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Phantoms of Language: The Rebirth of a Literary Great

Language wields the ability to charm or to curse, to mislead or to unveil, to harm or to heal. It may be readopted by its audience, or die in the air, imprisoned by the walls of the theater, the corners of the page, and the chambers of the instrument. As playwright of *The Tempest*, Shakespeare asserts and retires from his station of divine-like orchestrator of language, portraying a range of character emotional and psychological responses to mirror the compelling effects of verse, prose, and theater. Exploring music and the shared bond of language, he establishes a fine line between language to unify or to destroy, to punish and to forgive, and to neglect or to preserve. Among his final works, Shakespeare hopes his audience will readopt his artform in soul and spirit, translating the audience's actions beyond theater's scope.

Orienting himself with his main character Prospero, Shakespeare articulates his transformative, divine power over language, casting spells of literary genius similar to the expert musician. As former Duke of Milan, Prospero is a reflection of Shakespeare's own mastery and character, Prospero "being so reputed / In dignity, and for the liberal arts / Without a parallel" like Shakespeare in his respective literary sphere (1.2.90-92). Moreover, Prospero is in exile, just as Shakespeare will soon be exiled from his literary pursuits by his faithful audience and the limitations of humanity. Ariel, the moral spirit who conducts Prospero's will, describes Prospero's tempest as terrifying and rivaling the mighty Roman Gods: Ariel proclaims, "Jove's lightning . . . more momentary / And sight-outrunning were not," The fire and cracks / Of

sulfurous roaring the most mighty Neptune” (1.2.238-240). Likewise, Shakespeare’s allusion to Greek mythology not only identifies his work with both New and Old World material, but associates his power of language with divine quality, Prospero’s lightning extending from the heavens. Prospero manufactures a tempest from the sole conjurings of his mind in the same way Shakespeare crafts dramatizations of verse—a storm of magic and potent ideas. This imagery demonstrates the power of the musician and playwright to create marvelous wonders from nothing, later ushering restoration to his subjects as to his audience.

Reinforcing Prospero as his counterpart in language, Shakespeare alludes to literature’s blurring of reality adjacent to the island’s trickery and ambiguity. Prospero’s Dukedom and his fictional Mediterranean island, unnamed, relates to Shakespeare’s widespread influence and the mysterious capabilities of his language. The illusive qualities of magic, prose, and verse are reiterated through the beckoning of sleep and dreams; reflecting upon his banquet of song and phantoms, Prospero resolves, “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep” (4.1.173-175). In other words, each individual is composed of dreams, for we sleep and dream prior to birth and succeeding death. Prospero is calling human existence itself into question—mankind composed of the intangible and transient element of dreams—just as theater manifests the dreams of our lives and often possesses questions to its audience.

Another of Prospero’s apparitions, a lavish banquet appears to Prospero’s enemies made captives, one of whom is King Alonso of Naples: Alonso wonders aloud, “Such shapes, such gesture, and such sound, / expressing— / . . . a kind / Of excellent dumb discourse” (3.3.46-49). Thus, Alonso’s speech portrays his inability to separate the phantasmal from reality, elevating Prospero’s and in turn Shakespeare’s authority over language in manipulating human perceptions and psychological states. The visual quality of the banquet represents Shakespeare’s

imagery-infused language and its ability to materialize like magic. The description of “discourse”, and enjambment of “expressing” extends Shakespeare’s spoken language in theater to the auditory and visual forms of music and performed action.

While Prospero represents Shakespeare’s artform as a whole, Shakespeare’s spirit and physical form manifests compartmentally in relation to his native subjects. Ariel, a loyal sprite, is oriented with Prospero’s soul and will, as well as Shakespeare’s future liberation from his craft; by contrast, Caliban, a both human and monstrous form, is associated with Prospero’s struggle between extending revenge or mercy. In this way, Ariel and Caliban are opposites of one another and represent theater when used for moral debate: Upon arrival to the island, Prospero “made gape / the pine and let [Ariel] out” from Sycorax’s entrapping, while Caliban becomes Prospero’s “lying slave,” no longer ruling in succession of the evil witch Sycorax (1.2.346-347, 412). While Ariel is liberated by Prospero, Caliban is imprisoned—opposites of their prior histories. In this reversal, the tension between Prospero’s pure intentions and mercy come into conflict with his monstrous craving for revenge, the spiritual conflicting with the physical. Prospero references Ariel in relation to his soul directly, “As my soul prompts it. Spirit, fine spirit” (1.2.502). Because Ariel acts as Prospero’s marionette for magic, she reflects the spirit of the poet when used for positive impact.

Beyond the physical, Caliban represents the versatility of language, possessing both the creativity and coherence, yet uses language to curse and manipulate. Directed at Prospero, Caliban broods, “You taught me language, and my profit on’t / Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid of you / For learning me your language!” (1.2.437-439). Therefore, Caliban represents the dangerous and corruptible aspects of language, disguising his evil plots with eloquent dialect. Just as Prospero directly associates his soul with Ariel, Prospero claims Caliban directly: “This

thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (5.1.330-331). As Prospero formally recognizes Caliban as a native on the island, Shakespeare claims him as the literary monster of his own person. Unlike the subordinate characters of Shakespeare’s other works, Caliban speaks in both verse and prose, with prose reserved for his cursing at Prospero. Ariel is liberated since she represents Shakespeare’s spirit of literature, which lives on through the audience; however, Caliban must cease to exist, tied to Shakespeare's physical and earthly form.

Another dimension, Shakespeare further explores music as an extension and reinforcer of language and poetry, as well as the shared bond of language as a unifying force. Prospero’s island is representative of Shakespeare’s theater, awash in the magic of language to induce a vast array of emotions. Prospero’s servant Caliban effectively portrays the island's musical and emotional qualities: “The isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not / . . . I cried to dream again” (3.2.148-149, 156). Hence, the island produces a constant, trance-like state similar to theater. Music supports the power of prose—a form of poetry—and reminds the audience of the magical setting, used to enchant, disorient, alert, and guide. Ferdinand is filled with both “fury and . . . passion,” while Prospero’s enemies are “distracted,” the rest “mourning over them / Brimful of sorrow and dismay” (1.2, 5.1.470, 17). These diverse range of emotional and psychological responses mirror the magical property of language, establishing Shakespeare as an orchestrator of reality. Thus, Prospero uses music to guide individuals’ actions, while the shared bond of one’s native language enables and mobilizes relationships. Ferdinand exclaims, “My language! Heavens!” in joyful discovery of his common language with Miranda, while Alonso’s servants resolve, “Where the devil should he learn our language? I will give him some relief, if it be but for that” (1.2.2.2.514, 67-69). Just as the shared

bonds of language unite Ferdinand and Miranda in love and Caliban with Alonso's servants in evil plots, Shakespeare is united with his audience through the bond of verse.

Furthermore, Shakespeare explores the finality of death in relation to rebirth, evoking water imagery to represent the tempest and its mysterious nature. Realizing the isolating and dangerously God-like quality of his art, Prospero forgives his enemies and surrenders his craft: "I'll break my staff, / Bury it in certain fathoms in the earth, / And deeper than did ever plummet sound / I'll drown my book" (5.1.63-66). Therefore, Prospero relinquishes his magic just as Shakespeare renounces his playwriting. Drowning is particularly significant, a death typically without recovery of the body. Shakespeare selects drowning not only in connection to the tempest—banishing his magic with its very form of introduction—but to allow for its rebirth. This loss is not completed in the ritual of burial, allowing Shakespeare's audience to revive his literary genius in spirit. Fear of destruction is subsequently transformed into restoration. As a result of the tempest, Ariel reports, "Not a hair perished. / On their sustaining garments not a blemish, / But fresher than before" (1.2.258-260). Similarly, in response to Alonso's and Ferdinand's mutual fears that the other had drowned, Prospero concludes, "Though the seas threaten, they are merciful" (5.1.209). As a result, the play swings from a borderline tragedy to a romance, reflecting the transformative potential of language in the unfolding of events, the sea symbolic of such mystery. Recoveries and new beginnings are made possible for both the life of the characters and Shakespeare's artform. Accordingly, the two journeys aboard the ship mirror the transportative quality of theater, the return to Naples punctuated with "calm seas" and "auspicious gales" to complete the resolution of grace.

In a striking epilogue, Shakespeare—powerless without his artform—summons the mercy and forgiveness of his audience that he, as Prospero, extends to his enemies. His "charms.

.. o'erthrown" and the strength his "own / Which is most faint," Shakespeare acknowledges that the entirety of his power is derived from the enchanting quality of literature, mimicked by use of end rhyme (Epilogue.1-3). He transfers his magic to the audience, remaining "In this bare island by your spell," "your" referencing the audience (Epilogue.8). Ultimately, Shakespeare's power of literature is derived from the audience in that his sole purpose and desire is "to please" his audience (Epilogue.13). Extending forgiveness requires vulnerability, which Shakespeare associates with Prospero's surrendering of magic—a quality that is innately human. Shakespeare is acknowledging his lack of power over his own mortality. More specifically, he is trusting his audience to pardon him of any literary transgressions in this same vulnerable manner, "With the help of good hands" and "as relieved by prayer" (Epilogue.9, 16). This imagery of hands not only alludes to an applause of praise and the forgiveness granted by a higher power, but to Shakespeare's personal labor in transcribing his plays. Therefore, Prospero requires their applause to blow his ship to Naples, as Shakespeare requires the applause to release him from the stage and his life of literary pursuits.

Shakespeare concludes on a note of resolution and hope, requesting "your indulgence set me free" (Epilogue 20). In this instance, indulgence possesses a doubly positive and negative connotation. "Indulgence" reminds the audience not to overindulge in literature as Prospero does in magic, and not to neglect one another as Prospero did his dukedom. He entrusts his audience with the magical and God-like properties of literature, wielding its power to unify, heal and forgive rather than to curse, manipulate and destroy. However, to indulge also requests passionate commitment to the essence of his artform. Just as Shakespeare possesses the spirits of his audience through his plays, he summons his audience to preserve his work in their spirit, translating them into actions. Consequently, Shakespeare explores language in its diverse forms,

from music to speech, and its ability to unite and love or to avenge and destroy. Extending his power of literary magic to his audience, he implores them to liberate him from his own literary transgressions as he does his enemies and to utilize his art for its graceful attributes. The psychological and emotional authority of theater transfers from the characters of *The Tempest* to the audience, manifesting in the unifying and reverberating spirit of applause and the hope of their changed actions. To Shakespeare, theater must not be confined to his personal stage, but extend onto the world stage.

Work Cited

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