespeare wrote from his heart, and he brought about honour, pride and reverence to his audiences. I admire his spirit and feel I know him through his works. Hope you do too!

¹⁷ *The Tempest*, Act 5, Scene 1, Epilogue

ABOUT THE WRITER EVELYN GLENNIE



Evelyn Glennie is the first person in history to successfully create and sustain a full-time career as a solo percussionist, performing worldwide with the greatest conductors, orchestras and artists. She happens to be profoundly deaf.

Regularly providing masterclasses and consultations, Evelyn Glennie is also a leading commissioner of new works for solo percussion, with over 200 pieces to her name. The film *Touch the Sound* and her TED speech remain key testimonies to her approach to sound-creation.

She has received many awards for her work, including the Polar Music award in 2015, and in 2012 she had the honour of a leading role in the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympic Games. To this day, Evelyn continues to invest in realising her vision – to teach the world to listen, 'to improve communication and social cohesion by encouraging everyone to discover new ways of listening'.

The British Council has commissioned a collection of essays by eminent thinkers around the world, from politicians to Nobel Prize-winning writers, interpreting themes in Shakespeare's work for today.

Living Shakespeare is a dialogue between exceptional public figures and Shakespeare's works in relation to the burning questions which each writer faces. The collection demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance, from the stage, to our homes, to the staterooms of power.

The issues raised include optimism in diplomacy, female empowerment, listening, racial integration, and a response to extremism.

The essays are part of *Shakespeare Lives*, a global celebration of the influence of William Shakespeare on culture, language, education and society.

The British Council, the GREAT Britain campaign and an unprecedented number of partners are commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death with a series of initiatives including a unique online collaboration, performances on stage and film, exhibitions, public readings, conversations, debates and educational resources for people all around the world in 2016.



With thanks to our partners The Open University and BBC World Service.