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Early Modern Digital Review

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CiRCE Podcast Network, creator.***The Play's the Thing.***

Concord, NC: CiRCE Institute Podcast Network, 2018–. Accessed 1 February 2023.

shows.acast.com/the-plays-the-thing.

The Play's the Thing describes itself as “the ultimate podcast resource for lovers of Shakespeare.” It is certainly one for the dedicated fan, with six episodes on each play it examines: one for each act of the play and a final “Q&A” episode. Over the past five years, *The Play's the Thing* has covered around half of Shakespeare’s plays, focusing on the best-known including *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth*, and *Othello*. The podcast’s aim is to explore “the themes, scenes, characters, and lines that make Shakespeare so memorable,” with the ultimate goal of covering every play he wrote. The series is part of the CiRCE Institute, which “is committed to the Christianity expressed in the historic creeds of the church, especially the Nicene Creed” (circeinstitute.org/about-us). This is apparent in the podcast, or at least in the episodes listened to for this review (the six parts on *The Tempest*), where there were often references to Christian values and experiences. For example, in the episode titled “The Tempest: Act IV,” presenter Heidi White comments: “I’m not about to say Shakespeare and Jesus are the same, but [...] when pressed, our Lord himself would not take a stand on the contemporary issues of the day. [...] And I think in some ways Shakespeare draws the same line.” As such, *The Play's the Thing* takes a specific view of Shakespeare’s work, which will accord more comfortably with some listeners than others.

The podcast is available on three platforms—Apple Podcasts, Pocket Casts, and Acast—as well as on its own website, from which each episode can also be downloaded as an MP3 file. As such, it is straightforward for anyone familiar with podcasting to locate, listen to, and share via social media. However, it does require a substantial time commitment from the listener: each episode runs roughly one hour, so listening to the full set of podcasts on a single play will take two to three times longer than watching or listening to the play itself. There are also no transcripts of the episodes, meaning the conversations are not as accessible as some others in the field, and there are no linked copies of the play texts or other supporting materials (such as critical readings) provided. Recordings of the plays are mentioned, but again there are no links to these

or other recordings, free or paid for via streaming platforms or on YouTube or DVD. As such, this podcast is of more interest to the Shakespeare enthusiast than the educator. To this end, there is a private Facebook page for the Close Reads Podcast Network, of which *The Play's the Thing* is a part, where listeners can share their thoughts, and which currently has around 5,000 members (facebook.com/groups/1692179291092203).

The podcast has had a number of hosts since it began in 2018, all employed by or connected to the CiRCE Institute. David Kern, the institute's multimedia director, began the project. Colleagues including Matt Bianco, Angelina Stanford, Andrew Kern, and Brian Phillips can also be heard in various podcasts. The most recent episodes are usually hosted by Tim McIntosh, who is a playwright, actor, and teacher, with either Heidi White, a teacher, editor, and author, or Sarah-Jane Bentley, billed as "a teacher in England and a CiRCE friend."

As mentioned, this review is based on the six episodes about *The Tempest* as an example of the podcast's content. These episodes are presented as friendly, informal discussions between McIntosh and White. The episodes open with audio extracts from the act under discussion; in this case, these are taken from the 2017 Royal Shakespeare Company production starring Simon Russell Beale as Prospero. There is also a comparison between Beale and Helen Mirren as Prospero/a using an excerpt taken from Julie Taymor's 2010 film. While the podcasts are divided into acts, they do not examine the whole of each act but usually a single scene or part of a scene. For example, the episode on act 3 concentrates on Ferdinand and Miranda's first meeting ("The Tempest: Act III"). As well as discussing the scene itself, the hosts also compare the pairing to other Shakespearean couples such as Romeo and Juliet and Rosalind and Orlando.

McIntosh and White assume at least some prior Shakespeare knowledge on the part of their audience, frequently referencing other plays and characters, as when they compare Caliban to Shylock. A potential listener would be well advised to have read the act under discussion before listening, and ideally to have read, watched, or listened to the whole play. CiRCE has a particular focus on "classical education," and listeners will also hear mention of Plato, Dante, and Rousseau. While it is not essential to be familiar with these writers, listeners may find they gain more from the podcasts if they have some prior knowledge. However, McIntosh and White do not limit their discussion to Shakespearean and classical texts: in their discussion of *The Tempest*, they also talk about C. S. Lewis's *The Chronicles of Narnia* and the films *Avatar*, *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*,

and *Dances with Wolves*. There is also much informal chat about the hosts' daily lives: during the course of the six parts on *The Tempest*, their personal discussion touches on how much snow they have had in their local area and what they are cooking for Christmas dinner.

In terms of the texts used, McIntosh recommends the Pelican editions of Shakespeare's plays, while White prefers the Folger versions and warns against the No Fear Shakespeare books because "it's important to read Shakespeare in its original language and not have it translated" ("The Tempest Q&A"). This might imply, along with the classical references, that this podcast leans towards the academic, but it is framed much more as a chat between friends that the audience is listening in on. Although they clearly have some experience with the texts, including on stage in McIntosh's case, both McIntosh and White position themselves as Shakespeare fans rather than experts, with comments such as "Shakespeare's really remarkable" ("The Tempest: Act II") scattered throughout. In the first episode on *The Tempest*, they enthuse about the play's "whimsical" nature and tell us it "speaks to Shakespeare's versatility as a playwright [...] there's something truly magical about *The Tempest*" ("The Tempest: Act I"). The podcast is evidently not rehearsed and sometimes feels a little underprepared: again, in that first episode, McIntosh struggles to remember the plot of the play and has to fumble for his notes before filling the audience in on the story. There is also sometimes a sense that the hosts are simply speculating on their topic rather than having any academic basis for their comments; in "The Tempest: Act IV," while discussing whether Shakespeare really wrote the plays, they suggest that he might have chosen to destroy his own "paper trail," seemingly unaware that most people of Shakespeare's time left very little in way of documentation after they died.

At times, listeners may find the content of the discussions in this podcast problematic, particularly in terms of race and gender. When discussing Caliban in the first episode on *The Tempest*, the hosts suggest that he has "a compelling counter argument" to Prospero's accusation of attempted rape, in that Prospero lied to him. In "The Tempest: Act III," White states that "it is Caliban himself that makes himself a slave because he rejects all civilizing influence," while in "The Tempest: Act V" she dismisses the "modern colonial interpretation" of Prospero, saying, "I don't think that's in the text." In a digression on the Rape of the Sabine Women ("The Tempest: Act IV"), McIntosh states that "rape is not the right word, that word means something different today, but abduction is the

right word,” despite the story suggesting that the women were taken to be wives and mothers, not necessarily willingly. In the final Q&A episode, a discussion on how Shakespeare can be performed to address “current social agendas” singles out the BBC’s *Hollow Crown* production of *Richard II*. The hosts raise concerns about the “homosexual” interpretation of the main character and the way the production “really plays up the messianic themes of the play,” with White concluding that this is “an evil perspective,” despite admitting that she thought it was a “great” production.

There are now more than 100 episodes of *The Play’s the Thing* podcast, including a special episode on *Cymbeline*, “one of Shakespeare’s weirdest plays”; a “Family’s First Shakespeare” episode, in which McIntosh’s brother, sister, and mom remember their first encounters with Shakespeare; and three episodes on the “Life of Shakespeare.” There is also a special edition with James Shapiro discussing his book, *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (2020). For those who already have some knowledge of Shakespeare’s plays and warm to the hosts’ informal style and Christian outlook, these podcasts are like listening to old friends discussing their favourite plays over coffee. McIntosh and White encourage listeners to interact with the podcast via their social media platforms, in particular Facebook. This is also how listeners are able to submit questions for the Q&A episodes. The podcast’s target audience seems to be the enthusiastic (probably Christian) theatregoer rather than the student or academic, although all might find interesting digressions to expand their thinking about the texts. But those looking for something to support their studies or teaching of Shakespeare’s plays might prefer to seek out something more academically focused, as this podcast gives little support for those wanting to explore the texts in more scholarly detail or from different perspectives.

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