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# Interruption in *The Tempest*

A. LYNNE MAGNUSSON

ONE OF THE STRANGEST QUALITIES of *The Tempest* is its habit of interruption.<sup>1</sup> The circumstances surrounding Prospero's breaking off of the wedding masque in Act IV have always puzzled commentators. But this interruption is not an isolated occurrence. It happens often enough to constitute a motif. Plans for vengeance are interrupted: both Antonio's plot to kill Alonso and Stephano's plot to kill Prospero are arrested. If Prospero's plan for his enemies is vengeance, it, too, is perfunctorily discarded when Ariel urges against it. Prospero interrupts the dramatic movement between the accusatory masque of the Harpy and the response of the "three men of sin" by stepping forward to congratulate Ariel on his performance. The love plot is truncated. Although Prospero enjoins Ferdinand to pile "some thousands" of logs before nightfall, the proposed ordeal is apparently discarded. The play begins with a realistic portrayal of a storm and shipwreck, but both Miranda's and the audience's expectations of the consequent devastation are overturned. The interruptive strategy of the play is all the more strange given the fact that Shakespeare utilizes such features of the conventional well-made plot as the unities of time and place. Most readings of *The Tempest* do not take into account Shakespeare's pervasive device of breaking off dramatic actions in the play, but instead, as Anne Richter points out, concentrate on an amazingly varied array of allegorical and theoretical readings.<sup>2</sup>

Other peculiar qualities of the play may be related to these rifts in the plot. The comic material occasionally gives the impression of improvisation, as if the methods of the *commedia dell'arte* were in Shakespeare's mind when he devised the drunken pranks of Stephano, Trinculo, and Caliban. One has the sense that the actors of these characters could add, delete, or substitute jokes without significantly altering the play. Prospero's presence as a magician who behaves like a dramatist adds to the impression of the provisional or extempore status of much of the action, in that he makes some of it up as he goes along, and changes his mind along the way. There is a randomness to occurrences in the play alien to our expectations of Shakespeare's dramatic construction, with the play resisting our educated expectations of plot.

Interruption is a pattern not only of plot but also of language in *The Tempest*. The following discussion will first consider verbal occurrences of interruption and possible explanations of these. It will then return to related questions raised by plot interruptions.

## I

Stylistic interruption takes its crudest form in the first half of II.i. In this episode, Gonzalo attempts to comfort Alonso for the loss of his son by putting

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to S. P. Zitner, who directed me toward this topic.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Richter, Introduction to *The Tempest*, New Penguin Shakespeare (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 21.

a good face on their immediate situation, and Adrian and Francisco join him in this effort. Shakespeare's debt to Montaigne in Gonzalo's imagination of an ideal commonwealth has drawn the interest and attention of critics to this scene, but critics have, at the same time, been puzzled by the unfunny punning of Antonio and Sebastian throughout the scene. Shakespeare's method of handling the episode is certainly baffling. What occurs throughout is that the speech-making, mainly by Gonzalo, but also by Adrian and Francisco, is persistently interrupted by the punning and derogation of Sebastian and Antonio:

*Sebastian* [Aside to Antonio] Look, he's winding up the  
watch of his wit; by and by it will strike.  
*Gonzalo* Sir,—  
*Sebastian* [Aside to Antonio] One: tell.  
*Gonzalo* When every grief is entertain'd that's offer'd,  
Comes to th'entertainer—  
*Sebastian* A dollar.  
*Gonzalo* Dolour comes to him, indeed: you have spoken  
truer than you purpos'd.

(II.i.12–20)<sup>3</sup>

Sebastian and Antonio disrupt the speeches not only by punning, but also by anticipating the next words to come from the speaker's mouth, by anticipating the syntactic and rhetorical construction of the speeches, and by criticizing and commenting upon the diction and the mode of delivery:

*Adrian* Though this island seem to be desert,—  
*Antonio* Ha, ha, ha!  
*Sebastian* So: you're paid.  
*Adrian* Uninhabitable, and almost inaccessible,—  
*Sebastian* Yet,—  
*Adrian* Yet,—  
*Antonio* He could not miss't.  
*Adrian* It must needs be of subtle, tender and delicate  
temperance.  
*Antonio* Temperance was a delicate wench.  
*Sebastian* Ay, and a subtle; as he most learnedly deliver'd.  
*Adrian* The air breathes upon us here most sweetly.  
*Sebastian* As if it had lungs, and rotten ones.  
*Antonio* Or as 'twere perfum'd by a fen.  
*Gonzalo* Here is everything advantageous to life.  
*Antonio* True; save means to live.

(II.i.34–49)

Sebastian's "Yet,—" anticipates the syntactic direction of Adrian's sentence, which, of course, one expects after the preparatory "Though"; but one does not expect the expectedness of the construction to be drawn to one's attention. Moreover, he also undermines the rhetorical method implicit in the syntax: the creating of an antithesis between the apparent "facts" of the situation ("desert," "uninhabitable") and the desired interpretation ("subtle, tender and delicate temperance"), in order to make incidental the perceived actuality. The punsters' commentary on Adrian's description of the air not only calls into question his sweetened perception of their surroundings, but also underlines the dead metaphor buried in the diluted poeticism of the utterance. At every

<sup>3</sup> Citations from *The Tempest* are from the Arden edition, ed. Frank Kermode, 5th ed. (London: Methuen, 1954).

stage and at every level, the villains interrupt and expose the clichés and stereotypes of the loyal courtiers: the formulaic modes of consolation, the tendency to fabricate idealized and poeticized descriptions of the physical environment, Gonzalo's impractical and contradiction-ridden imaginative re-creation of "the Golden Age"; their comments attack every mode of discourse that satisfies the mind's inclination to accept whatever conforms to its uncritical longings for coherence, intelligibility, idealization.

Coleridge saw the disruptive witticisms of Sebastian and Antonio as Shakespeare's demonstration of

the tendency in bad men to indulge in scorn and contemptuous expressions, as a mode of getting rid of their own uneasy feelings of inferiority to the good, and also, by making the good ridiculous, of rendering the transition of others to wickedness easy.<sup>4</sup>

Parenthetically: it would be comforting if one could dismiss a current activity of literary criticism, almost identical in some of its manifestations to the erosive wordplay of Antonio and Sebastian, with Coleridge's rebuff. Essays in the recent volume *Deconstruction and Criticism* "disfigure" the texts of poems and of critical commentaries in just the way that Antonio and Sebastian disfigure Gonzalo's speeches. In one essay, J. Hillis Miller interrupts Wayne Booth's comment that a deconstructionist reading of a given work "is plainly and simply parasitical" on "the obvious and univocal reading" by a distracting performance with puns on "parasitical," etymologies, and citations of other words beginning with "para-."<sup>5</sup> Like Antonio and Sebastian with Gonzalo's speeches, present-day deconstructionists unravel a text, erode its appearance of sense, in order to suggest the merely rhetorical status of its propositions. Such critical activity is apparently condoned by the assertion that language is inevitably alienated from what it seeks to signify and so confesses that absence even, and perhaps most notably, in its persistent search for "presence." Sebastian and Antonio, like good deconstructionists, find the rifts in Gonzalo's Utopian speech—rifts made deliberately obtrusive by Shakespeare's design of the speech—which make the speech itself say other than Gonzalo means it to say.

In *The Tempest*, we cannot dismiss Antonio's and Sebastian's interruptions as merely a "tendency in bad men," for they form part of a pattern of linguistic disruption. Alonso, encased in grief for his son, repeatedly interrupts the efforts at consolation, dismissing them, at one point, as mere rhetoric, as words crammed into his ears (II.i.102–3). Elsewhere in the play Prospero persistently interrupts the conversation between Ferdinand and Miranda. The dialogue of their first encounter employs the formulaic hyperboles of romantic love: Miranda calls Ferdinand a "spirit," "A thing divine"; he responds in kind, addressing her as "goddess." But Prospero punctures this rhetoric, upsetting the audience's usual tendency to accept the words as transparent signs of their intended meaning: "No, wench; it eats and sleeps and hath such senses / As we have . . ." (I.ii.415–16).

Furthermore, Prospero's long narrative of events preceding his sojourn on the island (I.ii.66–151) is interestingly self-interruptive in its manner. As a

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Coleridge's Shakespearean Criticism*, ed. Thomas Middleton Raysor (London: Constable, 1930), I, 135.

<sup>5</sup> J. Hillis Miller, "The Critic as Host," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, ed. Harold Bloom, et al. (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), pp. 217–53.

characterizing device, the style of the speech heightens the antithetical relation of Prospero and Gonzalo, for the composed speeches of Gonzalo are set against Prospero's disorderly narration. This opposition helps us to see that the characters are foils for one another, with Gonzalo's utopian fantasies and benign optimism set against Prospero's disillusionment and benign skepticism. Prospero's account of his banishment from Milan is worth our close attention for other reasons as well, for I think its interruptive mode is closely related to the plot's habit of interruption.

The syntactic disorderliness of Prospero's story about his brother's usurpation of the dukedom stands out as an oddity in a play where the norm of the verse style is a restrained and graceful elegance. The shapelessness of Prospero's tale is so out of keeping with the general tenor of the play's speeches that it has been used as evidence for the view (which most editors now discard) that *The Tempest* contains "undigested elements of an old play."<sup>6</sup> The idiosyncratic manner raises intriguing questions about the extent to which Shakespeare fuses his stylistic effects with his larger dramatic purposes. It could be argued that the interruptive manner of the speech, its "syntax of fits and starts," is merely an extreme example of the tendency James Sutherland found throughout the late plays: Shakespeare's impatience and difficulty with formal composition causing him to write in a careless fashion without concern for the expressive needs of the dramatic situation.<sup>7</sup> But one can find virtually no support for this argument elsewhere in *The Tempest*, a play which seems written with great care. Instead, I would suggest that the self-interruptive style has a distinct ethos that is related not only to Prospero's attitude but also to a central question the play raises. The shapelessness of the account and its failure to sort the occurrences of Prospero's past into an orderly exposition suggest a recurring concern in *The Tempest* with the contingent quality of the happenings in Prospero's life. Prospero's tendency to confuse the clear progress of his narrative and his failure to articulate simplified interpretations of the events or to provide any clear orientation of those who took part in the crime is related to a problem that is raised in other ways throughout the play: i.e., Shakespeare's preoccupation with the artist's (and his audience's) insistence on order, with the artist's (and the ruler's) perpetual failure to make more than a provisional order, and with the resulting anxiety about what is left out of any ordered vision. It is true that the syntactic disorderliness is an extreme instance of a tendency in Shakespeare's later style, which often leaves the effect of a complexity not assimilated into formal coherences. But I would argue here that the interruptive tendency of Shakespeare's later style finds an answerable context in the specific concerns of *The Tempest*, a context in which the style is the meaning.

Let me review briefly some of the main stylistic characteristics of Prospero's account. The sentence movement is digressive, overburdened with interruptive material:

My brother, and thy uncle, call'd Antonio,—  
I pray thee, mark me, that a brother should

<sup>6</sup> Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski, 2nd ed. (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 244; Frank Kermode, in his Introduction, discusses theories of earlier versions on pp. xv–xix. Others argue that the disordered syntax reflects Prospero's emotional state. For example, Righter, p. 10, suggests that "the tortuous syntax of this narration, its intensity and the anger which contorts many of the phrases, suggest a mind actually re-experiencing pain."

<sup>7</sup> James Sutherland, "The Language of the Last Plays," in *More Talking of Shakespeare*, ed. John Garrett (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1959), pp. 144–58.

Be so perfidious!—he whom next thyself  
 Of all the world I lov'd, and to him put  
 The manage of my state; as at that time  
 Through all the signories it was the first,  
 And Prospero the prime duke, being so reputed  
 In dignity, and for the liberal Arts  
 Without a parallel; those being all my study,  
 The government I cast upon my brother,  
 And to my state grew stranger, being transported  
 And rapt in secret studies.

(I.ii. 66–77)

The sentence gathers interrupting parentheses and accumulates clauses so haphazardly that it never completes the anticipated subject—"My brother"—with a verb. The sentence turns aside from its original direction, and Prospero becomes the agent: "The government I cast upon my brother." Throughout the speech, grammatical subjects are repeatedly forgotten in the proliferation of circumstantial detail. The result of this use of anacolutha is an impression of directionlessness. Although the sentence is, technically, complex in structure, subordinating many clauses, the clauses are not joined together in such a way as to articulate the logical connections among ideas. Instead of introducing and categorizing subordinate ideas with causal, temporal, or concessive conjunctions, and so plotting the course of the sentence explicitly, participial subordination characterizes the style and the thought process. Participial construction is noncommittal.<sup>8</sup> We can see this clearly when we consider its use in lines 89–93:

I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated  
 To closeness and the bettering of my mind  
 With that which, but by being so retir'd,  
 O'er-priz'd all popular rate, in my false brother  
 Awak'd an evil nature. . . .

One cannot tell whether Prospero regards his neglect of worldly business and dedication to scholarship as a direct cause of Antonio's awakening criminal activity or merely as an attendant circumstance. Do the participial clauses, with a resuming "thus," merely recall and summarize the information of the preceding sentence? Or is Prospero not so much attributing blame to his neglect as—by juxtaposing his dedication with his neglect in the concatenation of participles—extenuating his delinquency from office? The participles do not specify; they do not place certain facts in the foreground, others in the background, but attribute equal weight to all of them. No causative sequence is constructed. The situation is presented with all its problematic complexity unsorted. And perhaps this is the point. If the syntax suggests man thinking, it points outward to circumstances that are listed—dropped into our consciousness without prejudice—and exist there as immediately perceived.

Most critical readings of the speech accommodate its shapelessness to the mind's preference for the organized, the constructed. Jan Kott quotes and reads

<sup>8</sup> See Morris W. Croll, "The Baroque Style in Prose," in *Studies in English Philology in Honor of Frederick Klaeber*, ed. Kemp Malone and Martin B. Ruud (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1929); rpt. in *Style, Rhetoric, and Rhythm*, ed. J. Max Patrick, et al. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 221–22.



the speech selectively—omitting facts that might point to Prospero's own complicity in his downfall—to make Antonio the prime mover in all that occurs, Prospero his passive victim:

Prospero's story takes up one of the main, basic—almost obsessional—Shakespearean themes: that of a good and a bad ruler, of the usurper who deprives the legal prince of his throne. This is Shakespeare's view of history, eternal history, its perpetual, unchanging mechanism. . . . In Prospero's narrative the framework of feudal history . . . is abstract like a formula. Prospero's account is a summary of Machiavelli's treatise, *The Prince*.<sup>9</sup>

Frank Davidson quotes and reads the speech selectively—omitting facts that might point to Antonio's manipulative politics—to show how the tale articulates a neat tragic plot. Prospero's downfall is brought about by his own "error": immoderate cultivation of the contemplative life causes his neglect of active government and that, in turn, causes his inevitable fall.<sup>10</sup> While Kott's digest siphons off the gray morass of Prospero's responsibility, Davidson's digest places it squarely in the foreground.

Prospero's actual version of his past experience is, as we have seen, far less conclusive than such interpretations would suggest. The diversity of interpretation the narrative elicits makes it apparent that Prospero's mind does not simplify; the style depicts the thinking of a man pestered, even baffled, by complications and qualifications. It shows the causes of events to be obscure, undecidable, lost in the "dark backward and abysm of time." Prospero represents his past experience as intractable to the kind of orderly disposition of reality that fiction usually presents. It has the unaccentuated aspect of life, not the focused significance one is accustomed to in art. The moral of Prospero's tale, insofar as it has one, is implicit in the style: there is no one clear pattern in the actions of the past. The speeches might be read as an indirect response to the kind of criticism Sir Francis Bacon repeatedly levels against poetic fictions and events portrayed on stage:

because true history propoundeth the successes and issues of actions not so agreeable to the merits of virtue and vice, therefore poesy feigns them more just in retribution, and more according to revealed providence.

(*Advancement of Learning*)

stories invented for the stage are more compact and elegant, and more as one would wish them to be, than stories out of history.

(*Novum Organum*)<sup>11</sup>

Prospero, like Bacon, seems conscious that the shaping hand of Destiny is not as easily discerned in the events of a man's life as the regularity of many artistic compositions would suggest.

But if the play represents life or external reality as shapeless—or as indifferent to shape—yet it represents the human mind in opposition as shape-making and shape-needing. In his capacity as surrogate playwright in *The Tempest*,

<sup>9</sup> Kott, p. 244.

<sup>10</sup> Frank Davidson, "The Tempest: An Interpretation," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 62 (1963), 504.

<sup>11</sup> Francis Bacon, *Works*, ed. and trans. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 14 vols. (London, 1857–74), VI, 203; VIII, 90.

Prospero himself spends most of his energy shaping the experience of the other characters into the intelligible patterns of artistic composition. He invents a fiction, schematic in its outlines, to organize the development of Ferdinand and Miranda's love affair into a dramatic "plot." Their initial meeting lacks the conflict requisite to love plots in drama, so Prospero announces to the audience that he will provide it:

[*Aside*] They are both in either's pow'rs: but this  
 swift business  
 I must uneasy make, lest too light winning  
 Make the prize light.

(I.ii.453–55)

In the masque of the Harpy, which Prospero devises and supervises from above, he has Ariel perform the role of a "minister of Fate," fooling the "three men of sin" into the belief that the issues of their actions will be according to this theatrically "revealed providence." In strong contrast to Prospero's problematic apprehension of the shapelessness of his own past experience, the masque of the Harpy sweeps the events of Alonso's life into a single vision with a unified design; and Alonso accepts the selective account of his experience as the pattern of his life. Supposing his son drowned, Alonso is convinced that the death is a direct consequence of his trespass against Prospero in the remote past:

Methought the billows spoke, and told me of it;  
 The winds did sing it to me; and the thunder,  
 That deep and dreadful organ-pipe, pronounc'd  
 The name of Prosper. . . .  
 Therefor my son i' th' ooze is bedded. . . .

(III.iii.96–100)

Of course, we know that Ferdinand is alive, and that this apparently coherent pattern of retributive justice emerging in the events of Alonso's life is engineered by Prospero's plotting. Prospero's interruption—he stops the scene to congratulate Ariel on his performance—calls our attention to the sheer contrivance of the causal sequence. The neat poetic justice is mere fabrication, not something given in the nature of things. The frightening spectacle apparently has a therapeutic effect on Alonso, though not on the others; it plunges him into suicidal despair—a close-enough approximation to the "heart-sorrow" Ariel demands. If Prospero manages to fool Alonso into virtue, it is because man's shape-needing mind makes him blindly and desperately eager to believe that the world he lives in yields answering coherences. Shakespeare's interruption of the scene takes the blinders off the eyes of his audience.

By the conclusion of the play, Prospero the plot-maker has convinced at least some of the characters (and at least some of the play's commentators)<sup>12</sup> that the unfolding of events has been "according to revealed providence." Gonzalo's retrospective summary of the play's action is "compact and elegant," as Prospero's account of his own past experience in Milan was not:

Look down, you gods,  
 And on this couple drop a blessed crown!

<sup>12</sup> For example, Joan Hartwig, in *Shakespeare's Tragicomic Vision* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1972), p. 138, describes the action of *The Tempest* as "the fulfillment of the Providential design."



For it is you that have chalk'd forth the way  
Which brought us hither.

.....  
Was Milan thrust from Milan, that his issue  
Should become Kings of Naples? O, rejoice  
Beyond a common joy! and set it down  
With gold on lasting pillars: 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.

(V.i.201–13)

Throughout the play, we are reminded that Prospero is shaping the action and directing his dramatic “plots” toward some determinate “end.” While the goal of his “project” is never explicitly stated and remains somewhat obscure, it surely involves the recovery of his dukedom, peace with Naples, and provision both for the future of his daughter and for the future of the two kingdoms. That, at any rate, is what he—provisionally—achieves. But the play suggests that the goal he achieves falls short of the goal he aspires to. There are signs that, beyond the concrete goal that Prospero accomplishes with the aid of his magic art, he has a deeper wish: to arrive not merely at this transient and fragile order of the final scene—subject at any moment to disturbance by the ill will of Antonio and Sebastian or the inexperience of Ferdinand and Miranda—but to create the idealized world that Gonzalo describes. The achieved end involves compromise and admission of at least partial failure for Prospero: the discarded Art, the revels speech, the begrudging forgiveness of his brother, the painful acknowledgment of Caliban as he is, the “Every third thought shall be my grave,” the epilogue, all point to this dissatisfaction. For Prospero, the ending is as provisional as the rest of the play’s action. Shakespeare portrays his main character as constructing fictions which give meaning and direction to the lives of the others, but acutely conscious—as the stylistic manner of his own story shows and as the repeated interruptions in the play reveal—that the visions his art creates are partial, contrived, deeply unsatisfactory.

The play communicates in many other ways its conception of life as fluid—as devoid of or indifferent to order—but as offering to the mind the materials for the large shifting shapes of dream. The “actuality” of the island is always at a dream-like remove from the characters’ perceptions of it. Relativity of perception characterizes the court party, each of whom has a decided opinion on the climate and the qualities of the island, and none of whom agree. Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano also interpret their experience as their dispositions and current preoccupations prompt them: with (in II.ii) Caliban mistaking Trinculo for “a spirit to torment me / For bringing wood in slowly”; Trinculo seeing in the shifting clouds “a foul bombard that would shed his liquor”; and Stephano, confronted with the four-legged enigma, making it out to be an exotic native he can tame and turn to profit.

At every level the play exhibits its concern to examine the sense-making process. However enigmatic the experiences they encounter, the characters find in them the “excellent dumb discourse” of their own mental constructs. And inevitably, in a play where actuality is conceived of as at a remove, language is at times cut adrift from any determinate reference to things outside itself. “Words” cease to be matched to “things.” Yet language’s play of meaning

goes on in the absence or indifference of determinate things or of a determinate reality to which language has reference. We have seen how the verbal interruptions call attention to this autonomous play of meanings. It also occurs, with sinister implications, in the "sleepy language" (II.i.206) of the conspirators, where, by a kaleidoscopic network of puns, Antonio convinces Sebastian that there's no difference between a sleeping king and a dead king. Where actuality is fluid and indeterminate, language can constitute dangerous versions of "reality."

## II

If style is instructive in *The Tempest*, so is dramatic construction. Susanne Langer argues that our basic expectation of the enacted play is that it be "form in suspense," by which she means "the incompleteness of a known completion," the "constant illusion of an imminent future," the "vivid appearance of a growing situation."<sup>13</sup> The breakings off and the gaps in the action of *The Tempest* upset this most fundamental expectation of the theatre audience: the feeling that a form is being fulfilled.

When a dramatist depicts two villains plotting to kill a king—as Antonio and Sebastian plot to kill Alonso in II.i—he is not merely presenting a situation; he is also making a commitment to his audience. In drama, a dilemma carries with it the promise of resolution. To represent danger is to create a future yet to be unfolded in which the imminent catastrophe will be enacted or the danger will be exposed and averted. But in *The Tempest*, the dangerous situation is merely arrested in the most arbitrary way. Ariel interrupts the moment of crisis, telling the audience that his "master through his Art foresees the danger" and awakening Gonzalo with a song. The danger is not exposed; the villains continue to seek the "next advantage" (III.iii.13). At the end of the play, the homicidal tendencies of Antonio are simply overlooked: Prospero says he "will tell no tales" (V.i.129). Thus a dramatic action which would loom large in any other Shakespearean play is aborted: the form is not fulfilled.

If the murder plot has no end, the log-bearing ordeal has no middle. Anne Richter sees a "gap open," or a scene suppressed, where Prospero should make his peace with Ferdinand.<sup>14</sup> Yet the disruption in plot sequence is more extreme even than Richter suggests, for the log-bearing test itself sets up quite explicit expectations that are not enacted. Before nightfall, Ferdinand

. . . must remove  
Some thousands of these logs, and pile them up,  
Upon a sore injunction.

(III.i.9–11)

Our experience of myth or of fairy tale makes us recognize immediately both the kind of task this is and the kind of completion that is expected. The task is an ordeal—unreasonably imposed, apparently impossible to accomplish. Such popular motifs fix our expectations more definitely than others. We do not expect the hero to fail the test; rather, we expect that he will accomplish it either with superhuman cunning or with superhuman powers, or with the aid

<sup>13</sup> Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner, 1953), pp. 309–11.

<sup>14</sup> Richter, p. 15.

of someone possessing such powers or cunning. Trickery Ferdinand very evidently lacks; but he possesses the love of a magician's daughter, and even Caliban knows where the magician keeps his books. Yet strangely the only resource Ferdinand brings to his enormous task is his good will. Miranda makes an ineffective attempt to help, and the action shifts into love talk. The scene contrasts interestingly with Ovid's account of the Jason and Medea story—which Shakespeare uses elsewhere in *The Tempest*. Stirred by love of Jason, Medea finds her "fathers hestes . . . so hard above / All measure" (VII.16–17) that she brings the powerful resources of her magic to his tasks.<sup>15</sup> The extent of Miranda's rebellion against her father—which, heightened, might have provided a dramatic intensity the episode lacks—is only to tell her lover her name:

Miranda.—O my father,  
I have broke your hest to say so!  
(III.i.36–37)

Shakespeare's decision not to gratify expectation that the difficult ordeal will be cleverly accomplished becomes still more curious when Prospero pronounces before night falls that Ferdinand has "strangely stood the test" (IV.i.7). Of course, one can explain the whole problem away by accepting Ferdinand's gracious endurance of base employment (III.i.1–15) as an adequate response to the "trials of [his] love" (IV.i.6). Yet given Prospero's obtrusive interruptions of the action to explain the function of the test, the presentation of this plot motif leaves one with the disturbing feeling of having gotten the meaning but missed the dramatic experience. The same is true of Prospero's abbreviated inward conflict as presented in the dialogue with Ariel in V.i. To present with so much ado dramatic obstacles which are no real obstacles is foreign to Shakespeare's usual dramatic practice. Yet it is consistent with his depiction of the murder plot, which suggests that one should look for method in this anti-dramatic mode.<sup>16</sup>

Gary Schmidgall makes the intriguing suggestion that Shakespeare's portrayal of evil in *The Tempest* may owe something to the court masques, particularly to Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, performed in 1609, the first of Jonson's masques to incorporate a fully elaborated anti-masque. In the anti-masque, hags representing Ignorance, Suspicion, and Credulity attempt to disrupt the celebration of Fame born out of Virtue. Yet, as both Schmidgall and Stephen Orgel note, the danger is averted without open conflict.<sup>17</sup> The witches of the anti-masque convene, boast of their powers, threaten devastation, and call up charms to bring it about. Their threats are large—"I'll speak a charm / Shall cleave the ground as low as lies / Old shrunk-up Chaos" (II. 293–95). But to their

<sup>15</sup> Ovid's *Metamorphoses: The Arthur Golding Translation* (1567), ed. John Frederick Nims (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

<sup>16</sup> Others have noted the lack of dramatic conflict and suspense in *The Tempest* and have offered different interpretations. See, for example, Harold S. Wilson, "Action and Symbol in *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 4 (1953), 375–84; Rose A. Zimbardo, "Form and Disorder in *The Tempest*," *SQ*, 14 (1963), 49–56; Leland Ryken, "The Temptation Theme in *The Tempest* and the Question of Dramatic Suspense," *Tennessee Studies in Literature*, 14 (1969), 119–27; Paul A. Cantor, "Shakespeare's *The Tempest*: The Wise Man as Hero," *SQ*, 31 (1980), 64–75.

<sup>17</sup> Gary Schmidgall, *Shakespeare and the Courtly Aesthetic* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), pp. 145–53; Stephen Orgel, ed., *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*, The Yale Ben Jonson, IV (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1969), pp. 5–9; hereafter noted in the text.

frustration, their charms, however often repeated, effect none of their imagined ill: "All our charms do nothing win / Upon the night; our labor dies!" (ll. 268–69). They fall into a macabre dance. Then, at the blast of loud music, they "vanished, and the whole face of the scene altered, scarce suffering the memory of such a thing" (ll. 336–37).<sup>18</sup> The House of Fame appears, with twelve masquers encircled in light, and heroic virtue in the person of Perseus steps forward to comment on the hags' flight. No real dramatic tension is created by the plotting of the hags, because the audience knows their attempted disruption will have no effect, being merely a prologue to the idealized world that will inevitably crown the masque. The defeat of the dark forces is accomplished without dramatic conflict or struggle; the triumph of virtue is rendered by the magnificent stroke of theatre when the scene is transformed. Orgel shows how Jonson translates the spectacular interruption of the anti-masque into thematic statement:

Symbolically the total disappearance of the hags and their hell demonstrates a basic assumption of the universe Jonson has created: the world of evil is not real.

(p. 9)

Gary Schmidgall argues that *The Tempest* shares with *The Masque of Queens* "the themes and structures" of what he calls the courtly aesthetic. Like the masque, he says, its movement is from initial disorder to ultimate harmony, from tempest to calm seas (pp. 156–65). He argues, from the fact that the good and evil characters in the masque never come into open conflict, that *The Tempest* also builds "the cumulative certainty that the evils will in fact be purged" (p. 151). Shakespeare, according to Schmidgall, displays a universe like Jonson's, where evil is immobilized and purged without conflict. His argument, I think, is marred by his mistaken view that *The Tempest* ends in a harmony as perfect as that of Jonson's masques, that the evils even in Sebastian and Antonio are purged by Prospero's superior powers, that "the threat of evil is not serious" (p. 152).

The impotence of evil in Jonson's masque—despite its Boethian antecedents—is mere cleverness, a toy of thought aimed at flattering the monarch and his court. The purportedly greater reality that Jonson's "false masque" gives way to is equally false, an illusion promoted by the glistening and worldly opulence of the discovered masque. The superior perspective from which evil is illusion is itself merely an expensive—and potentially dangerous—illusion. While evil as non-being may serve as consolation to the imprisoned philosopher, or as clever theatrical flattery of a monarch, it would be disastrous for a ruler to act as though threatened evil were "unreal." And while nothing comes of the threatened evil in *The Tempest* because of Prospero's magic powers, it remains to the end of the play as a persistent problem—one that is not finally resolved and cannot be lightly dismissed, a problem that will have to be dealt with over and again in the uncertain future—without "magic"—in Milan. When Prospero releases the court party from his spells, he says that "they shall be themselves" (V.i.32). What he implies, I think, is that the Antonios of this world will continue to be Antonios and their actions will require continued vigilance.

<sup>18</sup> *The Masque of Queens* is quoted from Ben Jonson: *The Complete Masques*, pp. 122–41.

If evil is inconsequential in Prospero's world, Prospero holds this attitude not from confidence that it can be safely disregarded, but from the remote and disillusioned perspective of the revels speech:

Our revels now are ended. 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-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.148–58)

In imagery that recalls the vainglories of the court masques, the speech points to the inconsequence of all human aspiration. It holds forth no promise of a higher reality that will emerge to displace the insubstantial dreams of this life; and it casts the shadow of ultimate futility on the goal-directed striving of Prospero's actions throughout the play, on Prospero's own plots as well as Antonio's counterplots, on all that Prospero has hoped to achieve and succeeds in limited measure in achieving. The murder plot, the love plot, the well-intentioned projects for reformation: in *The Tempest*—as in life—nothing really develops into climax and resolution. In a sense, Shakespeare takes the logic of *The Masque of Queens* one step further: in the masque, the evil projects evaporate—"scarce suffering the memory of such a thing"—to be replaced by the (momentarily) substantial vision of good triumphant; but according to the revels speech, not only the evil projects but also the projects and visions of goodness, all human achievements and resolutions evaporate—like the "insubstantial pageant[s]" of the theatre "scarce suffering the memory of such a thing." The repeatedly arrested actions of the play dramatize the perspective of the revels speech.

Furthermore, Prospero's revels speech confounds, or perhaps one might say deconstructs, the antithesis of art and life that obtains through much of the play. For the dream-making faculty does not confine its activity to plays, masques, poems, literary fictions. To live is to live within fictions, as Alonso, Ferdinand, Miranda, Gonzalo, Sebastian, and Antonio unwittingly live within the plots Prospero makes, and as they unwittingly live within the prison or dream houses of their own languages. The epilogue reminds us with great poignancy that Prospero also lives within the fiction Shakespeare makes (and his audience helps to make); and the play prompts one to infer that Shakespeare too lives within dreams or fictions that "are made on [of]" him. Perhaps the most telling and disturbing stylistic feature of the revels speech is the passive usage in "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on." Here the maker (Prospero in the immediate context of the masque, Shakespeare by extension) confesses his limited control over the making process, acknowledges a "being made of" by no personal or specific Agent.

One should note that Prospero's speech, apparently rejecting any demarcation between theatrical fictions and reality, occurs in the one scene where theatrical

illusion and the play's supposed reality are kept rigidly separate. The marriage masque is the only theatrical performance within the play which is not entirely integrated into the central action. Unlike the episode where Ferdinand is moved by Ariel's song and unlike the masque of the Harpy in III.iii, the masque is formally introduced. Prospero announces his intention to present "some vanity of mine Art"; we overhear his instructions to Ariel; Ferdinand comments on the masque as work of art distinct from the actuality of other occurrences in the play: "This is a most majestic vision, and / Harmonious charmingly" (IV.i.118–19). Moreover, the language of the masque is distinguished from the surrounding action by a conspicuously "poetic" diction—"Thy banks with pioned and twilled brims"—and by its use of rhyming couplets.

The immediate cause of the masque's interruption establishes still more acutely the scene's antithesis between art and life: Prospero remembers the pressing need to deal with the disorderly behavior of Caliban and his crew. Caliban has come to epitomize the threats to Prospero's dream of reproducing in his life on the island the order and harmony that belongs to art. The message of the "revels speech" seems to arise as a generalized statement of Prospero's private reflection that the order he tried to impose on his small island kingdom has been as momentary and insubstantial as the harmonious vision of the masque. The material of life is intractable to the shaping of art just as the nature of Caliban seems to Prospero to be intractable to the civilized art of education; Caliban remains a "devil, a born devil, on whose nature / Nurture can never stick."

Harold Bloom suggests that a profitable way to read poems is with an "awareness not so much of presences as of absences, of *what is missing in the poem because it had to be excluded*."<sup>19</sup> Whatever the merits of this as a general principle may be, Prospero's interruption of the wedding masque forces on us Prospero's own awareness of what the harmonious vision of his art has excluded. The clearest indication of what the wedding masque is "about"—or of its role in the play—is given by what in the surrounding action the particular selection and ordering of its fiction leaves out. The masque's most conspicuous omission is of Venus and Cupid. Ceres refuses to join the celebration if Venus is included, and Iris reassures her:

Of her society  
Be not afraid: I met her deity  
Cutting the clouds towards Paphos, and her son  
Dove-drawn with her.

(IV.i.91–94)

Banishing Venus and Cupid, the masque banishes what Prospero has just expressed fear of in the preceding dialogue. In his repeated warnings to the young couple against unrestrained sexuality—"the strongest oaths are straw / To th' fire in' th' blood"—Prospero seems overscrupulous. Many critics have noted how Prospero's fears are out of proportion to the situation: Ferdinand and Miranda seem the least likely of Shakespeare's young lovers to give way to "the strong'st suggestion / Our worser genius can" (IV.i.26–27). Given the "most opportune place"—they are concealed in Prospero's cave throughout most of Act V—Ferdinand and Miranda are content to play at chess. According to Clifford Leech, the warnings are sufficiently incongruous in their context to

<sup>19</sup> Harold Bloom, "The Breaking of Form," in *Deconstruction and Criticism*, p. 15.



suggest some distemper in Shakespeare's own mind.<sup>20</sup> However, the excessive warnings against passionate indulgence are perfectly consistent with Prospero's heightened consciousness, throughout the scene, of what in life is not amenable to art's selective concord. Moreover, they serve to heighten the contrast Shakespeare establishes in the scene between art's harmonious vision and life's loose ends. The idealized landscape of the masque has lost the stinging nettles of Prospero's island; winter is absent from the cycle of the seasons:

Spring come to you at the farthest,  
In the very end of harvest!  
(IV.i.114–15)

The masque omits not only what Prospero cannot control in others, but also what he cannot control in himself: his "beating mind" (IV.i.163). The guests Iris invites to join in the nuptial celebration are "temperate nymphs" with "ever-harmless looks." In sharp contrast, Prospero's own "distemper" breaks off the masque (IV.i.144–45). The interruption and the revels speech are ultimately occasioned by the absences of the masque, by what unmakes what Prospero strives to make.

Prospero's interruption of the wedding masque provides a paradigm for understanding Shakespeare's repeated interruptions of his own play. Readers of *The Tempest* have often regarded the play as Shakespeare's farewell to his own art. The collaborative works that follow *The Tempest* call into question the literal accuracy of this view. But *The Tempest* is confessional insofar as any dramatic work of an author who keeps himself and his views so consistently out of his plays can be. It confesses the unmaking and the "being made of" that are the perpetual conditions of making. But *The Tempest* does not confess, as most deconstructionist readings of texts claim that they all do, in spite of its author's making. Shakespeare, by his own design, makes the confession.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford Leech, *Shakespeare's Tragedies and Other Studies in Seventeenth-Century Drama* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1950), pp. 151–52.