The New World and Role of Providence in ***The Tempest***

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Abstract:

It has been suggested by almost every critic of the Tempest that the play has deep and significant relation with accounts of real and historical sea adventures made to the New World at Shakespeare's times. Some have claimed that it was Shakespeare's first hand acquaintance with the voyagers and their pamphlets that provided the underlying fabric of action, some others have been enthusiastic to show how much prophetic Shakespeare had proved himself in his presentation of the clash between the plantation settler-masters and natives in the new world, especially in the context of colonial and post colonial struggles and strains. The present essay intends to examine the notables background materials in the course of this issue and to judge their real contribution –as far as the New world and Role of Providence is concerned – in the making of the play.

Key words: New World, Voyage, Virginia, Magellan, Providence, Kermode.

It was Edmond Malone who first, in his 1808 *Account of the Incidents from Which the Title and Part of the Story of Shakespeare's Tempest Were Derived (London, 1808)* first argued that Shakespeare derived the title and some of the play's incidents from accounts of a storm and shipwreck experienced by Sir Thomas Gates and other Jamestown colonists on the Bermuda islands in 1609. Ever since these discoveries or, more precisely, allegations of source and influence, Shakespeareans have been asking: "What has The Tempest to do, if anything, with the New World?"

But before entering into that, one needs to know what exactly happened in 1609 adventure. Morton Luce, after a thorough investigation into the pamphlets on Bermuda made an exhaustive clarification of this obscure and complex issue in his Introduction to the "Arden" edition (pp xii-xiii). Frank Kermode makes a summary of this in his analysis of the problem:

In May 1609, a fleet of nine ships with five hundred colonists under Sir Thomas Gates and Sir George Summers set out to strengthen John Smith's Virginia colony; but on 25th July the *Sea –Adventure*, which carried both Gates and Summers, was separated from the rest of the fleet by a storm. Being driven towards the coast of the Bermudas, the crew were forced to run their ship ashore; and when "neere land" she

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"fell in between two rocks, where she was fast lodged and locked for further budging"; but all on board got safely to the beach, and also managed to save a good part of the ship's fittings and stores. The other ships, with one exception, reached the main-land of America. Ultimately Gates and Summers again set out for Virginia in May 1610; they arrived safely, and the story of their adventures were carried to England in the autumn of the same year. But the news of the storm had reached England before the end of 1609; and it was supposed that the *Sea-Adventure* had foundered, the tidings of the safety of the crew and of their strange experience must have made a deep impression in England and many narratives of the wreck were published. (xxvi)

In the eighteenth century, scholars traced Shakespeare's use of Setebos to Richard Eden's sixteenth –century accounts of Magellan's experience with Patagonian natives who "cryed upon their great devil Setebos to help them" (Eden 219). Experts in the nineteenth century did advance to detect some fragmentary borrowings from Eden and the Bermuda Pamphlets and to raise their brows on issues like:

a) The Action of the play is set on an island in the Mediterranean, an island somewhere between Naples and Tunis. Yet there appear to be, at the very least, several referencestoward the New World.

b) Ariel speaks of fetching magic dew from the "still-vexed Bermoothes" (I,ii,229).

c) Caliban says that Prospero's Art is powerful enough to control the god worshiped by Caliban's mother, and apparently by Caliban, a god named "Setebos" (I,ii,375; V,I,261), who was infact worshiped by South American natives.

d) Trinculo mentions the English willingness to pay a fee "to see a dead Indian" (II, ii, 33).

e) Miranda exclaims upon seeing the courtiers, attractive in their royal apparel: " O brave new world/ That has such people in it.! (V,I, 182 – 83).

But at the turn of the century and thereafter, many other investigators looked more carefully into the issue. Sidney Lee argued that Caliban resembled an American Indian and Prospero a planter (428-31). Edward Everett Hale argued that Shakespeare probably met the adventurers and read the narratives of Bartholomew Gosnold's voyage to the New England coast in May of 1602. Henry Cabot lodge, in the Introduction to Hale's book (p. 15) mentions that Walter Raleigh, writing in the MacLehose edition of *Hakluyt*, vol. 12, said: "Shakespeare, almost alone, saw the problem of American settlement in a detached light." All these make Kermode safely draw the conclusion that

That Shakespeare knew these narratives [Bermuda Pamphlets] is now generally agreed. . . . the industry of Luce, Lee, Gayley, cawley and Hotson has put the issue beyond reasonable doubt. There was for long considerable confusion about the bibliography of the narratives, but this was for the most part cleared up by Luce in the former Arden edition, and it is no longernecessary to establish that, out of all the real and fictitious works formerly canvassed, only three are directly relevant to The Tempest. These are Sylvester Jourdain's *Discovery of the Bermudas* (1610), the Council of Virginia's apologetic *True Declaration of the State of the Colonie in Virginia, with a confutation of such scandalous reports as have tended to the disgrace of so worthy an enterprise* (1610) and a letter by William Strachey, known as the True Reportory of the Wrack, dated 15 July, 1610 but published for the first time in *Purchas His Pilgrimes* (1625).(xxvi –xxvii)

Not only this. Shakespeare, probably, had been well acquainted with some of the members of the 1609 voyage to America. Kermode unhesitatingly claims:

He was certainly acquainted . . . with men who had to give serious consideration to the whole problem, practical and ethical, of the American colonies. Among these were Southampton and Pembroke, both of them financially interested in the plantation, and Shakespeare had friends in common with others of the Essex group similarly interested _ sir Robert Sidney, Sir henry Nevile and Lord De la Warr, who was to be a governor of the colony. It seems likely that . . . Shakespeare knew Dudley Digges, who may have procured Strachey's appointment as Secretary in 1609, when Donne was a rival applicant. Leslie Hotson conjectures that Digges may have edited Strachey's confidential report on the state of Virginia, and produced the more cheerful True Declaration. There seems to have been opportunity for Shakespeare to see the unpublished report, or even to have met Strachey. (xviii)

This view has been taken forward by C.M. Gayley too, who suggests that Shakespeare knew many of the men who were active in the Jamestown venture and, as an " arist-democratic" meliorist supported such vaguely defined colonial ideals as independence, freedom, and a sense of obligation to society. Gayley's thesis that Shakespeare acquired liberal views from men of the Virginia company was swiftly countered and partially refuted by A.W. ward. But scholars like Sidney Lee and Robert Cawley insisted that in The Tempest problematic relations between Caliban and the rest were meant to reflect problematic relations between the American natives and the Virginia settlers. (Frey 30)

The linguistic parallel between Shakespeare's play and the pamphlets too, has been carefully pointed out. It has been observed that at the surface level the description of *The True Declaration* is very close in sight and sounds to Shakespeare's presentation of scene and phraseology in the Tempest:

. . . the heavens were obscured, and made an Egyptian night of three daies perpetuall horror . . . The islands on which they fell were forced to runne their ship on shoare, which through Gods providence fell betwixt two rockes, that caused her to stand firme, and not immediately to be broken. (Kermode xxix)

But, in the deeper level, interestingly, the *Declarations* contribute to the philosophic standpoint of the play too. Its message seems to be one, carefully implemented by the playwright in the *Tempest*: he is too impiously fearful, that will not trust in God so powerful. The author, plainly and pointedly raises the primal issue:

What is there in all this tragical comaedie that should discourage us with impossibilitie of the enterprise? When of all the Fleete, one onely ship, by a secret leake was indangered and yet in the gulfe of Despair was so graciously preserved. . . . that which we accompt a punishment against evil is but a medicine against evil. (Kermode xxix)

It is Strachey who in *The True Declaration* first traced the role of providence in the adventure of 1609 : "Yet it pleased our mercifull God, to make even this hideous and hated place, both the place of our safetie, and the means of our deliverance." It does not require a second thought for a reader of *Tempest,* to realize that all these could have been the words of Prospero too, his boat reaching the island where not only does he become master but where he regains his lost kingdom and crown of Milan.

Drawing attention to these specially important Bermuda pamphlets and analyzing them elaborately, Kermode thus arrives at the conclusion that while writing the Tempest, "Shakespeare has these documents in mind" (Frey 31). And where he stops, he is vehemently supported by others too, notable among them Geoffrey Bullough and Smith. Bullough lists a host of notions found in travel literature on the New World and says:

All these ideas came into Shakespeare's mind and affected the characterization and texture of his play. He was not writing a didactic work, nevertheless, approval of the Virginia company's aims and recognition of its difficulties seem to be implied in his depiction of Prospero, Caliban and the intruders into the island. (245)

Almost in the same tune, Smith also notes that Richard Eden's accounts of explorations by Magellan and others tell of St. Elmo's fires in ship's rigging, Indians who die before their captors can exhibit them in Europe, Caliban-like natives who seek for grace, Utopian, golden world innocence, strange roaring sounds heard in woods, dogs used to pursue natives, natives interested in music, mutinies suppressed and so on. Smith comes to the conclusion that:

Shakespeare's imagination, at the time he wrote the Tempest, would appear to have been stimulated by the accounts of travel and exploration in the new world. (238-39)

Luce, Gayley, Kermode, Bullough and Smith represent those scholars concerned to present what accounts of the New World Shakespeare probably had in mind when he plunged into the writing of the *Tempest*. A second group however has been formed by some other scholars who are more concerned to show the play's prophetic character in relation to depicting what actually happened in the colonized countries of the New world and other developing nations in recent past. Thus Leslie Fiedler, one of the exponents of this second line of argument, observes that, by the time Prospero has put down the plot of Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo,

The whole history of imperialist America has been prophetically revealed to us in brief parable: from the initial act of expropriation through the Indian wars to the setting up of reservations, and from the beginnings of black slavery to the first revolts and evasions. With even more astonishing prescience, The Tempest foreshadows as well the emergence of that democracy of fugitive white slaves, deprived and cultureless refugees from a Europe they never owned, which D.H. Lawrence was so bitterly to describe. And it prophesies, finally, like some inspired piece of science fiction before its time, the revolt against the printed page, the anti-Gutenberg rebellion for which Marshall McLuhan is currently a chief spokesman. (238-39)

Others of this group, like E.P.Kuhl, Philip Mason, D.G. James, Stephen Greenblatt, Fredi Chiappelli also have elaborated various issues and sub-issues of colonialism, race relation and cultural materialism out of *The Tempest*. Two statements may be noteworthy in this critical line, one made by Greenblatt that *The Tempest* is the "profoundest literary exploration" in the Renaissance of the impact of a lettered culture upon an unlettered one and that Caliban's rejection of language as taught him by Prospero has a "devastating justness", the other, by Leo Marx, who with convincing particularity shows ways in which "the topography of The Tempest anticipates the moral geography of the American imagination" (72). " If Kermode, Bullough and Smith tend", Frey observes, "in the fashion of traditional source study, to connect The Tempest to the history that predates it, the visionary group that includes Fiedler and Marx connect the play more to the history that postdates it" (32). Both groups move beyond the local, immediate and sensuous life of the text and it is also here that they face the strong objection raised by Stoll, who likes to have *Tempest* solely as a drama, distrusting any source hunting and historical interpretation that might take the reader outside the text. Stoll denounces Gayley and others for taking such

great pains to endeavor to prove acquaintance on Shakespeare's part with the promoters of colonizing in Virginia and sympathy with their motives and aspirations . . . Shakespeare himself says not a word to that effect. Spenser, Daniel, Drayton and

the rest sing of the New World and Virginia, but not Shakespeare. . . . There is not a word in The Tempest about America or Virginia, colonies or colonizing, Indians or Tomhawks, maize, mocking birds or tobacco. Nothing but the Bermudas, once barely mentioned as a faraway place . . . . His interest and sympathy Shakespeare keeps to himself. (487)

Northrop Frye also observes in the same line that, "It is little puzzling why New World imagery should be so prominent in The Tempest, which really has nothing to do with the New World. . "(22). In asserting that the historical context of the New World bears little relevance to the inner, self-enclosed, self-referential working of the play, they raise questions over the very functions of drama and attach themselves with a kind of formalism and aestheticism that denies any concern with historically conditioned meanings of language.

But can anybody deny the historically conditioned meaning of language? Frey in his analysis shows that in its most elemental form, as mere paper and ink, The Tempest bears no content. It is only when the meaning – and it is always conditioned with history, the passage of time and refinement of culture in our minds – is processed and assigned to the printed letters, that specific information is availed. The most important task therefore is always to determine: What information shall we assign to language? How can it be assigned best to meet the purpose of the linguistic effort and its artistry?

To prove his point Frey, first, quotes the famous words of Caliban to Stephano in Ii, ii, 167-72:

I prithee, let me bring thee where crabs grow
And I with my long nails will dig thee pig-nuts;
Show thee a Jay's nest, and instruct thee how
To snare the nimble marmoset; I ''ll bring thee
To clustering filberts, and sometimes I'll get thee
Young scamels from the rock.

And then comments:

Any reader or hearer's imagination may supply a general context, no matter how vague, for pig nuts and the nimble marmoset. But 'scamels' is another matter. What happens in the brain when that word is first perceived? One may be totally at a loss or one may assume that a variety of bird or shellfish or other edible, unknown to one because of limited experience, is referred. A reader who consults notes or reference works will find that 'scamel' appears without much authority . . . the majority of editors favour emending 'scamel' in The Tempest to 'sea-mell', another variety of bird. My point is that we must go 'outside' the play to apprehend and create meanings for words and passages within it. (33)

With reference to French and Italian accounts of Magelan's, or more properly El. Cano's circumnavigation of 1519 – 22, Frey draws attention to some specific historical facts and incidents which may very well serve to establish relation between New World sources and *The Tempest :*

a) The Patagonians, whom Magellan encountered, used to eat small fish described as "fort scameux" and "squame". It is possible that in "scamels" Shakespeare is adapting a foreign word "squamelle".

b) Two of the mutineers against Magellan were named Antonio and Sebastian. With the help of one Gonzalo Gomez de Espinosa, Magellan put the mutiny down. More over, one of the ships in Magellan's fleet was wrecked but that "all the men were saved by a miracle, for they were not even wetted". (*Magellan's Voyage*, 62-63) One remembers Gonzalo's assertion that the garments of the shipwrecked voyagers appeared "rather new-dyed than stained with salt water" (II, I, 61-62).

c) When Drake circumnavigated the globe in 1577- 80, he partially followed Magellan's route. His mariners knew some of the details of Magellan's experience, especially on entering the colder and stormier latitudes at the vicinity of Port San Julian and encountering the strange, big, naked Patagonian natives. And Drake too, like Magellan suffered a mutiny at Port San Jlian, which ultimately was suppressed as had been in the case of his predecessor. In fact, sea adventure accounts repeatedly speak of mutiny and miracle once they enter Port San Julian.

d) Drake's chaplain, Francis Fletcher, kept a journal in which he recorded details of the encounters with the Patagonians. He found the name of the native God "Settaboth". More than that at one place of his journal he records: "They begin to dance and the more they stir their stumps the greater noise or sound they give and the more their spirits are ravished with melody in so much that they dance like madmen and cannot stay themselves unto death if some friend pluck not away the baubles, which being taken away, thay stand as not knowing what is become of themselves for a long time." Comparison can be made here with Caliban's famous lines:

Be not afraid; 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 some time voices,
That if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again.

In the play, Caliban leads his companions long ways after Ariel's music, and somewhat in the fashion of Fletcher's natives, they too lamented the loss of their bottles.

Mention can also be made of two pamphlets of 1610, the first one known as *News from Virginia*, by one of the Bermuda survivors, Richard Rich, and the second one , "*Brief and True Report on Virginia*", by Thomas Harriot. The names Alonsos, Gonzalos, Antonios and Ferdinando do occur in the first account. As for the Virginia commonwealth, Rich too writes of nature's plenty in a land like Gonzalo's Commonwealth where "There is no want at all", where "every man shall have his share" and "every man shall have a part". In Harriot's account, one meets the striking head phrase "Admiranda Narratio" in the very title page, and as if taking his cue from here, Shakespeare's Ferdinand say in the play: "Admir'd Miranda/ Indeed the top of admiration! Worth/ What's dearest to the world!" (III, I, 36- 39).

The conclusion that legitimately comes out of the above discussion is not that Shakespeare had read the accounts of Magellan, Drake, Fletcher or Rich, though it seems likely that he did. The real point is that we need to appreciate the extent to which some themes, situations, incidents and even names and phrases, used in *The Tempest* were part of the common coin of Shakespeare's day. To examine this coin, is to enrich one's experience of the play. For, indeed, as Frey suggests, Shakespeare himself shows , "how what happened and what was hoped for, tended to mingle in the minds of far travelers who said they found what they sought, their woes all changed to wonder, and their losses yielding to greater gain" (38). Providence cuts its way there in the play, in the wonderful, living accounts of the earned and weaved experiences of the day.

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