

## 19. *The Tempest*

Shakespeare's last play can be read as a metaphor (in poetry, magic, music and masque) for his own nature, the elements of which are divided into a cast of characters both natural and spiritual, a last supreme attempt to impose a resolution upon those conflicts which had fuelled all the great works.

Miranda's first speech is a strong condemnation of Prospero for using his Art to cause the shipwreck she has just witnessed :

Had I been any god of power, I would  
Have sunk the sea within the earth, or ere  
It should the good ship so have swallow'd, and  
The fraughting souls within her. (I ii. 10-13)

She is moved entirely by sympathy for the victims: 'O, I have suffered / With those that I saw suffer!' (5-6). Prospero comforts her with the assurance that there is 'not so much perdition as an hair / Betid to any creature in the vessel' (29-30), and we normally assume at this point that the 'virtue of compassion' is as strong in Prospero as in his daughter, and that the wreck is but the first of the trials which the evildoers must undergo for their own eventual redemption. An actor of serene dignity such as Gielgud would already by this point have convinced us, as much by his bearing, stage-presence and distinguished cadences as by what he actually says, that Prospero is a god-like being, totally in control of himself and everyone else, operating, like the Duke in *Measure for Measure* 'like power Divine' upon the lesser mortals around him. This was for centuries the traditional and orthodox reading of the play. But Prospero does not have to be like that. In Ninagawa's 1988 production Haruhiko Jo played Prospero with such smouldering hatred that one felt that he had preserved his enemies from the wreck only to prolong their suffering and to stage a confrontation before executing his final revenge. And this reading is, I suggest, more faithful to the text.

There is no character in Shakespeare more frequently identified with Shakespeare himself than Prospero. Perhaps Prospero is the most thinly-disguised appearance of the dramatist in his plays. But to say that Prospero is Shakespeare is not to exculpate him. Angelo was also Shakespeare. Is Prospero as white as he himself believes? What are his motives? Is his attempt to redeem Nature successful, or even, in the last analysis, desirable? What I want to do here is to outline some of the points which can be made against Prospero and in favour of Caliban; to ask to what extent Prospero fits the identikit of the criminal which we have derived from the earlier works.

In his introduction to the 1954 Arden edition (from which all my quotations are taken), Frank Kermode offers a summary of what he takes to be the play's central theme:

The main opposition is between the worlds of Prospero's Art, and Caliban's Nature. Caliban is the core of the play; like the shepherd in formal pastoral, he is the natural man against whom the cultivated man is measured. But we are not offered a comparison between a primitive innocence in nature and a sophisticated decadence, any more than we are in *Comus*. Caliban represents (at present we must oversimplify) nature without benefit of nurture; Nature, opposed to an Art which is man's

power over the created world and over himself; nature divorced from grace, or the senses without the mind. He differs from Iago and Edmund in that he is a 'naturalist' by nature, without access to the art that makes love out of lust; the restraints of temperance he cannot, in his bestiality, know; to the beauty of the nurtured he opposes a monstrous ugliness; ignorant of gentleness and humanity, he is a savage and capable of all ill; he is born to slavery, not to freedom, of a vile and not a noble union; and his parents represent an evil natural magic which is the antithesis of Prospero's benevolent Art. [xxiv-xxv]

Prospero has been practicing magic for decades before the start of the play: for what purpose? Until the ship carrying his enemies is accidentally brought within his sphere, his operations have no bearing on the loss of his dukedom, which, in any case, he had half-surrendered for their sake. Our information about Prospero's magical activities prior to the beginning of the play comes largely from the speech in which he renounces his Art [V i 33-57]. This famous speech, beginning 'Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves', derives directly from a passage in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* spoken by the black witch Medea. The same passage was put by Middleton into the mouth of Hecate in a play called *The Witch*. Kermode claims that 'only those elements which are consistent with "white" magic are taken over for Prospero' (149). This is not so:

graves at my command  
Have wak'd their sleepers, op'd, and let 'em forth  
By my so potent Art.

What had been his benevolent purpose in raising the dead? There is not a hint of benevolence in the entire speech. Dimming the sun, calling forth mutinous winds, setting 'roaring war' between sea and sky, shaking the promontory, plucking up great trees, is doing violence upon the natural order, exercising power for its own sake, or for the sake of playing god: 'and rifted Jove's stout oak with his own bolt'. Nor is it true, as Kermode says, that Prospero, unlike Sycorax who worked with demons, works only with higher intelligences. The elves are 'demi-puppets'; and to persecute Caliban Prospero employs goblins which are allowed to be active only in the hours of darkness. And the highest intelligence of all, Ariel, Prospero threatens with the same terrible torment inflicted on him by Sycorax.

What has Prospero done with his twelve years on the island? Parasitic on Caliban's knowledge of 'the qualities o' th'isle', he retires to his cell (having one subject to whom can be left the provision of physical necessities) and lives much as he had done before. The island exists for Prospero only as a place of exile and a source of nature-spirits which can be coerced into serving his purposes. He seeks total domination over nature and natural processes. He has continued his studies in both 'rough' (i.e. black) magic, and in the refined magic of alchemy (a not unusual combination which had helped to get alchemy a bad name) developing both into a potent Art. But there is nothing on the island on which he can exercise his potency, nothing more important for his spirits to do but pinch Caliban. He would like to be able to use his black magic to punish his enemies, but they are beyond his sphere of influence. And his alchemical project is stalled for lack of a suitable partner for his daughter in the *coniunctio*, the chymical wedding which must be

the next stage of the work. Meanwhile he has neglected his daughter, or, as he would say, in care of her has kept her in ignorance of the world beyond the island, seeing no way of preserving her purity in a wicked world but the combination of her ignorance and his protective magic.

Prospero seems to have cultivated magic for the purpose of becoming, in Miranda's words, a 'god of power', and that magic is as black as Faust's or Sycorax's unless the power is sought from the first for purely benevolent purposes. Benevolent towards whom? Towards his enemies? There is no suggestion that Prospero had dreamed that he would ever see them again; and when he does, his attitude to them shows no trace of benevolence until the fifth act. Towards Miranda? He has protected her from Caliban, but could probably have done that without magic. He selects Ferdinand (who is totally unknown to him) as her husband out of pure political expediency, and overrides their true feelings by having Ariel bewitch them:

At the first sight  
They have chang'd eyes. Delicate Ariel,  
I'll set thee free for this. [I ii 443-5]

Towards Ariel? He releases Ariel from the cloven pine only on condition that Ariel serve him, against his true nature, and threatens to do to Ariel again what Sycorax had done if he so much as murmurs against his servitude. According to Caliban all the lesser spirits hate Prospero as much as he does.

Towards Caliban Prospero had originally behaved with a show of 'human care' and 'nurture', but with the same assumption of superiority which had been rationalized as benevolence by the colonists in the New World, who, calling the natives savages because their religion was not Christianity, their civilization unlike European civilization, their language not English or Spanish, their dress and appearance and customs outlandish, denied them full humanity, freedom, and any title to their own lands, and exported them to England, dead or alive, to be exhibited at fairs. The possibility was debated that the Red Indians might not be human at all, but humanoid monsters created as slaves for humanity.

The isle was indeed Caliban's. He retains an affinity with it never matched by Prospero, who quits it as soon as he is able. Caliban's 'gabble' was presumably able to refer to the bigger light that burns by day and the lesser that burns by night if not to say 'sun' and 'moon'. There is a comic contrast between the brutish Caliban's ineligibility as a mate for Miranda, and the cultural appropriateness of Ferdinand's response to her first words to him: 'My language! heavens!'. Because Caliban does not behave in accordance with Prospero's puritanical code of honour, he is denied all human rights, enslaved and persecuted. Prospero does not drive him away. He cannot do without him:

We cannot miss him: he does make our fire,  
Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices  
That profit us. [I ii 313-15]

Visiting Caliban, provoking and reviling and tormenting him, seems to constitute a form of entertainment for Prospero, like bear-baiting.

Kermode defines Art as 'man's power over the created world and over himself'. We are no longer as likely as in 1954 to find what man has done to the created world and to himself over the 3000 years of his domination as something to be proud of, and are perhaps more likely to admire Caliban's sensitive response to and adaptation to the natural environment. There is nothing exclusively contemporary about taking the side of the native against the colonizer. In our awareness of the destructiveness of Western colonialism we are only returning to ideas which were commonplace in the sixteenth century. Reports from the New World differed widely in their descriptions of the Indians; to some they were demons or savage beasts, to others unfallen man. In his essay 'On the Caniballs' (translated by Florio in 1603) Montaigne argued that 'there is nothing in that nation, that is either barbarous or savage, unlesse men call that barbarisme which is not common to them', and that even if there were genuine barbarism, this was nothing in comparison with the barbarism of those who presumed to 'civilize' them.

Shakespeare himself in his earlier works (all of which deal with the art/nature conflict) had usually taken the side of Nature, from *Venus and Adonis* to *The Winter's Tale*, where Perdita rejects Polixenes' argument that art, itself a product of nature, can improve on nature. Perdita's reverence for 'great creating nature' echoes Montaigne's for 'our great and puissant mother Nature', and her rejection of 'our carnations and streak'd gillivors' as 'nature's bastards' is a paraphrase of his argument in defence of the natives of the New World:

They are even savage, as we call those fruits wilde, which nature of her selfe, and of her ordinarie progresse hath produced: whereas indeed, they are those which our selves have altered by our artificiall devices, and diverted from their common order, we should rather term savage. In those are the true and most profitable vertues, and naturall properties most lively and vigorous, which in these we have bastardized, applying them to the pleasure of our corrupted taste. ... There is no reason, arte should gaine the point of honour of our great and puissant mother Nature. We have so much by our inventions, surcharged the beauties and riches of hir workes, that we have altogether over-choaked hir: yet where-ever hir puritie shineth, she makes our vaine, and frivolous enterprises wonderfully ashamed.

The art to which Perdita refers is cultivation, whereas Prospero's Art (always with the capital) is supernatural, occult, and implies a spurning of the merely natural and earthy. Caliban represents the dark side of Nature, which Prospero seeks to exorcise, and of human nature, which he condemns in others but refuses to acknowledge in himself.

Certainly Caliban is brutish. He is also presented as both physically and morally ugly. This ugliness is usually assumed to derive from his evil parentage, but there is much to suggest that Caliban turns ugly, as Heathcliff does, in response to rejection and persecution.

The very name of Caliban, an anagram of canibal (Shakespeare's spelling of cannibal), and close to Cariban - a native of the West Indies - must have alerted many of Shakespeare's audience to the relevance of Montaigne's much-discussed essay, and the whole topical debate on the morality of colonialism. But Caliban is not simply an American Indian. He is also very much in the tradition of the wodwo, or wild man of the woods, so familiar in English art and folklore of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

(One tapestry depicts a wotwo abducting a woman from a castle.) One of Shakespeare's earliest editors, Malone, in his edition of 1790, wrote that Caliban's dress, 'which doubtless was originally prescribed by the poet himself and has been continued, I believe, since his time, is a large bear skin, or the skin of some other animal; and he is usually represented with long shaggy hair'. This tradition is still alive in the theatre.

The wotwo was itself a descendent of the satyr, with whom Caliban has much in common. The satyr had abundant hair and beard, broad nose, large pointed ears, horse tail, hooves, and large, permanently erect phallus. He represented natural as opposed to civilized man, everything man shares with the beasts. His characteristics were naive curiosity and credulousness, acquisitiveness, lust, drunkenness, lying, boasting and cowardice. He was completely gross and amoral. Yet every Greek tragedian competing in the Great Dionysia was obliged to follow his three tragedies with a satyr play. Neither in the satyr plays nor elsewhere was the satyr presented with disgust. Rather the satyr plays seem to have been celebrations of the life of the body at its most basic as a way of balancing the tragic vision with its relentless progress through suffering towards death. In the words of Tony Harrison:

This journey back into the service of the presiding god [Dionysus] seems to be paralleled by the release of the spirit back into the life of the senses at the end of the tragic journey. ... The sensual relish for life and its affirmation must have been the spirit of the conclusion of the four plays. The satyrs are included in the wholeness of the tragic vision. they are not forgotten or forced out by pseudo 'refinement'.

[*Trackers* xi]

In *The Trackers of Oxyrhyncus*, Harrison's completion of a fragmentary satyr play by Sophocles, Silenus, the leader of the satyrs, tells a story of such Apollonian 'refinement'. Marsyas, a satyr, found a flute and learned to play it so well that he competed against Apollo's lyre. Apollo had him flayed alive for his presumption. Perhaps there is here a deeply submerged link between Caliban's surprising responsiveness to music and the cramps and pinchings to which Prospero subjects him:

'How can *he* be a virtuoso on the flute?  
Look at the hoofs on him. He's half a brute!  
His one and only flaw. He showed that flutes  
sound just as beautiful when breathed into by 'brutes'.  
It confounded the categories of high and low  
when Caliban could outplay Prospero.

[*Trackers* 64]

By Shakespeare's time the tragic and comic visions had been wholly separated out by dualism, the satyrs permanently excluded from the world of Apollonian high culture. The animal man had to be converted into 'civilized' man (taught to repudiate his mother), exterminated, or enslaved, whether in the colonies or in the individual psyche. Shakespeare had to rediscover the language of wholeness, even at the cost of relinquishing the high ground of his own rhetorical mastery in the great anthology pieces. The Othello music is discredited; the silence of Cordelia vindicated. Perdita repudiates art

itself as the rape of nature. Once Apollo is silenced, the satyrs re-emerge from their darkness. Or, as Cassirer put it:

... whenever the inhibitions created by conscious reflection, by our causal analysis and analytical classification, fall away, the intuition of this essential identity between man and animal tends to reappear.  
[II, 183]

(It was through a similar purging of language that such later poets as Whitman, Lawrence and Hughes were to recapture that intuition.)

Prospero's style throughout is lofty and rhetorical, rising at times to a godlike perspective:

The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep. [IV i 152-8]

It has no truck with the ordinary traffic of life, the casual comedy. Preoccupied with his insubstantial pageant he quite forgets the substantial plot against him (as he had earlier, preoccupied with higher things, failed to detect his brother's plot against him). His style is literary and self-conscious. It does not stoop to the details of life in the body and the natural world. Not only log-bearing, but living itself (if living is a delicate awareness of and subtle relatedness to the rest of life) can be left to his servant Caliban.

In comparison, Caliban's verse (and it is significant that, unlike the other 'low' characters, he almost always speaks verse) is virtually without style:

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.[II ii 180-5]

Wilson Knight comments:

Whether as spirit-powers or as their ordinary selves, he is one with earth's creatures; 'all the qualities o' th' isle' come to us unmediated by any particular 'style' of expression; or we might say we have the perfection of style in its apparent absence. In Caliban's words we shall find a close-up of nature, and this apparent closeness seems to be unique in Shakespeare's nature poetry. He has always a vast resource at his disposal. There are nature-spirits in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and there is Perdita's flower dialogue in *The Winter's Tale*. His tragedies have elemental tempests,

and references to fierce animals, lion, bear, wolf and boar. There is pretty nearly every sort of nature, located or atmospheric, in reference or setting; but all are, in the comparison I am now making, used for literary or dramatic purpose, and so in a way distanced. Even the stallion in *Venus and Adonis*, the boar and hunted hare, yes, and the wonderful snail, might be called descriptive triumphs and are to that extent lacking in spontaneity. I am thinking on the lines of Tolstoy's final tenets, wherein he repudiated all artistic sophistication. Caliban's nature has an actuality beyond the literary; he speaks as one embedded in it, as sophisticated man cannot be.

[*Dimensions* 113-4]

Wilson Knight compares this kind of consciousness with that of the American Indian, of which Shakespeare had (with the help of Montaigne) got an inkling from the first reports:

There was normally no hunting for pleasure and no wanton destruction of arboreal life. In human affairs they could both inflict and endure suffering; they seem to have been unique among races in acceptance, without sentimentality, of the conditions of incarnate life, both its wonders and its agonies. Caliban's words breath natural kinship, sympathy and understanding; but also mastery, through man's place in the created scheme. [116]

Prospero does take pleasure in hunting, and, like some of the settlers, in hunting men. He turns his spirits into hounds and sets them gleefully on Caliban. Their names are telling: 'Fury, Fury! There, Tyrant, there!' [IV i 260]. It is hardly surprising that, with such a master, Caliban should turn vicious and long to 'batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake, / Or cut his wezand'.

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I have used the word 'puritanical' of Prospero, and should like to return to that; to look, for example, at the speech in which Prospero warns Ferdinand not to anticipate the marriage ceremony. It is not the warning itself which is noteworthy so much as the unnecessary extremity of the language, the hysteria almost, with which he expresses his horror at the unsanctified act:

If thou dost break her virgin-knot before  
All sanctimonious ceremonies may  
With full and holy rite be minister'd,  
No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall  
To make this contract grow; but barren hate,  
Sour-ey'd disdain and discord shall bestrew  
The union of your bed with weeds so loathly  
That you shall hate it both.

[IV i 15-22]

As if that were not already too much, Prospero returns obsessively to the matter a few lines later, in lines which echo Hamlet's to his mother:

do not give dalliance  
Too much the rein: the strongest oaths are straw  
To th' fire i' th' blood: be more abstemious,  
Or else, good night your vow! [IV i 51-4]

This provokes Ferdinand to a ridiculous response:

The white cold virgin snow upon my heart  
Abates the ardour of my liver. [IV i 55-6]

Unusually, sexuality has had little overt role in this play. But Prospero's determination that it should not rear its ugly head shows that it is a problem for him. He fears Venus as though she were Sycorax. He wants to refine Nature to bring it into alignment with arbitrary and exclusive human values. Or, insofar as his art is alchemical, the island is the crucible in which, now that the missing element, the groom, has become available, he prepares a chymical wedding. One particle of impurity would wreck the whole experiment, now nearing its goal. The experiment requires a very low temperature. The wedding is hedged about with vows, prohibitions, ceremonies. If sexuality is to be magically transformed into spirituality, courtship must be as circumscribed and codified as a game of chess.

Prospero sets up, as it were, a replay of *Venus and Adonis*, carefully rigged by magic to produce the opposite outcome. Venus is excluded, prohibited, replaced by Diana. The natural man in Ferdinand is put in a straight-jacket of prohibitions which almost stops his blood flowing. The result is a wooden tableau of contrived harmony which we cannot imagine surviving transplantation to the real world. To preserve such purity outside his laboratory, in Naples or Milan he would have to geld and spay every youth of the city.

There immediately follows the masque, performed by spirits pretending to be goddesses, 'temperate nymphs' and 'sunburn'd sicklemen'. The most important of the 'goddesses' is Ceres, goddess of *cultivated* nature, of husbandry. She returns to the same theme. Since Prospero must have written the script, or be unconsciously feeding the spirits their lines, he is elevating his obsession into a magic ritual. Ceres says that she has forsworn the 'scandal'd company' of Venus and her son, since they helped 'dusky Dis', king of the underworld, to drag down to his kingdom her daughter Proserpina or Persephone. Iris reassures her that Venus and Cupid have been successfully excluded from these rites:

Here thought they to have done  
Some wanton charm upon this man and maid,  
Whose vows are, that no bed-right shall be paid  
Till Hymen's torch be lighted: but in vain. [IV i 94-7]

This scenario repeats a pattern from the main body of the play, where Prospero's daughter has been threatened with rape, where he sets himself against a mother and son (Sycorax



and Caliban) who stand for uncontrolled natural energies in alliance with a dark underworld deity, Setebos. The masque is an attempt to rewrite the Persephone myth, so that Persephone escapes the attentions of dusky Dis, need not acknowledge the darkness, and it is perpetual summer. It is also an attempt to filter out all those impurities which might lead to tragedy. Passion is eliminated by strict rules, as in a game of chess. Standing behind the masque (and behind the whole play) is, as Hughes has demonstrated, the story of Dido and Aeneas:

A central mythic feature of this story, in Virgil's telling, is that Dido's fatal passion is dramatized as the goddess Venus' victory over the goddess Juno, while her actual death is described as a ritual ministered by Juno, Iris and Proserpina.

[*Shakespeare* 419]

Prospero is trying to conjure for his daughter an unfallen world. Ferdinand responds appropriately:

Let me live here ever;  
So rare a wonder'd father and a wise  
Makes this place Paradise. [IV i 123-5]

But a moment later the vision is rudely shattered (*'to a strange, hollow, and confused noise, they heavily vanish'*). Prospero remembers 'that foul conspiracy Of the beast Caliban' (described by Hughes as 'the emissary of that part of the Goddess which cannot be assimilated ... what has been excluded from the ego's life' [498]). Prospero can exclude Venus from the nuptials, but only at the cost of ensuring that if she cannot attend as an honoured guest bearing gifts, she will return covertly, from underground, bringing curses. No Art is sufficiently potent or perfect to exclude the goddess totally and permanently.

By controlling the moon and tides, Sycorax must also control the menstrual cycle in women. And 'blue-eyed' is a description often applied to Venus. In other words, Sycorax is Venus as she appears to the distorted puritanical vision of Prospero, the Queen of Heaven seen as a witch and a monster. His rejection of her converts her into that, as, in Shakespeare's first poem 'Venus and Adonis', Adonis' rejection of her beauty and bounty had converted her into a ravaging boar.

Is Prospero no more than Adonis who, having narrowly escaped the boar, goes into hiding or retreat for decades to perfect his defences against Venus until he is powerful enough to exclude her from his magic circle? Does he succeed in this? Does Shakespeare approve of the attempt? Or is the attempt doomed because, though Sycorax may be dead and Venus distant, the boar survives in Antonio and Caliban even on the island, and presumably marauds everywhere in the world beyond, where Prospero will be without his book and staff?

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The scene which above all others justifies Ninagawa's interpretation is Act V, Sc.i, 17-30:



Be not afeared; 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 sometimes voices,  
That if I then had wak'd after long sleep  
Will make me 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.

[*White Goddess* 426-7]

Wilson Knight agrees that this is 'the truest poetry of the play', and makes even greater claims for it. Caliban, he says,

makes no distinction between man and spirit, the natural and the supernatural, and sees and hears what to us is wonderful; his every accent is there to prove it. We forget the occasion. We are, for the moment, outside *The Tempest*, but inside the universe; a spiritualistic universe. The universe of the Red Men. [Dimensions 123]

In Caliban's poetry, he claims, 'Shakespeare forecasts what may be the future of world literature, concerned less with the fictional than the factual, but with a factuality that encompasses the supernatural' [126].

Is it, then, possible to reconcile the apparently opposite interpretations of Kermode and the many critics he speaks for on the one hand, and Graves and Wilson Knight on the other? Perhaps a partial reconciliation is to be found in the final humanization of Prospero. Prospero, in renouncing his Art, drops all his pretensions to be superhuman. The tempest in Prospero's mind has been a conflict between the light and dark elements warring there. He has attempted to disown the darker areas of the self, what Jung calls the 'shadow-self', as symbolized in Caliban and Sycorax, whose threat and ugliness is in part a product of his own lopsidedness, his puritanical obsessions, his hubristic tendency to behave as though man were capable of becoming god and restoring Paradise.

Only by casting off his magic garments can Prospero find himself. His final acknowledgement of Caliban - 'This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine' - transforms the shadow-self from an unredeemable monster into a creature capable of seeking wisdom and Grace. Prospero returns where he belongs, and leaves Caliban where he belongs, in possession of the island. Is there here a recognition that Prospero has something to learn even from Caliban, that Caliban acknowledged ceases to threaten the overthrow of the state and the psyche, that any healthy and balanced development of the life of the spirit is a corollary of an ability to live fully in the body in harmony with the natural environment?