

The Playwright as Magus: A Comparative Analysis of Shakespeare and Prospero

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Abstract— *Shakespeare's The Tempest is a play which has delighted many audiences and many readers. As Hazlitt said, "it is one of the most original and perfect of Shakespeare's productions," and he had shown in it all the variety of his powers. It is full of grace and grandeur. Though there is unanimity about the play's quality, there is the greatest diversity of opinion as to what the play means. Here we can find Campbell, in 1838, suggesting that Prospero is Shakespeare himself and his magic is his dramatic art. We can learn from Lowell, in that Prospero represents imagination, Ariel is fancy, and Caliban stands for brute Understanding. Prospero is the master-spirit that has brooded invisible and moved in deep waters of the greater tragedies, and now come to shore on a lost net of the main to sun himself; lying by his wand and drowning his book "deeper than did ever plummet sound". The play abides, after three hundred years dream of reconciliation; forcing tears, not by "pity and fear" but by sheer beauty; with a royal sense of the world, how it passes away, with a catch at the heart surmising hope in what is to come.*



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The Biographical Allegory:

According to reading Prospero is not God, but Shakespeare – or rather the controlling judgement of Shakespeare, since Ariel and Caliban are also representations of dual mirror potentialities of his soul. The dialogue between Prospero and Ariel in which Ariel is tired and cries for the promised freedom, and is told that there is one last work to be done which is in exact agreement with reading of the faltering art of *Cymbeline* second, Prospero's well-known farewell to his art, where commentators have seldom failed to admit what Professor Saintsbury calls a "designed personal allegory," and he noticed that Prospero clearly regards his art as pre-eminently a tempest-raising magic.

In poetic creation "all is forgiven, and it would be strange not to forgive"; but the partial and fleeting flame of the poet's intuition may light at last the total consciousness with the brilliance of a cosmic apprehension. This speech suggests the transit from the intermittent love of poetic composition to the perduring

love of mystic. Now these two methods of approach considered separately and in sequence are not as significant as they become when we realize that they are complementary to *The Tempest's* unique reality. For it will next be seen that these two aspects when considered together give us the usual flat view of it which reads it as an impersonal fairy story – corresponding to my reading of it as an objective vision of life – becomes a three - dimensional understanding when we remember the implicit personal allegory. Only by submitting our faculties to both methods we can properly understand the play to the full. *The Tempest* is at the same time a record of Shakespeare's spiritual progress and a statement of the vision to which that progress has brought him. It is apparent as a dynamic and living act of the soul, containing within itself the record of its birth: it is continually re-writing itself before our eyes. Dr. Garnett says that the play is autobiographical and it shows us more than anything else what the discipline of life had made of Shakespeare at fifty, a fruit too fully matured to be suffered to hang much longer on the tree. Conscious

superiority untinged by arrogance, genial scorn for the mean and base, mercifulness into which contempt enters very largely, serenity excluding passionate affection, while admitting tenderness, intellect overtopping morality, but in no way blighting or perverting it such are the mental features of him in whose development of the man of the world had kept pace with the poet and who now shone as the consummate example of both.

Shakespeare as Prospero

Shakespeare has in this play so become master of the whole of his own mystic universe that the universe, at last perfectly projected in one short play into the forms and shapes of objective human existence, shown us, in the wreck of *The Tempest*, a complete view of that reflected pattern in the still depths of the timeless soul of poetry. And since it reveals its vision not as a statement of absolute truth independently of the author, but related inwardly to the succession of experiences that condition and nurtures its own reality, it becomes, in a unique sense beyond other works of art, an absolute. There is no barrier between the inward and outward, expression and imitation. It has been said that the mode in which the subject-object distinction is transcended. Art aspires to the perfected fusion of expression with imitation. *The Tempest* is thus at the same time the most perfect work of art and the most crystal act of mystic vision in our literature.

Prospero's magic, in any case, is an "art" which includes, in fact largely consists of, music and drama. The action of *The Tempest* was thought to be confessional and Prospero's final speeches were associated with Shakespeare's retirement from the theater. The necessity of supposing that Shakespeare intends a life beyond a life beyond the grace may well be questioned, particularly since the most explicit metaphysics in *The Tempest* is to be found in the speech in which Prospero stressed the transitoriness of this life which is rounded with a sleep. Prospero is asserted as the portrait of the author an embodiment of that spirit of wise benevolence which is supposed to have thrown a halo over Shakespeare's later life. For Dowden, Shakespeare was himself a 'character', developing through his plays. Prospero is Shakespeare's life-long interest in magic: he is a magician like Rosalind, 'most profound in his art and yet not damnable' (*As you like it*, v.ii. 60). His magic is 'unsubtle by comparison with the next degree of the mage's enlightenment'. '*The Tempest* is apparently limitless in its productive power. Perhaps if we read it right, it will tell us more about the Shakespearean process too.

Overwhelmed by the desire to see in Prospero's intention to break his staff and to down his book, a veiled farewell to the stage on Shakespeare's part, many critics

have found in Prospero's magic an allegorical embodiment of Shakespeare's own art. The fact of the matter, however, is that the magic in *The Tempest*, like so much else that is supernatural in Shakespeare's play cannot be wished away or made to conform to our modern skeptical notions. In *The Tempest*, Shakespeare has no objective story before him from which to create. He spins his plot from his own poetic world entirely, simplifying the main issues of his total work – plot, poetry, persons; whittling off the non-essential and leaving the naked truth exposed.

The Tempest, patterned of storm and music, is thus an interpretation of Shakespeare's world. Shakespeare's world is embodied in Prospero's world, and so a more subtly mediated biographical approach comes to interpret the so-called objective reality of Shakespearean drama. Campbell in 1838, states that *The Tempest* is comparatively a grave counterpart to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. He says comparatively, for its gayety is only less abandoned and frolicsome. To be condemned to give the preference to either would give him a distress similar to that of being obliged to choose between the losses of two very dear friends.

The Enduring Legacy of the Magus:

Here Shakespeare himself is Prospero, or rather the superior genius who commands both Prospero and Ariel. Montegut suggests as a possible explanation that the demand for a masque may have broken in on Shakespeare's retirement in Stratford, where he was busily occupied with writing out his farewell in the play of *The Tempest*. The demand came from a source too powerful the masque in the Fourth Act, and the thing was done. 'The masque appears to have been introduced somewhat artificially; the general action would not be deranged by its excision.' Prospero apparently makes several allusions to his own age, and intimates that it is the proper age for Shakespeare to retire from public life. When Prospero says to Ariel, "The time, twist six and now must by us both be spent most precious," it is a little difficult to decide what Shakespeare means by 'the sixth hour'; because he wrote this play between his forty-seventh and his forty-eighth year, and Prospero seems to use the word 'hours' as the decades of human life; but in all other aspects his words correspond exactly to the age which he had then reached.

Shakespeare freed his beautiful spirit (Ariel) from the prison where barbarism had confined it, and by its aid humanized the savage theatre. Then the brambles burst into flower, the thickets were transformed into verdurous groves where fairies loved to throng, the horrible gloom of the primeval forests was scattered by

the light of dazzling apparitions, the foul, mephitic vapours grew melodious and were crossed and re-crossed by songs to which even Caliban and his companions could not be insensible, and which will retain their power as long as there are souls here below open to music and poesy.

The Dual Identities of Prospero and Shakespeare:

Prospero has often been identified with Shakespeare himself. Shakespeare, as if conscious that it would be his last, and as if inspired to typify himself, has made his hero a natural, dignified and benevolent magician, who could conjure up spirits from the vast deep, and command supernatural agency by the most seemingly natural and simple means. But the time was approaching when the potent sorcerer was to break his staff and bury it (in the earth). That staff has never been and never will be recovered.”

Shakespeare in this period is most like his own Prospero. In these ‘Romances’ and in the ‘Fragments’, a supernatural element is present; man does not strive with circumstance and with his own passions in darkness; the God preside over our human lives and fortunes, they communicate with us by vision, by oracles, through the elementary power of nature”. Shakespeare seems to have reached a pure and supreme elevation after having probed the darkness of his mind. He seems to have ostracized whatever demons he had in his soul. It is in this period of ethereal tranquility that he wrote *The Tempest*. The Shakespeare of *The Tempest* is a man who has reached a level of inner peace, which can only be acquired after transcending personal anguish. By now he had managed to understand the moral rhythm of the world. He knew that mercy, forgiveness and compassion were vital in the world in order to acquire genuine happiness. *The Tempest* is an attempt to portray this state mind in symbolic terms. Dowden had considered Prospero as having autobiographical tones.

The similarity between Shakespeare and Prospero are both aging men living in a time of exploration and who use words as power. But it is still fun to consider playwrights in general to be wizards. By using magic, Prospero wields so much power over the other characters and the play’s conclusion. When Shakespeare was writing *The Tempest*, he wrote the character of Prospero in the image of himself and the rest of the play was an extensive, detailed metaphor of his life and his work as a playwright.

Throughout the play, there are many instances where this theme shows up in obvious and non-obvious ways. In a more obvious way in Act II, scene I, Alonso, Antonio, Sebastian, and Gonzalo speak of how their clothes are just as nice as, if not nicer than, when they

were wearing them before, even though they had swum been the ocean to the island and their boat had sunk. This alludes to the fact that, even in their world, they seem to be actors and it is almost as if they’re wearing costumes. In the play, the only way their clothes could have stayed nice is if Prospero somehow made them, just like Shakespeare does in his plays with costumes. The play often talks about Prospero’s art. It portrays him as being obsessed with his art, devoting his whole life to it and always focusing on it and working on it. In the same way, Shakespeare works on his plays. He spent his whole life writing, acting in, and directing plays, and so Prospero is a reflection of Shakespeare. Prospero also uses his art as a way to control and manipulate people. He brings Antonio, Alonso, Ferdinand, Sebastian, Gonzalo, Stephano, Trinculo, and the rest of their crew to the island.

He uses Ariel to lure them in the direction he wants them to go by having Ariel play soft music but remain unseen so that they all follow in the direction of the music. This can be interpreted in two different ways that Shakespeare, in a similar fashion, manipulates people. The first way is that his art gives him a way to control actors. Everything they do in the plays is a work of Shakespeare, and he can have them do whatever he desires by using his art, writing. The second way he controls people is in the same way Prospero uses Ariel to control other men; Shakespeare uses his actors to manipulate the audience. He alone could not affect the audience in the way that he can with his actors acting out his words, just like Prospero alone is not as powerful alone as he is with Ariel. The Epilogue conveys his desire for giving up his vocation of a dramatist and retiring to Stratford-upon-Avon after weaving all the dreams through his 37 plays. *The Tempest* being the last of his plays, William Shakespeare treats the speech of Prospero as his last will and testament.

The Playwright’s supreme control over Prospero:

The voice of Prospero has been interpreted as being the voice of the playwright himself. Prospero’s supreme control over the island and the spirits symbolizes Shakespeare’s supreme mastery of the English stage during his time. When Prospero renounces his magic, it is Shakespeare himself bidding a kind of farewell to the dramatic career. According to another interpretation, *The Tempest* deals with a subject which constantly occupied Shakespeare towards the close of his career, that of reconciliation, pardon and atonement of sins. In this case, Prospero forgives all his enemies after they have represented of the grievous wrong done to him twelve years ago in conspiring against him and banishing him from the dukedom of Milan. It is reconciliation time between Prospero and Alonso with their offspring uniting

in holy wedlock at Naples with all the religious rites and rituals and their grandchildren becoming the joint rulers of Naples and Milan.

The Tempest represents the glorious victory of the righteous human soul over all things around it. It also represents an allegory about the pursuit of power and the consequences of that pursuit and that any perversion of the natural order of things in this world brings distress and doom. And that adherence and obedience to the natural order is essential for man's attainment of the highest good in life. *The Tempest*, therefore, yields a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations to generations of critics and readers; the list can never possibly be exhausted. It is the peak of Shakespeare's creation. "That this quixotic height of magnanimity should not surprise, that it should seem quite in keeping with the character, proves how deeply this character has been drawn from Shakespeare's own nature.

Conscious superiority unhinged by arrogance, genial scorn for the mean and base, mercifulness into which contempt entered very largely, serenity excluding passionate affection while admitting tenderness, intellect overtopping morality but in no way blighting or perverting it — such are the mental features of him in whose development the man of the world kept pace with the poet, and who now shone as the consummate perfection of both." In other words, it is Shakespeare's own nature which overflows into Prospero, and thus the magician represents not merely the noble-minded great man, but the genius, imaginatively delineated, not, as in *Hamlet*, psychologically analyzed.

The two figures in which this spiritual power and this resistance are embodied are the most admirable productions of an artist's powers in this or any other age. A man owning even a small share of the scientific knowledge of our times would inevitably have been regarded as a powerful magician at that date. In the creation of Prospero, therefore, Shakespeare unconsciously anticipated the results of time. After seeing autobiography in these final speeches, it follows that Shakespeare might have written more of himself into Prospero.

We know six definite things about Shakespeare: he was baptised in Stratford-Upon-Avon in April 1564, his father was an illiterate glover and alderman, he worked in London from 1592 onwards (and wrote quite a few plays) and performed with the Lord Chamberlain's Company (later King's Men), he was buried in 1616, he left his wife. Even some of those "facts" are open to dispute. His father indeed illiterate and he just put a cross for his signature on the records we have of him — as plenty

of his contemporaries seem to have done — for speed and convenience. Prospero conveniently fills that vacuum. He gives us a sense of someone we desperately want to know: the man behind all those wonderful words.

CONCLUSION

The Tempest, however, has a sort of sacredness as the last work of the mighty workman. Shakespeare, as if conscious that it would be his last, and as if inspired to typify himself, has made its hero who could conjure up spirits from the vastly deep, and command supernatural agency by the most seemingly natural and simple means — And this final play of our poet has magic indeed; for what can be simpler in language than the courtship of Ferdinand and Miranda, and yet what can be more magical than the sympathy with which it subdues us. So we understand the temptation of seeing Shakespeare wielding that staff — even though there's no more hard evidence that he felt close to Prospero than there is that he identified with Caliban, or Ferdinand or Miranda. But here's an interesting thing. In a fascinating University of Oxford podcast about the folly of linking Prospero and Shakespeare, the academic Emma Smith points out that for a few hundred years after it was published in the First Folio, most critics assumed that *The Tempest* was Shakespeare's earliest play. It appeared first in the table of contents and so was generally accepted as the first to be written.

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