

The Tempest

'The islanders'

Ariel

In early myth harpies were personifications of whirlwinds and hurricanes, thus highly appropriate to a tempest. Ariel is connected to music and the air; he embodies fire and air, Caliban embodies earth and water (the elements out of which Renaissance thinkers argued all things were made). They are opposites yet complementary, representing different but not incompatible aspects of humanity. Ariel may also represent Prospero's imaginative, quick witted and sensitive spirit.

Caliban owes much to the beast-man who would take part in the jigs or burlesque afterpieces which usually concluded Renaissance performances. The Arden edition discusses possible etymologies for his name, noting that 'Caliban is an anagram for cannibal' and that 'Cannibals were topical in Shakespeare's day ... partly because reports from the New World insisted that some natives consumed human flesh ... and simultaneous reports from sub-Saharan Africa, often drawing on ancient myths, made similar claims'(p.31). As they point out later, the English accused the Irish of cannibalism too.

Prospero has educated Caliban so he has human accomplishments, in particular language, traditionally the feature which distinguishes humans from animals. Caliban's mother was a witch, which scarcely makes us sympathetic to her or her progeny, although we only have Prospero's account of her, which may be some sort of self-justificatory myth.

Caliban's only known parent was a witch and he was educated by a prince. These conflicting forces embody the 'nature versus nurture' debate ie what makes us the way we are. Prospero declares that Caliban is 'a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick' (4.1. I 188-9). He feels that his efforts to educate / nurture Caliban have been wasted; Caliban's nature has asserted itself in spite of moral teaching, for example in the attempted rape of Miranda. Prospero judges Caliban according to moral standards he has no concept of; we have to ask if the fault lies in Caliban or Prospero. Caliban appears to be amoral rather than immoral; if he's acting purely from instinct and has not internalised the moral code Prospero has sought to impose, he may be strangely innocent – he can no more change his nature than Miranda could change hers and become wicked. Caliban may represent the uncivilised instincts of human nature; Prospero attempts to simply repress him but ultimately has to acknowledge him.

Caliban is able to rationalise to some extent (reason, along with language, has traditionally been seen as differentiating us from animals). The way Caliban sees it, Miranda is the only woman on the island and he wants to people it with little Calibans, perhaps through a natural animal instinct to reproduce, perhaps to regain some kind of control of his island – he is currently the only one of his kind.

Caliban is appalling; his language can be brutal, beyond reason. He suggests to Stephano that, having seized Prospero's books and thus disempowered him, he could 'with a log / Batter his skull, or paunch him at a stake [stab him in the gut], / Or cut his wezand [windpipe] with thy knife'(3.2.89-91).

Yet he also demonstrates a degree of sensitivity and even generosity which Prospero clearly hasn't sought to develop. When Prospero arrived on the island he petted Caliban, who loved him and taught him about the island; Prospero exploited this new-found knowledge to subjugate Caliban. Caliban points out that the education he received has done him no good: he acknowledges 'you taught me language' but undercuts this by stating simply that he learned how to curse. Prospero has tried to educate Caliban for his own ends, imposing his language and values for his own convenience, trying to recreate Caliban in his own image. Caliban's resentment is in some respects justified.

Prospero refers to Caliban as a devil after the attempted rape and rejects him brutally, inflicting painful punishment when he fails to live up to Prospero's standards. Yet Prospero ultimately comments, 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine', recognising his part of the responsibility for the problems between him and Caliban. He may also be acknowledging the animality in his own nature. It may also, as the Arden points out, 'refer to a dusky skin'(p.48).

Caliban exists partly in his relation to his anti-type, Miranda. Both are innocent in a sense but Miranda has never suffered; hers is a lucky innocence. Caliban is unlucky in his upbringing; Prospero has been a good and caring father to Miranda but a cruel and distant father-figure to Caliban. He treats Caliban's insubordination far more seriously than the political

insurrection and assassination plot of his enemies; he seems to have a different set of standards, a different level of respect, for his fellow Europeans.

We cannot avoid Caliban's ferocity, his delight in contemplating violence towards Prospero. He is problematic because he is not fully human and therefore human standards do not apply; he hasn't 'fallen', he isn't an image of postlapsarian man. Caliban makes no claim to humanity. His mother was of course human, albeit a witch, exiled from Algiers and so possibly Algerian. Prospero tells us that Caliban was fathered by 'the devil' but his parentage remains obscure. What is clear is that he was born on the island and lived there for some twelve years before Prospero arrived. The Arden editors acknowledge, '*The Tempest* is indeterminate, yet the bulk of the evidence points to a Caliban who is, despite his possibly demonic parentage and unspecified deformity, essentially human'(p.34). As they point out, the other characters refer to Caliban in more or less human terms on occasion but are quick to label him as monster and stress his non-human (or at least non recognisably human in their terms) characteristics at other points.

Caliban is regarded by Prospero and his fellow Europeans as 'other', although they fail to recognise that on the island, they are in fact the 'other'. Caliban may also be read as an individualist in a culture which fears individual energy. Whatever he is, he represents an element of human nature which can't be ignored; *The Tempest* forces us to confront it, together with Prospero's efforts to control it.

The island

Ideas regarding the discovery of the so-called New World are reflected in the choice of an unnamed island for the play's setting. Caliban seeking love or servitude and claiming kingship of the island is reminiscent of contemporary reports of native peoples.

The island is described differently by different characters. In Act 2 sc 1 Gonzalo sees the grass as green, Antonio sees it as tawny; we are faced with the subjective nature of simple everyday experience. It may be that Antonio's cynicism leads to him viewing the world as somewhat sterile, where Gonzalo sees fertility. Gonzalo refers to it as a pastoral paradise (important in the late plays – think of *The Winter's Tale*). The air is sweet and the island is green and lush, reflecting romance tradition, suggesting all that is natural and innocent, all that is necessary to life, 'everything advantageous to life'. Gonzalo's description owes much to his imagination; the island inspires a utopian dream in him, which his companions recognise to be absurd. By the end of the play he has come to see the island as a 'fearful country'.

The island is no Eden – it's not perfect even without Prospero's influence – it's described as full of 'torment, trouble, wonder and amazement' (5.1. 1.104-6). The island functions as an image of the human realm to some extent, mirroring the characters' hopes, fears and moral behaviour.

The island is important thematically in the representation of what we would term Colonialism; as the Arden editors phrase it, it's 'a theatrical microcosm of the imperial paradigm'(p.40).

The Arden points usefully to the 'growing flood of fact and myth – some of it in print, much of it oral'(p.40) on colonial expeditions, noting that 'the voluminous literature of European exploration was rife with tempests, wrecks, miracles, monsters, devils and wondrous natives'(p.41). The editors remind us, 'Shakespeare, like any literate Londoner of his day, must have been familiar with many of those texts and, very likely, had seen – perhaps even conversed with – one or more of the approximately 25 American natives who lived for a time in early seventeenth-century England'(pp.43-4).

The Arden editors note that 'Information was abundant about Western Europe's ongoing exploration of Africa and its brazen enslavement of African people' and that 'English commentators in Shakespeare's day were almost wholly indifferent to the plight of captured Africans but not to the fate of captured English sailors.'(p.49) They're referring to the North African and Mediterranean pirates, particularly active in the 17thc, who captured and enslaved white Europeans for slave labour or, in the case of the rich, occasionally for ransom. As Muslims, they had no concern over enslaving Christians, regarded as heathen; in much the same way, Europeans dismissed the rights of Muslims as 'heathen'.

Of course Colonialism operated much closer to home, in Ireland. The Arden notes that the representation of Caliban may reflect 'the invective that Edmund Spenser, Barnabe Rich and many of their literary contemporaries heaped on the inhabitants of the island that England sought vigorously but unsuccessfully to subdue, culturally as well as militarily'(p.51). They cite Rich's *A New Description of Ireland*, where the Irish are described as: 'rude, uncleanlie, and uncivill ... cruel, bloudie minded, apt and ready to commit any kind of mischief', even 'to rebel against their [English]

princes' (Arden p.52). They also note the importance of music to Irish folk culture (*The Tempest* is acknowledged to be Shakespeare's most musical play) and rightly draw attention to 'the patriarchal quality of the imposed colonial rule' (p.52) in both Ireland and the island of the play.

When Prospero arrived Caliban existed in a state of nature. Prospero assumed power and while he did some good, freeing Ariel and educating Caliban (the play is ambivalent about how valuable this is), he also subjected Caliban to slavery and punishment. Even Ariel simply exchanged imprisonment for a kind of slavery – he has no choice but to serve Prospero and has to remind him at the close of the play that he promised to free him after twelve years' service. Prospero's power on the island has no justification: it isn't hereditary, natural, or a result of a divinely ordained hierarchy, any of which would give him the right to power in Renaissance terms. Think of the earlier *Henry V*, which gives us an idealised view of royal power and authority.

Caliban's rather touching response to Stephano and Trinculo makes us conscious of how badly Prospero has behaved towards him. He cringes to them, like a beaten dog, associating human beings with persecution and torment. This inevitably lowers our opinion of Prospero.

Prospero maintains power through violence; Caliban just wants to be himself and enjoy living as he did prior to Prospero's arrival, when he was free.

There are numerous references in the play to contemporary Colonial issues. Prospero regularly refers to Caliban as a 'savage', 'slave' and 'devil', dehumanising him in Act 1 sc 2 as 'A thing most brutish'. Caliban in turn resists Prospero's Colonialist discourse, 'This island's mine by Sycorax my mother', / Which thou tak'st from me' (1.2 1.331-2).

The New World is clearly one possible context, alluded to specifically in references to Setebos, whom Caliban and his mother worship: Setebos was worshipped in Patagonia. Ariel refers in Act 1 sc 2 to 'the still-vexed Bermudas'.

Ian Johnston problematises (but does not dismiss) the Colonial reading of the text, arguing that 'it requires us to see Caliban as representative of an oppressed culture or class (either a Native American Indian or an Irish peasant or a member of the proletariat) ... Yet he is the only one of his kind ... and is a relatively recent arrival there. He has no culture matrix, no family, and no cultural history. So I'm not sure that the image of cultural oppression is particularly clear.' [I've put a link to Johnston's lecture on IBIS for you on the 'useful links on Shakespeare' area. It's well worth a look.]

I would disagree with him here. He is of course right to point to Caliban's uniqueness and lack of cultural matrix as he puts it but I'm not convinced that that cancels out what strikes me as clearly exploitative language and behaviour on Prospero's part. Caliban's uniqueness may point more to him symbolising the dispossessed (among other things) rather than being a recognisable human type. Both he and Ariel may operate as symbols in a dramatic consideration of human issues but they are not human and do not find easy parallels in the human world.

Caliban, together with the other 'islanders' Gonzalo refers to in Act 3 sc 3 1.29-33, clearly suggests a Colonial context. Interestingly, Gonzalo's account confuses two different views of native peoples, one as 'monstrous', the other as what Rousseau later referred to as 'the noble savage', uncorrupted by civilisation (much distrusted by philosophers such as Rousseau in the Romantic period) and living in a state of nature, a kind of pastoral golden age: 'Their manners are more gentle, kind, than of / Our human generation' (1.31-3). Montaigne's account of native Brazilians, cited in the Arden (p.45) comes close to this kind of benevolent paternalistic approach (which didn't get in the way of Colonialism). Florio's translation of Montaigne appeared in 1603, painting a picture of a people living by the laws of nature.

Political context

Prospero was ruler of Milan. While Italy was known in Shakespeare's England for its artistic achievements (the Renaissance was of course born in Italy), it was notorious for its politics, summed up in the Elizabethan and Jacobean imagination in the figure of Machiavelli, a statesman and political theorist (1469-1527). In *The Prince* (1513) Machiavelli discussed appropriate strategies for those in power who wanted to retain authority at all costs. Machiavelli embodied the devil to many Elizabethans and Jacobeans.

Renaissance England saw in Machiavelli an image of power-hungry, devious, manipulative politicians who would stop at nothing to gain or maintain power. This kind of cunning, corrupt and murderous political world was seen as characteristically Italian, specifically Machiavellian.

The early 17th century saw a crisis in values: conflict between the religious traditions of the Middle Ages and the secular bias of the Renaissance, between social order and individualism. A general corruption of social values seemed to have set in, a universal egotism confirming the dark legacy of Machiavelli. Francis Bacon commented in 1605: 'We are much beholden to Machiavel and others...that write what men do and not what they ought to do.'

Clearly *The Tempest* operates partly as a political romance, a means of exploring contemporary political power struggles. In the political pre-history to the play, Alonso, King of Naples and Antonio, Prospero's brother, usurped Prospero, ruler of Milan. The action of the play is precipitated by the shipwreck which Prospero controls – the political conspirators and courtiers Sebastian, Alonso, Gonzalo etc are all on board, although Ferdinand, Alonso's son, is washed up alone. Not content with one instance of political treachery, Antonio and Sebastian plot to take the crown.

In Act 1 Prospero refers to his past political self as 'a prince of power'; he spent so much time and energy researching magic that he neglected his political responsibilities, surrendering his authority to his brother and unwittingly paving the way for usurpation. He paints a picture of a corrupt political world, where power and corruption are clearly linked. Sebastian plans to kill his brother for the kingship, Caliban wants to make Stephano his king (through the comic corruption of alcohol and the rather more serious corruption of power). As the play progresses Prospero reassesses his attitudes to power and acknowledges his responsibility to right the wrongs which occurred through his negligence.

Prospero's use of magic to manipulate his political enemies may be a comment on the theatricality of the pomp and circumstance which accompanies political power, particularly royal power. We see this in the court of both Elizabeth and James, exploiting thrones, robes, language, symbolic representation for political effect, keeping people in awe and demonstrating power. Royal robes in particular symbolise power, as of course does the sceptre (Prospero has a magic staff).

Elizabeth died in 1603 so when *The Tempest* was first performed in 1611, James I was on the throne. Shakespeare's company name changed to reflect the change in patronage, to 'The King's Men' or 'King's Company'.

Blackstone, writing a legal history including the reigns of Elizabeth and James (*Commentaries On The Laws of England*, 1765-9), articulates the difference in political style between Elizabeth and James: 'Queen Elizabeth ... had almost the same legal powers, and sometimes exerted them as roughly, as their father King Henry the eighth ... She probably, or her able advisors, had penetration enough to discern how the power of the kingdom had gradually shifted its channel [giving Parliament more power] and wisdom enough not to provoke the commons to discover and feel their strength ... Such, in short, were her circumstances, her necessities, her wisdom, and her good disposition, that never did a prince so long and so intirely ... reign in the affections of the people.'

His account of James is markedly different: 'the claim of a more absolute power inherent in the kingly office than had ever been carried into practice, soon awakened the sleeping lion'. The people 'examined into the divinity of this claim, and found it weakly and fallaciously supported ... The leaders felt the pulse of the nation ... and accordingly resisted and opposed it, whenever the pusillanimous temper of the reigning monarch had courage to put it to the trial'.

The Tempest dramatises issues of power, its source and its right use, which were of significant interest to contemporary audiences. The figure of Prospero is central to this debate. He's the central character and the voice we hear most but we don't see the world of the play simply through him; he doesn't function as a consistent mouthpiece for Shakespeare.

As a duke, 'neglecting worldly ends' and seeking to observe others in disguise to bring them to their senses, he's reminiscent of the duke in *Measure for Measure*; like the Duke he manipulate events but unlike the Duke, he doesn't appear to be omnipotent. As a magician he recalls Oberon.

Prospero can be cruel if he thinks it's justified. He tells Miranda that Ferdinand looks just like Caliban to people who are used to the polite world and all its attractive young courtiers. Prospero is clearly learned, although there is some personal

tension between his 'nobler reason' and his 'fury', which for Shakespeare connoted uncontrollable, destructive anger, even madness. We see that he is capable of the lower motives of Jacobean tragedy, vengeance and malice. Prospero regularly punishes Ariel by making him relive the torments of Sycorax. This turns Ariel from a powerful, free sprite – like figure to a distorted frightened figure, a 'malignant thing' to be confined like Caliban.

This raises issues of parenthood but also usurpation. Caliban refers to Prospero as a father figure at first but he has clearly usurped Caliban, who resentfully speaks of a time when he was 'mine own king'. Prospero is quick to exploit his power and can be somewhat cruel in his desire to control; it's interesting that he never seems to doubt his right to rule, to impose his will, be it on his newly acquired subjects, Ariel and Caliban, or, more paternalistically, on Miranda: he controls Miranda and Ferdinand, for example, by threatening confinement and punishment. Prospero insists that this, together with the tests, are for Miranda's benefit, 'lest too light winning / Make the prize light'.

Miranda becomes more independent from her father as the play progresses, even questioning him in Act 3 sc 1, wishing the logs he's insisted Ferdinand bear would be burnt by lightning. She's unschooled in the courtly game of love but she demonstrates dignity and modesty in her dealings with Ferdinand, a mixture of innocence and 'bashful cunning'. Prospero initially sees their love as potentially disruptive (parents commonly oppose love matches in romance tradition). He comes to see its purity, a rarity in the corrupt world he knows, and prays for blessings on 'that which breeds between 'em'.

The relationship between Miranda and Ferdinand is of course politically significant: the marriage will bring political stability by joining the two royal houses (Alonso is Ferdinand's father). The traditional romance motif of marriage between members of opposing families represents social harmony; as Johnston phrases it in his lecture, 'Their love ... firmly under the control of their moral feelings, will, in a sense, regenerate Milan.'

Magic

Prospero is significant as political, even Colonial ruler, as father but also as magus.

James I, like many of his subjects, was fascinated by the supernatural. The Arden cites James's *Daemonologie*, which argued that witches and magicians served 'both one Master, although in diverse fashions' (Arden p.63). The second quotation is particularly interesting in relation to Prospero: 'divers men having attained to a great perfection in learning ... are at last entised, that where lawfull artes or sciences failes, to satisfie their restles mindes, even to seeke to that black and unlawfull science of *Magic*.'

Caliban, who knows about magic, refers to Prospero specifically as 'A sorcerer, that by his cunning hath / Cheated me of this island' (3:2 l.41-2).

Blackstone, an 18thc legal historian writing about the seventeenth century, explains that 'inchantment or sorcery' is deemed by law to be an 'offence against God and religion', punished by being burning at the stake. Interestingly, Blackstone assumes that sorcery is real, noting 'the ridiculous stories ... and the many impostures and delusions that have been discovered in all ages [which] are enough to demolish all faith in such a dubious crime; if the contrary evidence were not also extremely strong.'

James brought in legislation enacting that 'all persons invoking any evil spirit, or consulting, covenanting with, entertaining, employing ... any evil spirit; or taking up dead bodies from their graves to be used in any witchcraft, sorcery, charm or enchantment; or killing or otherwise hurting any person by such infernal arts; should ... suffer death'. For simply trying, not succeeding, 'to hurt any man or beast ... he or she should suffer imprisonment and pillory for the first offence and death for the second.' This definition is particularly interesting in relation to Prospero, who tells us: 'graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers, ope'd and let 'em forth' (5.1.l.48-9). He doesn't tell us why he raised these people but it clearly points to a contemporary definition of sorcery. Renaissance people would have associated the power to raise the dead with God (Christ raised Lazarus, for example). Prospero is appropriating a power which human beings should not aspire to. This dark side to his power is strengthened by our witnessing his callous treatment of Caliban. It is significant that Prospero comes to refer to his power as 'rough magic' and solemnly vows to give it up [to 'abjure' means to renounce something; it's akin to taking a vow]. The audience is likely to welcome his decision to break his staff, the symbol of his power, and to bury it deep in the ground; his magic tome will be also placed out of human reach.

The play doesn't define Prospero's power unambiguously; it ranges from entertaining illusions to, if we believe Prospero, controlling the natural world (again, a divine prerogative to the Renaissance mind). When addressing the elves, whose

power he uses with his own, he asserts, 'I have bedimmed / The noontide sun', suggesting considerable power; he continues, 'called forth the mutinous winds ... to the dread-rattling thunder / Have I given fire' (5.1.41-5).

We see Prospero's magic in the raising of the storm, a clear sign of disorder, but also the repairing of the ship, mysterious musical airs (unnatural but not always disturbing, recalling to the audience the link between art and magic) but also unexplained pains inflicted on Caliban. He conjures up a magical banquet and makes it disappear at will. In giving up his magic Prospero may be acknowledging that, since it is beyond nature, it is unnatural and unacceptable.

The moral implications of humans having more than natural power was a significant Renaissance theme – think of Marlowe's Faustus, aspiring to a kind of power God never intended. In *The Tempest* Shakespeare locates this debate in a political context, the earthly power of Kings and princes.

Prospero comes to see that power doesn't exist in a moral vacuum; the propriety of great power may lie more in human nature than power itself. Prospero's great power derived from studying magic; he learns that studying human nature is more necessary.

Prospero is fundamentally good but he is irascible, sometimes cruel, jealous and, when he loses emotional control, capable of disturbing desires for vengeance and even malice. His most significant moral act is the forgiveness of Sebastian, Antonio and Alonso but this 'rarer action' has to be learned from the non human Ariel, suggesting that mercy, traditionally one of the human virtues, may not be innate. Ariel tells Prospero that if he could see the sufferings he inflicts on those he's punishing, he would feel for them, arguing that if he (Ariel) were human, he would too. Prospero has to learn to understand and acknowledge his own flawed humanity before he can empathise with others; this new engagement with other humans, the recognition of a shared humanity, implies some humility. It leads to his more enlightened behaviour at the close of the play, when he has moved from isolation and supernatural power to empathy and a responsible assumption of the natural power allotted to him.

Prospero's reflection, 'the rarer action is in mercy rather than in vengeance' is part personal epiphany, part declaration of intent. This raises issues of penitence and forgiveness which are central to the play. Prospero says he will forgive the traitors if they're penitent but the only one who shows some penitence is Alonso, the least wicked. The others are sorry their plans haven't worked out rather than being sorry that they plotted in the first place. Antonio, the one who as wronged Prospero most directly (as his brother as well as his usurper), scarcely speaks. If the play was a morality play centring on repentance, the play would address Antonio's inner self, the psychological progress of repentance.

Virtue is frequently referred to in the play. Mercy or forgiveness would suffice but virtue has connotations of magnanimity, nobility, civic 'virtu'. There were four Medieval virtues: prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. Those of you who have read *Macbeth* will recall that they also feature in the Kingly virtues which Malcolm lists in Act 4 sc 3: 'The King-becoming graces, / As Justice, Verity, Temp'rance, Stableness, / Bounty, Perseverance, Mercy, Lowliness, / Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude'.

Prospero has learned about human virtue; it may be deliberate that the punishment he metes out to the erstwhile conspirators is not severe. By the end of the play he has come to desire restoration, both personal and political, not vengeance.

Theatricality

Prospero's power is also associated with art; in Act 4 for eg he refers to the betrothal masque, the play-within-the-play, as 'some vanity of mine art', signifying that the very imaginative art which creates the masque also destroys it. Prospero draws attention to the transience of the illusion of art, reminding us that life too is transient. Remembering Miranda's youth, he apologises for imposing his cynicism; as T.S.Eliot commented, 'mankind cannot bear very much reality'. Prospero, like the play itself, enchants and disenchanters yet we are left with the power of the beauty of imaginative language, a sense in which imaginative reality may transcend the disillusion. We see the reasons behind Prospero's cynicism and have to acknowledge his wisdom but, like Caliban, we see the value of artistic delight, illusions of life.

The Tempest, like *M N's Dream*, interrogates the nature of theatricality and illusion, the interaction of the natural and the supernatural, different realms of existence. It anticipates the Romantic interest in different states of consciousness, the

significance of sleep, vision, the 'waking dream' as Keats phrased it. Many of the characters exist on the boundary between sleep and waking. Prospero causes Miranda to fall asleep, Ariel's music lulls all but Sebastian and Antonio to sleep; Alonso's 'wondrous heavy with sleep'. Antonio wonders if they're awake or not, referring to 'a sleepy language', the notion of being 'asleep with eyes wide open'. Caliban sleeps every afternoon, blurring reality and dream, past and present, telling us sadly, 'I cried to dream again'. Miranda's memories of 'the real world' before the island, cannot be distinguished from dream. Ferdinand's experience of the island is one he recognises to be dream-like.

This dream-like quality draws attention to the illusion of the play, making it difficult to take bloody plans of murder seriously; they're more a dream of usurpation than a possible reality. Their plans function more like a play-within-the-play, as a re-enactment of the past. Their plans make no sense in the current context, miles away from Milan but they are significant as an image of an unresolved past whose implications are far-reaching; ambition and the appetite for power still exist in the dream but their significance is limited and their objectives are absurd. Their ambitious dreams may say something about the futility of human dreams in a fallen world; this fits with Prospero's reference to the masque as a 'vanity'.

Prospero tells Ferdinand after breaking off the masque, 'We are such stuff / As dreams are made on', rendering explicit the play's implicit consideration of the difficulties of interpreting art and life. Taken with 'our little life is rounded with a sleep', we have a view of life as a dream surrounded by sleep, much as the island is surrounded by the sea (which mingles with sleep in the imagery of the play). Thus the island represents dream / life; the sea represents death / eternity.

The ultimate resolution to the problems the play poses lie outside the theatre. As Johnston argues in his lecture, 'there is no sense here that any appropriate life could be based on remaining on the island'. He goes on, 'The theatre – that magical world ... can, like Prospero's magic, educate us into a better sense of ourselves, into a final acceptance of the world' but he notes the limits of the theatre; in the conclusion to the play 'no-one is asking any awkward questions'. He points to the irony of the unresolved ending as 'present but not corrosive', like Prospero's cynicism. His summation of the theatricality of the play is persuasive and very pertinent: 'Dreams may be the stuff of life, they may energize us, delight us, educate us, and reconcile us to each other, but we cannot live life as a dream. We may carry what we learn in the world of illusion with us into life ... Life must be lived historically, not aesthetically.'

The Conclusion [in which, to be Fieldingesque, nothing is concluded]

The Tempest isn't an argument but a dramatic exploration of metaphorical ways of seeing the world. It resists any attempt to read it as a neat allegory eg Prospero represents the imagination, Caliban embodies brute understanding, Ferdinand represents youth and Miranda abstract womanhood. There is some truth in this but one can also read Prospero as James I, the play as an allegory for the politically troubled London.

Of course the play is also about Renaissance ideas concerning nature and art, the different levels of life, animal, human, intellectual. Both characters and audience struggle with the problem of interpretation in this play it resists the very interpretative effort it demands. Our only option as an audience is to accept the play on its own terms, with Coleridgean 'willing suspension of disbelief', to approach it with what Keats termed 'negative capability'.

A few final notes...

The plot owes much to **romance tradition**: miraculous escape at sea, the separation and rivalry of brothers, a magician exerting power over his enemies, a prince wooing an unknown maiden later discovered to be of royal blood. These are popular incidents in Renaissance narrative romance. The deposition of a duke and the plot to kill a King were not uncommon in fact or fiction. For Shakespeare's audience, the very setting denotes a romance: the Mediterranean was regarded as exotic and somewhat mysterious, enchanting and of course remote.

Folklore also informs the imaginary world created in the play. Elements of folk tradition include: dressing in borrowed fine clothes, monsters offering gifts and oddly enough, log bearing. Folklore had strong links with community festivities - reapers and water nymphs dancing, the drawing of the characters into a circle, punishment by ducking in filthy water or by madness, songs of invitation and summer, a concluding procession – such practices were common in popular festivities. We see this in the betrothal masque, with nymphs representing air and water and sicklemen representing fire and earth (the four elements believed to be the foundation for all things). Their dance provides an image of harmony.

The Final Act

In Act 5 sc 1 Prospero's self-knowledge becomes apparent in the change from references to 'my so potent art' (recalled by his entrance in his robes, symbolising power, as seen in the first Act) to 'But this rough magic I here abjure'. The drama is clearly inner rather than public at this point.

Prospero operates as a poet figure, whose art is magic. His relationship with his art is problematic; he was so immersed in his studies that he lost interest in his political responsibilities yet it is through his art that he is able to rectify the wrongs – the art which led to rejecting responsibility now leads to embracing it. When he finally abjures it we have a clear sense that he does so willingly. He's accomplished all he needs to, Miranda's future is secure and we get the impression that he is laying down a burden, as if the magic which once brought power and was so deeply attractive has itself become a responsibility.

A less optimistic reading of Prospero would point to the fact that he took up magical power and used it to his own ends; he now renounces it for his own ends, nearing his own death, at a point when he no longer needs it.

Ultimately Prospero can't protect Miranda, who regards his enemies naively as part of a 'brave new world'. He responds to her youthful naivety and hope with the cynical, world-weary, 'Tis new to thee'. After all, three of the men Miranda finds so impressive are usurpers and would-be murderers.

Yet there is some hope as he lays aside his robe, symbolising magical power (think of the clothing imagery denoting royalty and authority in *Macbeth*), and is able to acknowledge her tears; they become much closer, suggesting that his supernatural power is incompatible with close human relationships.

Prospero's magic also represents a form of disorder – through magic, he creates the storm, repairs the ship, makes things invisible, punishes Caliban with strange inner pains, creates music. When he is recreating order from chaos (one of the roles ancient rulers took on in myth) he turns his back on his magic. In comedies things move towards order – the world has to survive without the magic of a Prospero or a Puck.

Prospero's relationship with Ariel finds no clear resolution; Ariel doesn't respond to Prospero's affectionate farewell, which perhaps indicates that Prospero doesn't know Ariel as well as he thinks he does; he simply knows how to control him and exploit his powers. He may be romanticising him, seeing him in his own human image, imposing human emotions onto a non human; it may be that he is externalising his own affectionate feelings onto the figure of Ariel: 'I shall miss thee / But yet thou shalt have thy freedom' (l 95-6).

The play gains comic impetus as Shakespeare re-establishes the dream-like quality. Caliban determines to 'sue for grace'. He cries to Setebos, his mother's god, and comes to recognise that wonder leads to fear. He is forced to see himself as a 'thrice double ass' and submit to order. The audience is left to ponder whether this is a 'proper' acceptance of slavery or an emerging freedom.

Epilogue

Prospero's power brought isolation, even despair, although he didn't recognise it until this point (as is often pointed out, his very name suggests the very opposite). The references to 'prayer', 'mercy' and 'free' throughout the play broaden the scope of the epilogue and prepare for the challenge of the last couplet in which 'crimes' and 'indulgence' feature in a direct appeal to the audience. Our applause is an act of identification, an affirmation of hope against the despair we've witnessed and may witness in our own world; the self-conscious theatricality invites us to be aware of our own role outside the theatre.

Court and Country

The Renaissance court was the political, social, cultural and fashion centre of the nation; it was also regarded as the poet's natural home (Petrarch had insisted that poets were the equals of kings). In Shakespeare the pastoral world often figured the world of the court: in *The Winter's Tale*, *Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It* etc country pursuits figure a world of sophistication and power, (dancing, singing, making flower chains - not real country pursuits!). *The Tempest* doesn't represent a court directly but it takes courtly figures out of their political context and places them in a realm of pastoral possibilities. Shakespeare is exploiting the popularity of pastoral poetry, which articulates a longing for an idealised, golden, carefree imaginary country, full of youth, music and beauty, a world evoked by Milton: 'Such sights as youthful poets dream / On summer eves by haunted stream'.

The pastoral gives the imagination free rein but locates the text within a recognisable English context, evoking English settings with hedgerows and English flowers.

Prospero's power is associated in the text with imagination and art but also nature. He makes use of the natural world, most cruelly in threatening to imprison Ariel in the 'knotty entrails' of an oak.

The Sea / Storm

The sea can act as a powerful image of destructive power, as in *Titus Andronicus*: 'I stand as one upon a rock / Environ'd with a wilderness of sea'. In *Pericles* it functions as an image of the anger and power of the gods. The shipwrecked Pericles pleads:

Yet cease your ire, you angry stars of heaven!
Wind, rain, and thunder, remember earthly man
Is but a substance that must yield to you' (2.1. 1.1-3)

Thomas Nashe pointed to the cosmic implications of storms, which human beings pick up on instinctively, 'Who heareth the thunder, that thinks not of God'.

In romance tradition the sea often separates loved ones; shipwreck is a popular motif. Think of *Twelfth Night* for example. Shakespeare exploits the drama inherent in the shipwrecks of romance but also makes symbolic use of the power of the sea and the storms often associated with it.

In *The Tempest* the storm acts as an image of chaos, reflecting the uncertainty of political and other kinds of power (magic, patriarchal family, art). The Boatswain's language reflects this, telling Antonio (the usurper), 'You do assist the storm', 'What care these roarers for the name of king?' Social and political disorder is figured in the plot to kill Alonso, Caliban planning to kill Prospero.

Miranda reads the storm as a portent of chaos, expecting chaos and suffering to follow.

In *King Lear* the storm is a projection in the macrocosm (outer world) of the tempest in the microcosm (inner world). Lear hears thunder and knows that what he's feared will come – 'I shall go mad'. The storm symbolises the mental disintegration of Lear himself but also the break-up of society and the threat to the universe itself under the impact of ingratitude and treachery, both personal and political.

The storms in *Twelfth Night* and *Lear* are of course natural. What is particularly interesting in *The Tempest* is that Prospero causes the storm, providing a clear and powerful link between his magical powers and the natural world. Prospero declares, 'To the dread rattling thunder / Have I given fire,' suggesting god-like power. *The Tempest* explores the need for order, in nature, human life and art. The storm itself provides a structuring metaphor for chaos and human helplessness.

The Sub-Plot

Fear exists even in the comic sub-plots, with Trinculo's trembling (2.2 1.9) and Caliban's expectation of punishment. Stephano's ego delights in Caliban's flattering image of him, 'That's a brave god'(l. 109); after all, in his imagination he casts himself in the role of king. Caliban's response to alcohol verges on religious zeal; since this is all they bring him, it makes the conspirators look vulgar and contemptible. He comes to see they are fools, declaring, 'I'll be wise hereafter'. But when he first meets them Caliban comically celebrates finding a possible new king, drunkenly howling and crying repeatedly 'freedom'. This naïve hope that a new ruler must be better, is undercut by Stephano's bullying; the comic sub-plot here mirrors the primary: Stephano, like Prospero, assumes power over Caliban without question. He exploits this kingly image in Act 3 sc 2, where Caliban endeavours to enlist his help in gaining revenge on Prospero, offering Miranda as bait. Stephano's posturing fits the chaotic revelry but again the primary plot makes itself felt: Caliban comments, 'That's not the right tune' and Ariel intervenes with the right tune ie Prospero's, again turning comedy to fear. Caliban shows his childlike side, recognising their fear and trying to make them feel better by a dream of riches falling from heaven. For Caliban, as for Stephano, Trinculo and of course Ferdinand and Miranda, the world of the imagination can be comforting, liberating. The comics in Act 3 sc 3 leave the scene singing, 'Thought is free'. Yet we see the limitations of the imaginary world in this play, its insecurity, as evidenced in Prospero destroying the masque in Act 4. The masque represents his own imagination, his 'fancies' yet he chooses to destroy it and likens all reality to a dream.

Evanthius (writing in late Roman times)

'in comedy the characters are of moderate estate, the passions and dangers are mild, the outcome of the action is happy; but exactly the opposite is true of tragedy: the characters are great, the dangers severe, the conclusion sad. Furthermore, in comedy things are upset at the beginning and peaceful at the close; in tragedy things take place in the reverse order. Tragedies express the view that life should be rejected, comedies that it should be embraced. Finally, the events of

comedy are always fictitious, those of tragedy are often true and taken from history.' Cited in *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, ed. Laurence Lerner, Penguin, 1970, p.299.

© Dr Beth Swan, www.english-lecturer.co.uk