

e-Luminations: The Tempest

DO WHAT THOU WILT

Prospero was the second great magician on the Elizabethan-Jacobean stage. The first was Marlowe's Doctor Faustus. Why is the one redeemed and the other damned?

Shakespeare's Prospero and Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus are both magicians, but they have different approaches and achieve different outcomes. Prospero uses his magic to effect a partial reconciliation with his enemies and a royal and worthy match for his daughter, Miranda. Faustus squanders the power and knowledge he gains in exchange for his soul by playing adolescent pranks and performing parlor tricks.

Is Prospero "better" than Faustus? Certainly Shakespeare has given him time and experiences that enable him to make better decisions. He began his exile as a single parent, forced to carve out a new life for himself and his infant daughter on a savage, uncharted island. He has had years to ponder what happened and why. While he still harbors anger and a determination to set things right, Prospero resolves to pursue "virtue," i.e. the moral high road, rather than vengeance.

Despite Faustus's knowledge, success and experience as a physician, he has led a sheltered, academic life. The intellectual power he prizes and is celebrated for does not prepare him for the consequences of his bargain with Lucifer. He rationalizes or shies away from examining his choices.

The rewards of Prospero's path are mixed but obvious. Although his brother, Antonio, is still his enemy, Prospero has the courage to relinquish his magic and rejoin society. In doing so, he regains what he lost, plus a brave new world full of love and possibilities for Miranda. Faustus gains nothing and is dragged kicking and screaming to Hell, not fully comprehending what got him there until it is too late. —Beth Bardossi

The article above was excerpted from OSF's 2007 *Illuminations*, a 64-page guide to the plays in the 2007 season. For more information or to buy the full *Illuminations* [click here](#). Members at the Patron level and above and teachers who bring school groups to OSF receive a free copy of *Illuminations*.