

# The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's "The Tempest" (W.H. Auden: Critical Editions)

W. H. Auden

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Written in the midst of World War II after its author emigrated to America, "The Sea and the Mirror" is not merely a great poem but ranks as one of the most profound interpretations of Shakespeare's final play in the twentieth century. As W. H. Auden told friends, it is "really about the Christian conception of art" and it is "my Ars Poetica, in the same way I believe *The Tempest* to be Shakespeare's." This is the first critical edition. Arthur Kirsch's introduction and notes make the poem newly accessible to readers of Auden, readers of Shakespeare, and all those interested in the relation of life and literature—those two classic themes alluded to in its title.

The poem begins in a theater after a performance of *The Tempest* has ended. It includes a moving speech in verse by Prospero bidding farewell to Ariel, a section in which the supporting characters speak in a dazzling variety of verse forms about their experiences on the island, and an extravagantly inventive section in prose that sees the uncivilized Caliban address the audience on art--an unalloyed example of what Auden's friend Oliver Sachs has called his "wild, extraordinary and demonic imagination."

Besides annotating Auden's allusions and sources (in notes after the text), Kirsch provides extensive quotations from his manuscript drafts, permitting the reader to follow the poem's genesis in Auden's imagination. This book, which incorporates for the first time previously ignored corrections that Auden made on the galleys of the first edition, also provides an unusual opportunity to see the effect of one literary genius upon another.



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