

Shakespeare's Tempest: mazing¹ the senses to restore reason

1. Introduction. "Enlightenment and Modernity", 1600-1850. With the discovery of America the centre of gravity of the world shifts to the Atlantic. Questioning traditional methods of knowledge: science and religion become separate domains. Rise of European nation-states, Atlantic slave trade, colonialism, capitalism, exploitation of natural resources and labour. Appeal to universal reason and the realisation of human potential. Social progress through necessary stages of social development. Balancing self-interest and the social good. The liberal state. Nationalism and racism. Marx and Engels: "Law, morality, religion are to him [the worker] so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush so many bourgeois interests" (*Communist Manifesto*, 1848, Oxford Classics, p. 14). But whose enlightenment? what reason?

2. Immediate context: 1609 wreck of ships off Bermuda during voyage from England to colonise Jamestown in Virginia, William Strachey's account, *True repertory of the wreck and redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, July fifteenth, sixteen hundred and ten*. Though set in the Mediterranean, the play expresses the ambiguities of encounters with native Americans, of making new worlds and of investigating and controlling nature.

3. Prospero, former duke of Milan, was exiled to an island with his daughter Miranda. His brother Antonio had overthrown him with the help of the king of Naples, Alonso. The only others on the island are Caliban, the earthy son of a witch, and Ariel, an airy spirit, both of whom Prospero commands with the aid of magical power. Now, twelve years on, a ship is carrying all Prospero's enemies back from the wedding of the king of Naples' daughter Claribel in Tunis. Prospero creates a tempest, the ship is wrecked and those on board are dispersed into four groups: (a) king and courtiers, (b) the king's son Ferdinand, (c) servants, and (d) sailors. Each group is taken out of its senses in some way by Prospero's magic in order to effect change and eventual reconciliation, with Prospero restored to his dukedom and Miranda promised to Ferdinand. "In one voyage did Claribel her husband find at Tunis, and Ferdinand, her brother, found a wife where he himself was lost, Prospero his dukedom in a poor isle, and all of us ourselves when no man was his own." (Gonzalo, 5.1.208-213, p. 199)

- (a) "You are three men of sin [...] I have made you mad, and even with such-like valour men hang and drown their proper selves." [*The king and courtiers draw their swords.*] "You fools! I and my fellows are ministers of Fate [...] But remember – for that's my business to you – that you three from Milan did supplant good Prospero, exposed unto the sea, which hath requit it, him and his innocent child; for which foul deed, the powers delaying, not forgetting, have incensed the seas and shores, yea all the creatures against your peace." (Ariel to Alonso, Antonio and the king of Naples' brother Sebastian, 3.3.52, 58-60, 60-1, 68-75, pp. 166-7). "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." (Prospero, 5.1.26-32, p. 189) "Since I saw thee, th'affliction of my mind amends, with which I fear a madness held me. [...] Thy dukedom I resign and do entreat thou pardon me my wrongs." (Alonso to Prospero, 5.1.114-119, p. 194)
- (b) "At the first sight they have changed eyes. Delicate Ariel, I'll set thee free for this." (Prospero to Ariel, 1.2.441-3, p.125)
- (c) "I'll be wise hereafter, and seek for grace. What a thrice-double ass was I to take this drunkard for a god, and worship this dull fool." (Caliban, 5.1.294-7, p. 203)
- (d) "If I did think, sir, I were well awake, I'd strive to tell you. We were dead of sleep, and – how we know not – all clapped under hatches." (boatswain, 5.1.229-231, p. 200)
- (e) "Now my charms are all o'erthrown,/ and what strength I have's mine own,/ which is most faint. Now 'tis true / I must be here confined by you,/ or sent to Naples. Let me not,/ since I have my dukedom got,/ and pardoned the deceiver, dwell / on this bare island by your spell,/ but release me from my bands / with the help of your good hands./ [...] As you from crimes would pardoned be,/ let your indulgence set me free." (Prospero, 5.1.319-338)

¹ Maze: to stupify, put out of one's wits (OED).

4. Themes:

1. Control over nature. Can nature itself be controlled, or only people's perceptions? cf. Bacon, "Nature, to be commanded, must be obeyed" (Aphorism 3).
2. Control over human nature. To what extent can education and the learning of, say, polished Italian make a difference to human nature and instinct? Prospero of Caliban: "A devil, a born devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick" (4.1.188-9, p.183). Miranda to Caliban: "Abhorred slave, which any print of goodness wilt not take [...]" (1.2.350-1, p. 120). Prospero to Miranda about Antonio: "I thus neglecting worldly ends, [...] in my false brother awaked an evil nature" (1.2.89/92-3, p. 105). Prospero to Antonio at the end: "I do forgive thee, unnatural though thou art" (5.1.79-80, p. 192). On the virtues of language, Miranda to Caliban: "When thou didst not, savage, know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like a thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes with words that made them known" (1.2.354-7, p. 120). Caliban to Miranda in reply: "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!" (1.2.162-3, p. 121) (But see also Caliban's lyrical speeches, e.g. at 3.2.132-141, p. 162.)
Prospero's control over himself (self-government): portrayed as irritable and dictatorial, he decides to act "with nobler reason 'gainst my fury" (see 4.5) when he renounces magic.
3. Control over people, government: different examples of bad governance (Prospero irresponsibly burying himself in his books in Milan, Prospero as colonial despot of the island, the Naples court as vacuous and riven with intrigue) versus Gonzalo's utopia (2.1.145-162, pp. 135-6) without government, law, trade, work, marriage. What kind of governance did native Americans have, and what would be the best form of government in a colony? cf. Hobbes and Locke on 'state of nature'.
4. The civilizing mission of European colonialism. Caliban to Prospero: "This island's mine [...] which thou tak'st from me. When thou cam'st first, thou strok'st me and made much of me; [...] and then I loved thee, and showed thee all the qualities o' th' isle, the fresh springs, brine pits, barren places and fertile – cursed be I that did so! [...] for I am all the subjects that you have, which first was mine own king" (1.2.331-342, pp. 119-120).
5. Knowledge and power. cf. Bacon (Aphorism 3), "Human knowledge and human power meet in one." Should knowledge be pursued at the expense of social duty? "Me, poor man, my library was dukedom large enough" (Prospero to Miranda, 1.2.109-110, p. 107). "But this rough magic I here abjure; [...] I'll break my staff ... and deeper than did ever plummet sound I'll drown my book" (Prospero alone, 5.1.50-57, p. 190). "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." (Prospero to Ariel, 5.1.25-28, p. 189) "So their rising senses begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle their clearer reason" (Prospero observing the courtiers, 5.1.66.-68, p. 191).
Influence of Stoicism through Michel de Montaigne (1533-92) whose essays were translated into English in 1603, particularly "On cannibals" and "On cruelty": social duty, responsible government and self-government, reason controlling the passions. Echoes of Virgil's *Aeneid* throughout the play. (See Ben Ross Schneider, 1995, "'Are we being historical yet?' Colonialist interpretations of Shakespeare's *Tempest*", *Shakespeare Studies*, 23, available at http://www.stoics.com/are_we_being_historical_yet.html)
6. Role-play and performance: not only are the characters in the play mazed by Prospero's magic but we as audience are mazed by the play itself. "To have no screen between this part he played and him he played it for, he needs will be absolute Milan" (Prospero to Miranda about Antonio, his brother, 1.2.107-9, p. 107). "These our actors, as I foretold you, were all spirits, and are melted into air, into thin air, and, like the baseless fabric of this vision, the cloud-capped 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." (Prospero to Ferdinand, 4.1.148-158, pp.180-1) See epilogue above under 3(e).