Shakespeare's Gentle Apocalypse: *The Tempest*

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There hath pass'd away a glory from the earth.

~William Wordsworth

1. Introduction

A belief in imminent Apocalypse was common during Shakespeare's life, and St. John's *Revelation* was read avidly as a guide to current events.(1) Bernard Capp comments, "During the first half of Elizabeth's reign there developed a general consensus that the pope was the Antichrist and that the end of the world was at hand" (97). The defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588 further fueled "apocalyptic excitement and patriotic fervor" (Capp 97), although this event was only the beginning of continued hostilities between the countries (Outhwaite 25). In what is called the "Great Dearth," England suffered "a disastrous sequence of harvest failures (1593-97) with economic depression, widespread poverty and high mortality from plague and starvation" (Clark 6). England's apocalyptic expectations turned out to be correct although not in the way they anticipated. The Protestant Reformation indeed brought an end to the medieval order, but rather than initiating Judgment Day and Christ's reign on earth, the unintended result was the emergence of Modernity. Shakespeare's mature drama is deeply informed by the demise of the feudal order and the birth of something new and as yet unimaginable. Shakespeare died in 1616, so he didn't live to see the English Revolution and the execution of King Charles I in 1649, but these spectacular events were the fruit of long-term developments in which Shakespeare participated.

Shakespeare's final play that he wrote as sole author was *The Tempest*, which portrays Prospero the magician, an artist figure who renounces his magic or art in the latter part of the play. Shakespeare's anticipation of his retirement was the

occasion for *The Tempest*, an artistic reflection on how and why the dramatic forms associated with Renaissance hierarchy were becoming increasingly problematic.

The relevant historical background to *The Tempest* is the transition to Modernity, an apocalypse which requires some explanation. From the perspective of René Girard's Fundamental Anthropology, the Medieval-Renaissance period is characterized by sacrificial hierarchy, a hierarchy, moreover, that contains the seed of its own destruction, that is, Christianity (*Theater* 283). Christianity undermines so-called divine hierarchy by revealing its sacrificial root. When the New Testament revelation finally reaches fruition during the Reformation, the medieval order is destabilized, allowing for the development of Modernity.

According to Girard, Shakespeare's plays demystify mimetic desire and the scapegoating mechanism, but the effects of this demystification are rather ambivalent. On the one hand, Girard suggests that the mimetic drive is weakened by its unveiling. In Girard's reading, Hamlet, for example, as a modern, is not really mimetic enough to take revenge immediately upon Claudius. Hamlet's desire must be first stimulated by the fifth-act graveyard fight with Laertes (*Theater* 274-8). Likewise, Girard sees Miranda, in *The Tempest*, as falling asleep out of boredom in the first act when her father Prospero recounts all the mimetic betrayals that led to his usurpation and exile (*Theater* 352-3). Girard ends his book on Shakespeare with this image of Miranda bored with tales of betrayal and revenge. But on the other hand, in Girard's reading of Modernity, the disabling of the scapegoat mechanism unleashes a mimetic crisis, a "vizarding of degree" that Ulysses warns against in Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. According to Girard, this crisis of degree is "the context of all Shakespearean plays without exception" (*Theater* 351). So Modernity, for Girard, seems to be characterized by both hypermimeticism, as we lose the protection of the scapegoat mechanism, and a weakening of mimeticism, as we understand mimetic desire and it loses its fascination.

Girard is undoubtedly correct that the New Testament demystifies the scapegoat mechanism, and with corrosive effects on hierarchy. But the influence of the New Testament is actually more complicated. The public, ritual scene of sacrifice is critiqued, yes, but also opposed to the private scene of true faith. While his disciples apparently expected a political revolution, Christ proclaimed, "the kingdom of God is within you" (Luke 17.21). When you say your prayers or give alms, Christ commands, don't do it in public to gain praise before men; but rather, "pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly" (Matt. 6.6). The New Testament suggests that each individual has a personal, private relationship with God, and this relationship effectively authorizes the individual in opposition to traditional authorities. Being reliant upon God paradoxically makes one independent in a social context. For example, Martin

Luther's private faith, nurtured by his Bible studies, empowered him in his public opposition to the medieval priestly hierarchy. Furthermore, each individual, in his or her relationship with God, becomes worthy of serious literary representation, thus giving birth to the realistic novel (the source of Girard's theory of mimetic desire).(2) The important influence of the New Testament on Modernity is egalitarian individualism as the necessary alternative to communal sacrifice and hierarchy. And this is where Girard's understanding of Modernity gets into trouble.

Girard's mimetic theory can be accurately characterized as the most powerful critique of individualism ever made.(3) Even the individual's most private and "sacred" desires are not his or her own but only an imitation of the model, so that the individual's core of identity is decentered by mimetic theory, inhabited by the desires of the Other. Girard demonstrates convincingly that the autonomous individual is a myth. Because Girard so resolutely critiques individualism, he doesn't really appreciate its positive, constructive power for Modernity. What matters is not that each individual is truly unique, but that this belief creates individual difference in practice. Medieval hierarchy depends on class difference to prevent conflict, but individual difference in the modern world also functions to mitigate the effects of mimetic competition. Furthermore, Girard's ethical critique of the scapegoat mechanism is based on the value of the individual, so his own theory demands a recognition of individual rights, which are the political foundation of Modernity. Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* recognizes individualism as the force that makes both Renaissance hierarchy and Shakespeare's art increasingly problematic. Shakespeare saw that the Renaissance cosmos, the divine order, was coming to an end, and that the kind of art that he practiced was coming to an end at the same time and for the same reasons.

2. The Storm

The Tempest opens with a storm at sea, a crisis which directly poses the problem of authority. Shakespeare tests the basis of traditional hierarchy in the face of a larger crisis, which is presented as "natural" but with obvious allegorical implications; we know that hierarchy, as a cultural phenomenon, is threatened by cultural forces, not natural. The scene contrasts the aristocracy of the passengers with the meritocracy of the ship's crew, who have presumably earned their authority, such as it is, through competence at their work. King Alonso and the other nobles emerge from below decks to chastise the mariners for their perceived incompetence in saving the ship. Gonzalo reminds the Boatswain, rather absurdly, "remember whom thou hast aboard" (1.1.18-19), as if the sailors would be more diligent protecting the lives of the aristocrats than their own lives. By interfering with the crew, the nobles only "assist the storm" (1.1.14), as the Boatswain points out. Aristocracy, the basis of English political order, is revealed as worse than useless in the face of a situation

demanding the practical skills of the lower classes. The Boatswain tells Gonzalo:

You are a councillor; if you can command these elements to silence, and work the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more. Use your authority. If you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long and make yourself ready in your cabin for the mischance of the hour, if it so hap. (1.1.21-27)The aristocrats are obviously unable to “command these elements to silence,” and so Shakespeare makes clear here that human authority has no basis in nature, a recognition that seems obvious to us, but which directly contradicts Renaissance political theory, whereby the King’s authority was justified by reference to a cosmic order both natural and divine. As the Boatswain exclaims, “What care these roarers for the name of king?” (1.1.16-17). The storm has no respect for *names* and by extension, words. Language, the primary human institution and the basic resource for a dramatic artist, has seemingly lost its traditional power and significance. The Boatswain’s comments illustrate the necessary connection between representation and social order. Shakespeare’s emphasis on hierarchy in this scene leaves little doubt that the storm represents the larger political and cultural crisis that traumatized Europe during the early Modern period, a crisis which, the events of the play suggest, can be traced to the forces of individualism, creating a widespread skepticism about the value of traditional authorities: political, cultural, and religious.

3. Shakespeare’s Anatomy of Authority

The following scene with Prospero and Miranda provides quite a different perspective on the tempest. Miranda fears for the lives of those on board the ship, and asks her father to save them. But Prospero reassures her that the “direful spectacle of the wreck” is in fact “safely ordered” with “provision in mine art” (1.2.26, 28, 29). So it might seem that the crisis of authority during the storm is merely a façade, and that Prospero was in control the whole time, just as he controls the action throughout the play. We must not forget, however, that Prospero gives up his magic at the end of the play; so his time of power, such as it is, is coming to an end. Furthermore, the second scene, as I’ll argue, skeptically analyzes his authority in relation to his daughter, Ariel, and Caliban. In this scene, the play moves from the larger crisis of authority to the closely-related problem of the artist’s authority, the main issue of *The Tempest*.

The second scene of the first act is a long exposition that explains, through dialogue, how Prospero and Miranda came to the island, how Ariel came to be Prospero’s servant, and Caliban their slave. The question for us is the basis of Prospero’s authority for each of these figures, who represent on one level his audience. Marjorie Garber comments that Miranda’s empathetic response to the shipwreck positions her as “the ideal spectator of tragedy and catharsis,” and in her

reception of her father's tale, "Miranda is the ideal audience, hanging on every word" (857). For Miranda, Prospero's authority doesn't appear problematic, since their relationship is based on mutual love and care, and Prospero claims without fear of contradiction that all his actions during the play are motivated by his love for Miranda (1.2.16-17). But Miranda is a modern girl with a lively sense of independence and great confidence in her desires. Introducing his account of their past, Prospero asks her, "Canst thou remember / A time before we came unto this cell?" (1.2.38-39). He immediately answers his own question without waiting for her reply, "I do not think thou canst, for then thou wast not / Out three years old" (1.2.40-41), revealing his authoritarian tendencies. Miranda, however, directly contradicts him—"Certainly, sir, I can" (1.2.41)— asserting her independence, her private, internal scene of representation, which opens onto "the dark backward and abysm of time" (1.2.50), a limitless abyss of selfhood.

Prospero claims that Miranda is "ignorant of what thou art" (1.2.18) and she indeed looks to him to tell her "what I am" (1.2.34). Rather than a paternalistic determination of her limits, however, he recounts for her their common aristocratic heritage, a legacy which he will recover through the events of the play. In a traditional society, one's family and birth indeed determine one's identity, but Miranda is a self-fashioner who goes beyond her father's injunctions, as in her romance with Ferdinand. She may seem passive during his account of her identity, but Prospero tells her the classic fairy-tale story that she is really a princess, though currently unrecognized by the world. Miranda, however, seems unimpressed by her noble heritage and more concerned with her father's sufferings.

A well-known crux of the second scene is Prospero's repeated accusations that Miranda "attend'st not" (1.2.87) while he recounts the story of their exile. He begins his narrative with an injunction to "be attentive" (1.2.38), a command which he repeats in various forms several times during his account (1.2.67, 117, 135, 171). At three points he goes beyond the general charge to pay attention and directly accuses her of not listening to him: "Dost thou attend me?"; "Thou attend'st not"; "Does thou hear?" (1.2.78, 87, 106). At the end of his dialogue with Miranda he tells her, "Here cease more questions. / Thou art inclined to sleep. 'Tis a good dullness, / And give it way. I know thou canst not choose" (1.2.185-87), although Miranda had not mentioned being sleepy. Later in the scene, after his dialogue with Ariel, Prospero wakes her, upon which she comments, "The strangeness of your story put / Heaviness in me" (1.2.309-10). On the above evidence, Girard claims that Miranda is "drowsier and drowsier" during this scene, due to her failed attempt to "absorb Prospero's obsession and play it back to him" (*Theater* 352); although Girard doesn't consider any of the problems raised by this interpretation. I will argue, in contrast, that Prospero's anxiety about Miranda listening to him signifies a vulnerability that points to the limits of his authority.

Apart from Prospero's accusations, what evidence is there that Miranda is indeed almost falling asleep during his account of their past? The story he tells concerns not just his personal "obsession," but their common history, her aristocratic heritage, a major turning point in their island life, and her very identity. Moreover, his story is hardly boring but rather a gripping account of betrayal and exile. Miranda's comments during his tale suggest not drowsiness but intense interest. She interjects apposite observations and questions throughout his narrative, and she rejects immediately his suggestions that she lacks attention. When he questions her for a third time, "Does thou hear?" she replies, "Your tale, sir, would cure deafness" (1.2.106). Indeed. But she is clearly asleep during his dialogue with Ariel, needing to be awakened before the appearance of Caliban. Miranda seems largely ignorant of Ariel and his role in the action, so it appears that Prospero has deliberately concealed Ariel from her.

We have to consider the possibility that Prospero puts Miranda to sleep using his magic, which is a traditional interpretation in performance. Early in the scene, as he begins his dialogue with Miranda, he asks her, "Lend thy hand / And pluck my magic garment from me. So, / Lie there my art" (1.2.23-25). Bevington, like most editors, adds the stage direction to these lines, "laying down his magic cloak and staff." Later in the scene, as he finishes talking with Miranda and begins his conversation with Ariel, he would require his magic (and hence his cloak and wand) in order to command a spirit. Editors often add a stage direction for Prospero to put back on his magic cloak (upon his words, "Now I arise" [1.2.170]) shortly before Miranda falls asleep. Presumably, then, Prospero waves his wand as he tells her, "Thou art inclined to sleep. . . . / I know thou canst not choose" (1.2.186-87).

So if Miranda is not drowsy, and Prospero indeed puts her to sleep with his magic, then why does he repeatedly command her to listen? The editors of the Third Series Arden edition, Virginia and Alden Vaughan, comment, "Prospero's demands for Miranda's attention here [1.2.78] and later in [lines] 87 and 106 need not imply that she is inattentive; they more likely indicate Prospero's increasing agitation as he recalls the circumstances of Antonio's treachery" (175, fn. 78). The Vaughans' comment is good advice for the actor playing Prospero, but it raises the question of why Prospero's agitation should take this particular form and not another. Prospero's anxiety about Miranda listening to him suggests, at the very least, his vulnerability as an authority figure in relation to Miranda. On one level, his repeated comments to Miranda are symptomatic of the weakness of his old age; but his old age itself has an allegorical dimension pointing to a real problem of authority, one that Prospero has internalized so that is shows even when there is no real threat. In allegorical terms, there is a significant tension, introduced by individualism, between the artist and even the most sympathetic members of his audience. Upon meeting Ferdinand later in this scene, Miranda will have her own story that is more

compelling to her than any of her father’s plots.

Shakespeare continues his anatomy of authority with Prospero’s dialogue with Ariel. Upon Prospero’s summons, Ariel begins by proclaiming his loyalty and obedience to Prospero, but as Prospero starts to give further orders, Ariel protests his servitude,

Is there more toil? Since thou dost give me pains,
Let me remember thee what thou hast promised,
Which is not yet performed me. (1.2.243-45)Ariel demands simply, “My liberty” (1.2.246), that most modern of values, which trumps duty or obedience. In part, this exchange is a lead-in to Prospero’s retelling of their history: how Prospero rescued Ariel from imprisonment in a tree in return for his services for a fixed period. Ariel impatiently awaits the freedom that is promised him.

It’s possible to overemphasize the antagonism between Prospero and Ariel. Prospero refers to Ariel constantly with terms of endearment. Later in the play, Ariel asks Prospero, for no apparent reason, “Do you love me, master? No?” (4.1.48), in a remarkable display of tender vulnerability. Prospero answers immediately, “Dearly, my delicate Ariel” (4.1.49). There is considerable affection, freely given, between them. Nevertheless, their relationship is based mainly on a mutual agreement, a contract. Prospero has freed Ariel from imprisonment, and Ariel has agreed to serve Prospero for a set period of time in return. Their relationship depends upon reciprocal duties, and the contract is enforced by the threat of force: “If thou more murmurs’t,” Prospero warns him, “I will rend an oak / And peg thee in his knotty entrails till / Thou hast howled away twelve winters” (1.2.296-98). With this comment and when he accuses Ariel of lying and calls him a “malignant thing!” (1.2.258), Prospero wildly overreacts to Ariel’s respectful reminder of their agreement, signifying, as in his dialogue with Miranda above, paranoia about his authority. Still, to the degree that their relationship requires an enforced agreement, it is truly problematic. Ariel serves Prospero readily for the rest of the play, and the last lines of the play, not counting the epilogue, are Prospero’s request for fair weather on the return trip, after which, he promises Ariel, “to the elements / Be free, and fare thou well!” (5.1.321-22). His farewell, free from any reproachful bitterness about the end of their relationship, is a generous gift of freedom to the spectators who are also his collaborators, who have granted him a “willing suspension of disbelief” during this performance and throughout his career, the most powerful magic of all.

The next relationship in Shakespeare’s anatomy of authority is Prospero and Caliban. Prospero’s connection with Caliban was initially characterized by mutual service not unlike Ariel’s. At first, as Caliban relates, Prospero and Miranda treated him kindly, like a member of their family; “And then I loved thee / And showed thee

all the qualities o'th'isle, / The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile" (1.2.339-41). According to Prospero, however, this idyllic relationship came to an end when Caliban "didst seek to violate / The honor of my child" (1.2.350-51), a crime which Caliban does not recognize as such, and for which he is unrepentant. Caliban is presented as incorrigible, beyond the effects of education and culture, although he does display a fine sensitivity to the music of the island and an aptitude for swearing. As a result of the attempt to rape Miranda, Caliban is enslaved by Prospero and forced to bring them wood and water. Although Caliban's actions have precipitated this turn in their relationship, Prospero justifies his enslavement weakly, telling Miranda, "We cannot miss him. He does make our fire, / Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices that profit us" (1.2.314-16). Shakespeare, if not Prospero, presents Caliban's enslavement as an artifact of Renaissance hierarchy, whereby aristocrats do not perform manual labor, rather than any kind of just punishment. There is no mutuality at all in their current relationship; the profit is all on the side of Prospero, and Caliban is tortured horribly by spirits if he fails to do as he is told. Significantly, Caliban has his own version of events, by which he is the rightful owner of the island that was stolen from him by Prospero. Unlike the stories of Miranda and Ariel, there is no prospect of agreement upon a common narrative. Prospero's authority for Caliban is the most primitive form of authority, the imminent threat of violence.

When we examine Prospero's three main relationships on the island, in terms of the basis of his authority, a pattern emerges. The key variable is reciprocity. In the case of Miranda, his authority for her is equal to her authority to him. Although he is ultimately the one who can give orders, his motive is to serve her more than himself. Their relationship is characterized by a mutual exchange of love and devotion. But even this wholly reciprocal relationship is problematic as Miranda asserts her independence, especially in her relationship with Ferdinand. In the case of Ariel, their relationship is described as a mutually-beneficial contract but one which is enforced by the threat of violence. Here there is considerable reciprocity and even affection, but Prospero is more powerful than Ariel, who desires freedom above all and is forced to serve Prospero. In this case, there is more open rebellion, and Prospero's language, if not his actions, is occasionally violent. With Caliban, there is no reciprocity, no agreement about their mutual history, and their relationship is characterized by violence, both the torture employed by Prospero and the attempted murder of Prospero by Caliban and his cohorts. Prospero has power over Caliban but no authority.

Shakespeare's anatomy of authority in the second scene demonstrates that authority in the modern world depends upon reciprocity. The less reciprocal and mutual each relationship is, the more fragile it is, and the more likelihood of violence. Shakespeare's argument follows naturally from the revelation in the

opening scene, that there is no basis for authority in nature, no basis that is not inherent to those relationships themselves. Shakespeare's view on authority here is quite modern and democratic. The most effective authority depends upon equality. And if authority is really completely equal, then it's not clear that we can really call it authority at all, but rather some kind of mutually beneficent agreement. Quite radically, Shakespeare rules out the unwilling service of an inferior such as Caliban. Where there is no reciprocity, authority is untenable.

Shakespeare is hardly a cynic, asserting that individuals are ruled by self-interest alone. Some individuals, such as Caliban, Antonio, and Sebastian are, but others such as Miranda, Ariel, and Prospero himself are capable of self-sacrificing love. Still, we see that authority depends solely on the immanent specifics of human relationships rather than any external cosmic order; ideally, authority depends on mutual respect, the only sure foundation. The threat of violence is the least effective form of authority, because as soon as one's back is turned, as soon as the immediate danger of punishment is lifted, all obedience immediately ceases and turns to its opposite. Especially in the agreement between Ariel and Prospero, Shakespeare's analysis anticipates the political theories of Hobbes and Locke, by which the public order is founded on a social contract in which each individual participates equally, turning over some liberties to the State in return for the reciprocal protection of basic rights. Prospero's relationships test the limits and basis of authority, because he is, in many ways, still an old-fashioned type of authority who rules by the "magic" of cosmic order, a form of authority rapidly becoming untenable in the modern world.

Many critics have tried to interpret Ariel and Caliban in allegorical terms. Girard, for example, sees Caliban and Ariel as aspects of Shakespeare's psyche as he developed as an artist. Caliban, in Girard's reading, represents Shakespeare's raw and dangerous mimetic process that he had to overcome in order to mature as an artist, while "Ariel represents the more refined, ethical, and noble literary mode that the later Shakespeare wants to substitute for Caliban" (347). Girard's interpretation is not that far from the traditional reading that Ariel represents spirit and Caliban earth as the twin sources of Shakespeare's artistic inspiration. In this reading, the whole play becomes, in effect, a psychomachia, a battle within Prospero's soul. Peter Greenaway, in his film version of *The Tempest* entitled *Prospero's Books*, was evidently inspired by this interpretation when he has John Gielgud, playing Prospero, speak the lines of all the characters in voiceover. Girard's interpretation assumes an anachronistic, romantic self-obsession on Shakespeare's part that is foreign to his fundamentally social artistic ethos. For Shakespeare, the artist is essentially a social figure, not the isolated romantic genius. *The Tempest*, like all great drama and narrative, has an allegorical dimension; Miranda, Ariel, and Caliban represent the artist-magician's audience. But they represent his audience precisely

as individuals, not as personifications of ideas or types. Their relationship to Prospero categorizes them as his audience, but apart from that relationship, their characters are defined by their personal characteristics and history, as with all individuals.(4) The fact that Prospero depends upon each of them, in different ways, to enact his schemes illustrates the essentially dialogic nature of art and the collaborative spirit of drama especially, which depends so much upon the imagination of the audience, as the Chorus to Shakespeare's *Henry V* famously points out. As individuals, Miranda, Ariel, and Caliban resist any attempts to rigidly limit their identity.

4. The End of Romance

The problem with Shakespeare's dramatic magic, *The Tempest* suggests, is the necessarily hierarchical relationship between the artist and his audience. It might be objected here that the artist actually serves the audience rather than the other way around. This is true for the popular artist with no larger ambitions, and for this reason the popular artist is not generally a figure of resentment insofar as he or she succeeds in entertaining. Shakespeare is popular, no doubt, but his art constantly challenges the audience, expanding its knowledge and understanding of the human (which he considers in originary and historical terms). During the Renaissance, art was usually justified by its fidelity to nature and its moral functionality. "[T]he purpose of playing," in Hamlet's words, "is to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image" (*Hamlet* 3.2.20-23). By the same token, Prospero confronts the "three men of sin" (3.3.53)—Alonso, Antonio, and Sebastian—with their own moral depravity, although the latter two show no signs of repentance, again suggesting the limits of the artist's power. It's true, of course, that the Renaissance conceived of the playwright as a craftsperson rather than a Romantic genius, but this more limited conception hardly insulates the artist from resentment. The prevalence of defensive or apologetic, occasionally "armed," prologues and epilogues during this time period suggests that the artist was a vulnerable figure. The essential point is that a play is known to be and experienced as the product of the artist's vision. The artist is structurally the god of his creation, whose powers are indeed magical in relation to the world of the artwork. The power of the artist in relation to his audience, of course, is a great deal more contingent and fragile—which is the theme of *The Tempest*. Nevertheless, the price of admission to the imaginative world of the play is submission to the artist's vision. *The Tempest* suggests that the implied contract between artist and audience is breaking down. Shakespeare was to some extent anticipating future developments. Garber asks, quite recently, "Why should the audience prefer Prospero the magician and his daughter Miranda over Sycorax the magician and her son Caliban? Both Sycorax and Prospero keep Ariel in bondage" (868)—ignoring, of course, the material differences between Sycorax's unconditional bondage of Ariel and

Prospero's reciprocal contract with him. Garber's point reflects that of a recent generation of critics who view Prospero as the colonial oppressor. As Shakespeare's audience, these critics reflect the hostility of Caliban, whom previous generations demonized, but who is now generally regarded as a tragic figure.

Shakespeare's retirement was undoubtedly a contingent event, not a conscious response to any problems of reception. But he was clearly anticipating his retirement as he wrote the play, and he used the occasion to reflect on the future of his kind of art. Art, of course, continues after Shakespeare's death. But successful artists after the interregnum took different strategies, in terms of both form and content, to mitigate the potential for resentment in the reception of their work. Shakespeare's turn to Romance in his final plays anticipates some of these future developments.(5)

In the epilogue, Prospero explicitly acknowledges his dependence upon the audience:

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
In this bare island by your spell,
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands.
Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair,
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (1-20)Prospero notes his "charms are all o'erthrown," the passive voice and verb choice suggesting usurpation rather than a voluntary abdication of his magic, such as he promised earlier ("I'll break my staff, . . . drown my book" [5.1. 54, 57]). The two versions taken together suggest a more or less forced resignation: he renounces his magic in a recognition that it has lost its power without the audience's help, who now hold Prospero in their "bands" with a

“spell,” reversing the conventional relationship. Prospero claims that because he has lost his magic, therefore he is weak and dependent on the audience, their “prayer.” But the play, taken as a whole, suggests that his magic always depended on the audience, and now, without their mercy, he is helpless, dependent on their “indulgence.” The figure of the artist as a powerful mage is no longer applicable. Indeed, his “project” is now quite humble: merely “to please” his spectators.

Unlike his contemporaries Spenser, Sydney, and Jonson, Shakespeare left us no nonfiction statements about poetry. But his art constantly reflects upon itself and constitutes a profound and detailed exploration of the meaning, purpose, and limits of poetry in the Renaissance. Prospero’s great elegies on his artistic career are among Shakespeare’s most important statements in this regard. Late in the play, after abruptly ending the wedding masque for Miranda and Ferdinand, Prospero explains apologetically,

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. (4.1.148-158)The time of his art has come to an end—”Our revels now are ended.” Not just this particular performance, not just Shakespeare’s career, but, allegorically, the Renaissance era is drawing to a close and “all which it inherit.” This ending is closely associated with the decline of traditional religion in the West, brought about by Judeo-Christian iconoclasm in the largest sense. *The Tempest* itself exemplifies such iconoclasm in that it skeptically deconstructs the sources of the artist’s authority, even while giving tribute to his power and vision. This “apocalypse” affords the artist an insight into the nature of his project, its majesty and power: “this vision, / The cloud-capp’d towers, the gorgeous palaces, / The solemn temples, the great globe itself”—all dissolving into “air, into thin air.” This is undoubtedly a great loss, but Prospero reassures his audience: “You do look, my son, in a moved sort, / As if you were dismayed. Be cheerful, sir” (4.1.146-7). However majestic, his art is finally a “baseless fabric,” an “insubstantial pageant,” which will fade and “Leave not a rack behind.” In a characteristic gesture of humility, Shakespeare acknowledges that art is necessarily illusion, a gesture that anticipates and wards off any objections by the audience. The power of any particular artwork or form is temporary and functional, not essential or universal.

Prospero goes on to connect art to life itself: “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on, and our little life / Is rounded with a sleep.” Not only art, not only the products of our imaginations are illusion, but our very life itself, comparable to a dream which vanishes upon waking. How can this leap from art to life be justified? Perhaps Prospero is speaking for himself as a performer in the play, whose identity ceases with the performance. Or he could be referring to the short term of our lifespan from a cosmic perspective. A third possibility is that our life shares certain essential characteristics with art, considered as illusion—an anthropological insight that is borne out but also qualified by Eric Gans’s originary hypothesis.(6) The human species is distinguished by language, which, in Gans’s hypothesis, originates to signify the sacred, similar, in this respect, to Prospero’s magic. Language itself, therefore, includes an element of illusion, since the sacred is generated by human’s mimetic tendencies (even as it transcends them), not anything supernatural. This originary heritage in the sacred, considered here as illusion, can be minimized but never completely eliminated.

The occasion for Prospero’s speech above is his sudden remembering of “that foul conspiracy / Of the beast Caliban and his confederates / Against my life” (4.1.139-41), which, allegorically, represents the forces of individualism threatening his art. The beautiful and harmonious spectacle of the wedding masque, the music of the spheres, is giving way to the discordant jangle of Modernity, figured by the harsh baying of the hounds sent to harass Caliban and his gang. Ferdinand comments upon Prospero’s reaction: “Your father’s in some passion / That works him strongly” (4.1.143-44). And Miranda responds, “Never till this day / Saw I him touched with anger so distempered” (4.1.144-45). Prospero seems to be what we now call “projecting” when he says to Ferdinand, “You do look, my son, in a moved sort, / As if you were dismayed. Be cheerful, sir” (4.1.146-7), words that are apparently directed more to himself than his son and daughter. Anyone, of course, would be disturbed upon remembering a plot on his life which is nearing its aim. But in this case, Prospero’s reaction seems excessive. With Ariel on the watch, and with Prospero’s knowledge of the plot, there doesn’t appear to be any serious threat from “Caliban and his confederates.” A more inept conspiracy could hardly be imagined. As we noted above, however, what is at stake here is not just the happenstance of Caliban’s plot, but rather what it represents in larger terms. By the same token, Prospero’s exaggerated reaction signifies not just the contingency of a man becoming irritable and old (as Prospero excuses himself—”Sir, I am vexed. / Bear with my weakness. My old brain is troubled. / Be not disturbed with my infirmity. . . . / . . . A turn or two I’ll walk to still my beating mind” [4.1.158-163)]), but also the vulnerability of the artist, his dependence upon a fickle and increasingly independent audience.

Prospero’s reflections upon his art are expanded in his famous farewell to the

island’s spirits, which, along with the epilogue, explicitly states his renunciation of magic:

> Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes, and groves,
> And ye that on the sands with printless foot
> Do chase the ebbing Neptune, and do fly him
> When he comes back; you demi-puppets that
> By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make,
> Whereof the ewe not bites; and you whose pastime
> Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice
> To hear the solemn curfew; by whose aid,
> Weak masters though ye be, I have bedimmed
> The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,
> And twixt the green sea and the azured vault
> Set roaring war; to the dread rattling thunder
> Have I given fire, and rifted Jove’s stout oak
> With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory
> Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up
> The pine and cedar; graves at my command
> Have waked their sleepers, oped, and let ’em forth
> By my so potent art. But this rough magic
> I here abjure, and, when I have required
> Some heavenly music–which even now I do–
> To work mine end upon their senses that
> This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,
> Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
> And deeper than did ever plummet sound
> I’ll drown my book. (5.1.33-57)

Prospero gives no explicit reason during the play why he decides to abjure his magic, but this speech gives us some important clues. The elves and spirits he evokes are relics from England’s past; he calls on them not as individual spirits, but rather collectively, and as such they are integral to the cosmic order, the same order and hierarchy which underlies his artistic vision. Their independent activities as he describes them are essentially playful and fanciful—making “midnight mushrooms,” chasing the waves that lap the beach, making “green sour ringlets” in the pastures, rejoicing in nighttime revels—like the art itself of a bygone age, a golden age untroubled by Machiavellian politics—and like all golden ages, essentially mythic. His speech suggests that such spirits, as “weak masters,” are in one sense dependent upon the artist, while he likewise depends upon them. At the

artist's command, they perform terrifying spectacles of power—earthquakes, lightning, thunder, eclipse, and even the revival of the dead. Shakespeare here pays homage to the power of his "so potent art" and the faith of a dying age, which saw in such events the hand of God. He characterizes his art as "rough" or violent "magic"—the hierarchical order of the cosmos implies a certain violence; in Girardian terms, a sacrificial basis, which is to some extent expressed even in the relationship of the Renaissance artist to the general public. The awe-inspiring magical performances are ambiguously supernatural and unnatural—a violation of the natural order, suggesting their essential ambivalence within the play. The demise of his magic is presented as final and even apocalyptic. His staff he'll "break" and "drown" his "book," an ending without possibility of revival.

5. The Future

Prospero, sans magic, has little hope for the rest of his life, planning to "retire me to my Milan, where / Every third thought shall be my grave" (5.1.314-5); but the world will continue without him, and Prospero's attitude toward the future is relevant to the larger question of the shift to Modernity represented in the play. What comes after the Renaissance artist? Miranda and Ferdinand are the next generation, so their natures and their relationship hold the answer to this question. Prospero plans for Miranda and Ferdinand to fall in love, and their marriage will unite the kingdoms of Milan and Naples, ending their historic hostility. So their relationship might seem to confirm the authority of the artist and his power to shape the future. But in fact, as I'll argue, Prospero is less important than usually recognized in this regard.

When Miranda and Ferdinand first meet each other, they fall in love literally at first sight. Prospero remarks in an aside, "At the first sight / They have changed eyes" (1.2.444-5). But Prospero immediately intervenes, commenting to the audience, "this swift business / I must uneasy make, lest too light winning / Make the prize light" (1.2.454-56). Things easily won are not highly valued, as every coquette knows, but Miranda is no coquette; so in her naïve lack of pretense, Prospero must introduce barriers that serve the same role. Girard argues that Prospero understands the mimetic nature of desire, and he sets up obstacles precisely in order to reinforce their love (*Theater* 350). Since there are no obstacles to their love, he must invent them, and so Prospero accuses Ferdinand of plotting to overthrow his island reign, confines him by magic, and sets him to work piling up "Some thousands of these logs" (3.1.10). The question is whether Prospero's interventions serve any constructive role, or if he is actually completely superfluous beyond his role in arranging their initial meeting. Later in the play, apologizing to Ferdinand, he says, "All thy vexations / Were but my trials of thy love, and thou / Hast strangely stood the test" (4.1.5-7). Prospero is not a Machiavellian schemer, arranging a dynastic match with no consideration for his child's feelings. The fact

that Ferdinand is heir to the throne is important, of course, but Prospero wants to make sure that Miranda will be happy with him, and so a test of his resolve seems warranted. But as Prospero himself notes, “thou / Hast strangely stood the test,” suggesting that Ferdinand has shown no inclination towards inconsistency.

Miranda’s reaction to her father’s interventions is also significant for understanding their role. When her father accuses Ferdinand of plotting, her first reaction is in line with the naiveté which is her most notable characteristic: “There’s nothing ill can dwell in such a temple” (1.2.461). Events, however, bear out her initial estimation of Ferdinand’s character, which is indeed completely faithful, courtly, and virtuous. Prospero, however, reacts harshly to her pleadings, “What I say, / My foot my tutor?” and forbids her to speak for him or to see him (1.2.472-3). This turn of events, of course, is part of his plan. What is important is Miranda’s response. She refuses to be silent, and she disobeys him by visiting Ferdinand and helping him. During her visit, they exchange vows of true love and marriage. Her disregard for her father’s commands confirms her independent nature; there is nothing of Ophelia’s submissiveness in Miranda’s positive confidence in her desires, which apparently owe nothing to her father’s mediation. Her assurance in herself and in Ferdinand proves completely warranted in the play.

Some critics have assumed that Prospero’s dire warnings against premarital sex must be somehow necessary, but there is no evidence for such in the text we have. In the fourth act, after acquiescing in their marriage, he warns Ferdinand sternly:

If thou dost break her virgin-knot before
All sanctimonious ceremonies may
With full and holy rite be ministered,
No sweet aspersion shall the heavens let fall
To make this contract grow; but barren hate,
Sour-eyed disdain, and discord shall bestrew
The union of your bed with weeds so loathly
That you shall hate it both: therefore take heed,
As Hymen’s lamps shall light you. (4.1.15-23)But Ferdinand is literally the perfect gentlemen, so what purpose does this warning serve, which Prospero repeats again soon after?

Look thou be true; do not give dalliance
Too much the rein. The strongest oaths are straw|
To the fire i’th’ blood: be more abstemious,
Or else good night your vow! (4.1.51-4)Indeed, the wedding masque itself quite pointedly excludes the interference of Venus and her son Cupid, who would presumably lead the couple into fornication. Prospero’s persistent intermeddling

into Miranda and Ferdinand's relationship is of the same order as his vexation upon remembering Caliban's plot: "Sir, I am vexed. / Bear with my weakness. My old brain is troubled. / Be not disturbed with my infirmity. . . . / . . . A turn or two I'll walk to still my beating mind" (4.1.158-163). Again we see that Prospero feels that his authority is vulnerable even when there is no immediate occasion. But the main point that Shakespeare makes with all of Prospero's anxious interfering is that he is completely superfluous to their relationship, which is good news since they represent the future. Miranda and Ferdinand's love for each other is all that is needed.

The one time that there is even any hint of discord between Miranda and Ferdinand comes in the final scene, when Prospero dramatically pulls back a curtain to reveal the couple playing chess. The shipwrecked nobles, including Ferdinand's father Alonso, had thought Ferdinand dead, so for them at least the scene seems to confirm Prospero's magical powers. But the royal couple are quite purposely independent here as throughout the play. They don't notice the onstage audience at first, so their conversation is presumably candid, directed solely at each other. Critics have noted that chess was rather exclusively "associated with royalty in Jacobean England, . . . and Naples was known as a centre of chess-playing" (Vaughan & Vaughan 296, fn.171). Garber, for example, sees this scene as anticipating their future rule, when they will be literally moving knights and bishops around their kingdom (869). But chess is also a game of war, so the scene hints at conflict simply by the choice of game. More seriously, Miranda accuses Ferdinand of cheating: "Sweet lord, you play me false" (5.1.173). The implication is that Miranda is perhaps losing and makes the accusation playfully, since Ferdinand immediately denies it: "No, my dearest love, / I would not for the world" (5.1.174-5). Miranda replies, "Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle, / And I would call it fair play" (5.1.176-77). Miranda's love is such that even if Ferdinand had cheated her out of a score of kingdoms, she would call it fair play anyway and forgive him without challenge. In contrast to her typical naiveté, Miranda here displays a sophisticated knowledge of the possibility of deceit and a fine comic irony in her teasing accusation. Ferdinand is perhaps the more innocent player, since he doesn't seem to catch Miranda's irony immediately. In both the game itself and Miranda's allegation, Shakespeare calls attention to the ever-present possibility of conflict, even Machiavellian scheming with the charge of cheating, such as resulted in Prospero and Miranda's banishment. How Miranda and Ferdinand deal with this possibility is key to Shakespeare's hopes for the future. On the one hand, conflict is sublimated through the game of chess and in the irony which Miranda displays in the possibility of losing. A couple who can deal with mimetic tensions through games and teasing is less likely to resort to actual violence or treachery. Without any romantic or idealistic delusions, they implicitly accept the inevitability of resentment. Furthermore, Miranda demonstrates the ability to overcome such

resentment with unconditional love and forgiveness. Miranda's resourcefulness makes Prospero's magic unnecessary, providing a more realistic alternative for the new age dawning.

6. Conclusion

Prospero's magic represents Shakespeare's art; this is generally accepted. But his magic is also a token of Renaissance hierarchy, which was understood as a cosmic order. The connection between art and magic, therefore, is not a contingent analogy, but rather more intimate, together forming an organic whole, together depending upon a respect for authority which was declining due to the rise of individualism. Largely as a result of Protestantism, the private self was recognized as an independent center of sacrality, and no longer perceived as dependent upon the public scene. In Shakespeare's plays, such independence is generally limited to the upper classes. Caliban, after all, is for the most part a comic character and forced to repent at the end of the play: "I'll be wise hereafter / And seek for grace" (5.1.289-99). Such limits are among the reasons that the time of Shakespeare's art is drawing to a close. His plays and poems can be understood as a subversion of the public scene, the medieval, hierarchical order. Ironically, while his art depends upon hierarchy, he consistently undermines its sacred foundation, bringing about its own demise. At the end of his career, he turns his iconoclasm finally on himself or rather the figure of the artist as grand magician. Prospero undergoes, in effect, a ritual humiliation, one which he virtually arranges himself. The play begins with Prospero as the grand magician, orchestrating the awesome tempest with ease. But the events of the play reveal him as a weak and troubled old man, forced to beg for applause in the Epilogue, and superfluous to the new age dawning with Miranda and Ferdinand. Miranda's comment upon seeing the assembled crowd of shipwrecked nobles, "O brave new world / That has such people in't!" (5.1.185-86), is always taken as ironic on Shakespeare's part, since the group includes such villains as Sebastian and Antonio. Yet the larger group also includes Miranda herself, and her imagination and ingenuity are indeed tokens of a promising future. And so we should read her "brave new world" seriously, as Shakespeare's blessing upon the new age of modernity dawning.

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Notes

1. On the popularity of commentaries on *Revelations*, see Capp 100-1. (back)

2. On the influence of the New Testament for the development of novelistic realism, see Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953). (back)

3. See Book III on "Interdividual Psychology" in René Girard's *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World,* trans. Stephen Bann & Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987): 283-431. (back)

4. By the same token, Prospero is an individual yet representative dramatic artist rather than Shakespeare. There is no warrant for assuming that Prospero's foibles are common to Shakespeare. (back)

5. On Shakespeare's turn to Romance, see my "*The Winter's Tale* and Antitheatricalism: Shakespeare's Rehabilitation of the Public Scene," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 17.1 (Fall 2011). (back)

6. See *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* by Eric Gans (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), especially pp. 1-28. (back)