

## *Tempest as a Romance*

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*Abstract : Whereas Tragedy depicts alienation and destruction, the world of Romance is built on reconciliation and restoration. In tragedies, characters are destroyed as a result of their own actions and choices; in Romance, characters respond to situations and events rather than provoking them. Tragedy tends to be concerned with revenge, Romance with forgiveness. The tragic hero is desperate to achieve impossible targets. But impossible things also do occur in romance almost in a natural, normal way, thereby making its reality a fictitious reality or magic reality. The audience in a romance always moves in a swing, or stand fixed, half way between belief and disbelief. The present essay intends to identify and explain the romance elements and their mechanism in one of the major last plays of Shakespeare, The Tempest.*

A Romance is generally considered to be a natural step in describing human experience after tragedy. Tragedy involves irreversible choices made in a world where time leads inexorably to the tragic conclusion. In Romance, time seems to be "reversible"; there are second chances and fresh starts. As a result, categories such as cause and effect, beginning and end, are displaced by a sense of simultaneity and harmony. Tragedy is governed by a sense of Fate (*Macbeth*, *Hamlet*) or Fortune (*King Lear*); in Romance, the sense of destiny comes instead from *Divine Providence*. Tragedy depicts alienation and destruction, Romance, reconciliation and restoration. In tragedies, characters are destroyed as a result of their own actions and choices; in Romance, characters respond to situations and events rather than provoking them. Tragedy tends to be concerned with revenge, Romance with forgiveness. Plot structure in Romance moves beyond that of tragedy: an event there, even with tragic potential, leads not to tragedy but to a providential experience. The providential "happy ending" of a Romance bears a superficial resemblance to that of a comedy. But while the tone of comedy is genial and exuberant, Romance has a muted tone of happiness -- joy mixed with sorrow. Romance is unrealistic. Supernatural elements abound, and characters often seem "larger than life". The "happy ending" may seem unmotivated or contrived, not unlike the *deus ex machina* ("God out of the [stage] machinery" where a God appears at the end of the play to "fix" everything) endings of classical comedy. Realism is not the point. Romance requires us to suspend disbelief in the "unrealistic" nature of the plot and experience it on its own terms.

Most of these major elements are seen to be operative in *Tempest*, a play that abounds in the performances of magic and the fantastic, undertakes a long

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wondering journey to a strange island and unfolds accounts of challenges and forgiveness, loss and recovery. The storm, with which it begins, provides an occasion for introductions to a sizable portion of the dramatis personae. Alonso, King of Naples, with his brother Sebastian and his son Ferdinand, parallels – or will ultimately parallel – Prospero Duke of Milan with his brother Antonio and his daughter Miranda. As Antonio seizes the throne from Prospero, so Sebastian seeks to do the same, here on the island, from Alonso. But what works in Milan does not work on this miraculous island. And, besides, as the play begins, the lives of the entire group are in danger. In this setting, though the faithful counselor Gonzalo may seem a shade sententious, it is he who is right: The Boatswain, he says, will “be hanged yet, / Though every drop of water swear against it / And gape at wid’st to glut him” (1.1.58-60). And it is he who, at scene’s end, declares, “Now would I give a thousand furlongs of sea for an acre of barren ground, long heath, broom, furze, anything” – and, miraculously, the acre of barren ground appears and he and his companions are washed up on it. We should not underestimate the power of that small but important miracle. Though Antonio and Sebastian are cynics from the beginning, who delight in puncturing and undermining the often foolish idealism of Gonzalo, their realism, is soon shown to be akin to nihilism. The realm of romance is no place for people without values.

In effect, in the theater, Gonzalo claps his hands, the storm ends, and we are transported to dry land of Caliban, Prospero and Miranda. To reach them we must pass through the storm, through a kind of elemental chaos. Out of that chaos there emerges the magic island, the locale of the play. What we enter is a world of the imagination, a world of metaphor. In such a setting, a different sensibility is at work, people behave differently, and, above all, they understand differently. When, in 2.1, Antonio and Sebastian in effect pour scorn on the imagination (the imagined commonwealth of Gonzalo), they are playing the role of philistine: they fail to understand the power of metaphor. This play, in fact, is about the power and triumph of the imagination – about fiction, so intensely and completely believed as to become fact. Orpheus, one may recall, caused rocks and stones to move through his music, and caused wild animals to lie down together. In so doing, he reversed, through art, the relationship of form and substance, language and reality. Language changes reality instead of reality language. This is of course the very essence of romance, transforming reality into fiction or rather making fiction appear as reality, and securing the willing suspension of disbelief at every step.

“If by your Art...” Miranda begins. The storm appears to be an artificial one, created by Prospero’s magic powers. When his background story is known, one realizes why

at 1.2.23 he puts off his “magic garment.” Prospero neglected his rule in Milan, but in the same breath the reader is reminded that he did so in order to learn the secrets of nature. His is the classic dilemma of the tension between the life of action and the life of contemplation. When his faithful counselor Gonzalo puts his books in his boat – the boat in which he and his daughter are callously exiled – he provides him with something more important than food for the body, namely food for the mind. Later when Prospero reaches and conquers the island by his magic art, the island thus turns out to be a place in which Art has mastered Nature. This Shakespeare picks up as his theme already half explored in *The Winter’s Tale*. There a baby is exposed; here a father and his daughter are exposed. The baby of *The Winter’s Tale* grows up amid shepherds, in a world where life, and nature, make sense – a world of kindheartedness and simple pleasures. Miranda grows up in a different but equally protected environment.

The story that Prospero tells is long and as soon as it ends Miranda sleeps: Prospero casts a spell on her. We move on to the next section in the scene and get introduced to Ariel, who functions as Prospero’s executive spirit (one is easily reminded of Puck’s similar function for Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). He has organized the shipwreck but seen to it that everyone is brought to shore safely – “Not a hair perished” (217). Ariel was servant to the witch Sycorax, former owner of the island, and “for thou wast a spirit too delicate / To act her earthy and abhorr’d commands, / Refusing her grand hests” (272-4) was imprisoned in a cloven pine by the witch. It was Prospero who let this good spirit out when he arrived. The reader has been informed significantly, by the way, that Sycorax came to the island much in the same way as Prospero did: she was banished from “Argier” and left on the island by sailors, pregnant with the “freckled whelp hag-born” Caliban.

Prospero sends Ariel off and the scene is ready now for arrival of Caliban, – the slave. Caliban is a creature of earth just as Ariel is a creature of air: the universe of the *Tempest* is built around the four elements, earth, air, fire and water. The earthy powers that Caliban represents, all disruptive and irrational, must be kept under control, in a state of subjection. Caliban protests Prospero’s treatment of him:

This island’s mine by Sycorax my mother,  
Which thou tak’st from me. When thou cam’st first,  
Thou strok’st me and made much of me; wouldst give me  
Water with berries in’t; and teach me how  
To name the bigger light, and how the less,  
That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee  
And showed thee all the qualities o’ th’ isle,  
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.  
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms  
Of Sycorax – toads, beetles, bats, light on you!  
For I am all the subjects that you have,

Which first was my own king; and here you sty me  
 In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me  
 The rest o' th' island. (1.2.333-46)

Prospero's response (346ff) indicates that Caliban's lusting after Miranda forced him to change his treatment of him, and in essence to abandon any hope of reforming Caliban. He had taught him to speak, he says (355ff), though Caliban curses him for doing so:

You taught me language, and my profit on't  
 Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you  
 For learning me your language! (1.2.365-67)

This episode, and indeed much else in this play, is of great interest to the historian of Anthropology, since behind it lies the question of the status of non-European "savages," an issue brought to the table or given a new urgency by the European discovery of, and encroachment on, the New World. To what extent can "savages" be regarded as rational human beings, to be converted into civilized beings, or to what extent are they representative of powers of darkness, and their culture is to be supplanted by the master's culture, their language, by the master's language, – Such debates constitute a large part of modern, postcolonial criticism. Caliban's name, perhaps a distortion of "Cannibal," takes us back to Montaigne's famous essay *Des cannibales*, with its meditation on European civilization and its oblique suggestion that, just possibly, the cannibals live a life more uncorrupted than the civilized Europeans do.

But what is interesting to note is that whereas in real world the powerful drives away the powerless, in fact so did Antonio in the case of Prospero in Milan, Prospero in the island never does that and in fact, towards the end of the play returns the island to Caliban, its legitimate owner. Thus *Tempest* projects not only the colonial venture but also its abolition to liberation and forming of the Commonwealth. What History takes nearly 400 years to accomplish, has been achieved by romance within a play time. This is another miracle of the play.

Now it is Ferdinand's turn to arrive. Ariel's song, a minor interlude in the play and a somewhat threatening one, suggests, with its barking dogs a disorder barely kept under control – and the reference to dead fathers in the following stanza is also hardly reassuring: "Full fathom five thy father lies; / Of his bones are coral made"). What matters here though is the "sea change / Into something rich and strange...." Ferdinand, washed by the sea, appears to Miranda like a wondrous apparition – "A thing divine; for nothing natural / I ever saw so noble" (421-22), and Miranda seems to Ferdinand "Most sure the goddess on whom these airs attend."

The two come together in harmony: even their language is the same, to Ferdinand's considerable surprise (1.2.431). But Prospero resolves to test Ferdinand: "lest too

light winning / Make the prize light.” He does so first by charming Ferdinand, then by reducing him to a Caliban, a log-mover. The effect of course is to remove from Ferdinand unnecessary airs, to make him a person without rank. This mortification parallels a kind of pastoral purgation, in which rank counts for nothing – a kind of Florizel experience, or the experience of the king’s sons Guiderius and Arviragus in *Cymbeline*. What draws special attention is that Prospero’s universe after all, is an ordered universe, it is not a projection of raw nature but raw nature overcome by sincerity, emotion overcome by discipline (magic itself is a discipline) and instinct or impulse, by civility. There also, the inevitable tragic plot of the *Tempest* has been overcome by that of the romance.

The opening of the second Act takes the reader back to the courtiers. Gonzalo, in a famous speech, speculates on how he might order things “if he had plantation of the isle.”

I’ th’ commonwealth I would by contraries  
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic  
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;  
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,  
And use of service, none; contract, succession,  
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;  
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;  
No occupation: all men idle, all;  
And women too, but innocent and pure:  
No sovereignty...  
... All things in common Nature should produce  
Without sweat or endeavour: treason, felony,  
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,  
Would I not have; but Nature should bring forth,  
Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance,  
To feed my innocent people. (2.1.143-52, 155-60)

The speech is another reminder of the romance atmosphere of the play, for all the classic dilemmas of utopianism are enumerated here. Gonzalo intends to be king of the island and yet there would be no sovereignty (to bring order in a country, requires force or consent); there would be no trade, but also no poverty; no ownership of land, no warfare – in fact Nature would give all things in abundance and there would be no need of any work or ‘labour’ at all. The speech, it is worth pointing out, comes more or less out of nowhere – a kind of sudden inspiration on Gonzalo’s part, and inspiration, imagination gratify the atmospheres of romance only.

But, Gonzalo’s speech is sharply contrasted by two murderous conspiracies too, first one involving Antonio and Sebastian who now want to kill Alonso in order to capture the throne of Naples, and the second one projecting the trio, Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo, willing to kill Prospero and reclaim the island along with some additional

interests. Stephano imagines himself married to Miranda: "Monster, I will kill this man: his daughter and I will be king and queen ... and Trinculo and thyself shall be viceroys" (104-6). But these ambitious plans ultimately come to nothing as Prospero, who by his art smells everything earlier, with the help of Ariel, overwhelms and triumphs over his antagonists. If Prospero's weapon is magic, Ariel, his deputy and right hand, uses music, both reinforcing the romance air of the play and causing Caliban to muse on how the island is full of mysterious sounds:

Be not afeard; 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 sometime voices,  
 That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,  
 Will make them sleep again: and then, in dreaming,  
 The clouds methought would open, and show riches  
 Ready to drop upon me; that, when I wak'd,  
 I cried to dream again. (3.2.133-41)

The point, of course, is that the island moves in harmony with the celestial spheres, suspended in a magic realm, and to complement its course of action now a banquet is spread for the courtiers. The banquet definitely requires some kind of mechanical arrangement, as does the next pastoral masque that Prospero conjures up to celebrate the long waited marriage between Miranda and Ferdinand and their nuptial festivity. But in the magic island it appears as a normal supernatural intervention and such 'awaited wonders' do enhance the appeal of the romance. Moreover, it is the most elaborate of such masques in Shakespeare, very much a feature of the aristocratic entertainments of the time, when masques were growing steadily in popularity at the court and Ben Jonson had begun his collaboration with the great architect Inigo Jones. It also introduces into *The Tempest* the theme of the changing of the seasons, central to *The Winter's Tale* and here performing a similar function: linking the natural cycle of summer and winter to human fecundity and to the succession of generations. The masque begins with Iris, the Rainbow Goddess, who, having shown her cold beauty summons Ceres, the goddess of harvest:

Hail, many-coloured messenger, that ne'er  
 Dost disobey the wife of Jupiter;  
 Who, with thy saffron wings, upon my flow'rs  
 Diffusest honey drops, refreshing show'rs;  
 And with each end of thy blue bow dost crown  
 My bosky acres and my unshrub'd down,  
 Rich scarf to my proud earth-why hath thy Queen  
 Summon'd me hither to this short-grass'd green?.

Ceres reminds the audience/reader that it was her daughter Proserpine who was carried off to the underworld. Iris is able to tell her that Venus and Cupid are controlled (92ff) in the harmony of the masque, and thus Juno (Goddess of marriage) and Ceres (Goddess of harvest) are linked in perfect harmony (106ff).

The masque is both a useful diversion in a fourth act (something similar occurs in Act 4 of *The Winter's Tale*, too) and a climax and completion to the courtship of Ferdinand and Miranda. It is also a reminder of the ordering mechanics of drama, another art form. The ordered show of the masque, followed by the controlled dance performance of the "sunburned sicklemen", however, is an indication that power and violence, an important element in marriage and sexuality, must be controlled in order to be fruitful. They also provide a rural and pastoral setting to supplement the mythological air as well as to confirm to the romance nature of the play.

In Act 5 the courtiers are reduced to repentance, as Ariel tells us (5.1.15). Prospero, in line with the New Dispensation of the romances, is for forgiveness rather than punishment. He addresses Ariel:

Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling  
Of their afflictions, and shall not myself,  
One of their kind, that relish all as sharply,  
Passion as they, be kindlier mov'd than thou art?  
Though with their high wrongs I am struck to th' quick,  
Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury  
Do I take part; the rarer action is  
In virtue than in vengeance; they being penitent,  
The sole drift of my purpose doth extend  
Not a frown further. Go release them, Ariel;  
My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore,  
And they shall be themselves. (5.1.21-32)

And now Prospero lays aside his magic, his objectives having been fulfilled, it is no longer to be required:

Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves;  
And ye that on the sands with printless foot  
Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him  
When he comes back; you demi-puppets that  
By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,  
Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime  
Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice  
To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid-  
Weak masters though ye be-I have be-dimm'd  
The noontide sun, call'd forth the mutinous winds,  
And 'twixt the green sea and the azur'd vault  
Set roaring war. To the dread rattling thunder  
Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak  
With his own bolt; the strong-bas'd promontory  
Have I made shake, and by the spurs pluck'd up  
The pine and cedar. Graves at my command  
Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let 'em forth,  
By my so potent art. But this rough magic  
I here abjure; and, when I have requir'd  
Some heavenly music-which even now I do-  
To work mine end upon their senses that  
This airy charm is for, I'll break my staff,

Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
And deeper than did ever plummet sound  
I'll drown my book. (5.1.33-57)

Magic being discarded and books being left behind, the show now departs from the magic island and prepares to confront the challenges of the real world, once again. But the effect of romance, like sweet fragrance, is allowed to linger a little more. And accordingly Gonzalo is seen to recount the achievements, to remember the problems solved in such a grand and miraculous design:

“Prospero his dukedom /  
In a poor isle, and all of us ourselves  
When no man was his own” (212-13). “

In conclusion it can be said that in *Tempest* Prospero, finally succeeds in turning back wheels of history or its course, his exercise of art not only reclaiming Milan, but causing an old wrong to be undone and life to be resumed. The new generation, with a dynastic union will cause an old division settle together, and Prospero's generation will rest easy in the knowledge that a peaceful future has been secured. In this sense, then, this is indeed a coveted retirement for Prospero who now is tired of “Every third thought”. By virtue of his magical art Prospero becomes the Providence and this is the ultimate achievement of romance in *Tempest*.

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