



## “The Baseless Fabric of this Vision” The Poetics of Space in *The Tempest*

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**Abstract.** The paper attempts to survey Shakespeare’s “new world” of the stage in search of creative correspondences between the diverse devices of a dramatic reform “bodied forth” in *The Tempest*. The spatial analysis of the play confirms the view that Shakespeare’s dramaturgical experiments in his concluding romance aim at rehabilitating the mythical stance of drama through (re)domesticating the fantastic on the stage endowed with creative spatial, temporal and instrumental agencies. The analysis investigates Shakespeare’s innovative strategies in the play in order to see how he deploys the combined forces of the stage’s art in the new genre to legitimize the fantastic for dramatic use, to reopen the mythical dimension for the theatre through dissolving the limited topical and spatial confines of the Renaissance stage. Focusing mostly on the spatial aspects and constituents of the *Tempest*-world it approaches the play as a pioneering piece of the stage’s spatial redefinition, a topical dramatic eutopia where the abstract, utopian space of humanistic ideas, theological, ethical, phenomenological and social conceptions is turned to shape and gains local habitation through dramatic implacement. The inquiry pays particular attention to the poetic qualities of space as instruments of passage between the spheres of fact and fiction, place and space, the natural and the artistic, i.e., the dialectical twin domains of Prospero’s magical realm.

**Keywords:** space, place, dramaturgy, myth, mythtopia

Since G. W. Knight’s groundbreaking studies in the romances of Shakespeare the examination and interpretation of the last plays as myths have been an

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authorized and legitimate occupation of Shakespeare criticism. Most of the seminal works of this critical discourse from Knight (1929), (1932), (1947) through D. G. James (1937) to N. Frye (1986) focus on Shakespeare’s preoccupation with archetypal themes like truth, justice, time, immortality, regeneration, providence, deliverance, mercy, rebirth, resurrection – topoi of religious relevance and metaphysical reference, representative of a proper closure to the oeuvre. Some of them already familiar through modal variations from earlier works, others open new perspectives for drama and its stage representation. The romances in this view, through resounding old themes in new keys and introducing new ones conventionally dominant in other genres, are complex compositions set in the tonic to drive the oeuvre to a conclusive coda that would both conceptually and dramaturgically transcend the finite world of the preceding great tragic sequence. Myth-focused critical studies also emphasize the heightened role of the creative imagination in the romances endowed via poetic means with a dramatic agency that signals the dawn of a new era, promising and promoting a paradigm shift in the history of stage representation. They suggest that it is also through the last plays – most of all, *The Tempest* – that the collective topical myths of the plays and the private myth of their author meet. Nineteenth-century romantic interpretations of *The Tempest* as a personal allegory, besides throwing some reflected light on the enigmatic figure of the playwright, provided a hermeneutical key as well through the solely authorized reading of the play as the ultimate revelation of its author’s creed in its self-reflective, self-celebrating and self-glorifying metatheatricity.

*The Tempest*, at the same time, encourages – with equal persuasive force – a less book-bound, more prospective reading that invites – especially in spatial terms – a different approach to mythology.

Since the age of Hellenism that brought about the decline of theatre in ancient Greece, and buried live mythology, books have been the paramount myth of the western world. For more than fifteen hundred years they have become the tenor and the vehicle, the signifier and signified, the Hermetic containers of the great codes of culture, the literal embodiments of humanism in its temporal and spatial entirety. After the decline of Christian drama – an attempt to call myth to a new life of purely spiritual perspectives – by the end of the sixteenth century, it was the mission of Shakespeare and his contemporaries to reverse the equation and reinvest the stage with its original authority, with the ancient agency of myth-making through the combined forces of presentation and representation. The study of the creative interplay of the two Hermetic media – that of the page and the stage –, however, requires the adaptation of hermeneutical approaches as well. We should give up the diachronic, book-bound interpretation of myth and mythology and turn to the synchronic view of live myth that A. Losev elaborated in his pioneering work on the subject (2000, [1994]). Losev builds up the desired definition through a sequential process of cognitive purification moving alternately backward and

forward on the way. At each turn he removes an attributive layer of historically (via books) related meaning, peeling off the lendings to find the thing beneath. Only after clarifying what it is not (mere fiction, fantasy, ideal state of being, scientific construction, metaphysical abstraction, scheme, allegory, poetry, religious construct, dogma or narrated history) does he reach the final dialectic formula – a substantial compound of four major attributes that embody the object of “real” or “absolute” mythology: “Verbalized miraculous personal history” (2000, 272 [translation mine]). Projecting this quadra as referential matrix upon the play may help us to map up the wondrous world of *The Tempest* in search for further mythical dimensions of its space-world.

The placement of *The Tempest* in Shakespeare’s oeuvre is as puzzling as the location of Prospero’s island on the map of the world old or new. It is the first play in *The Book of Shakespeare*, i.e., *The First Folio* of 1623 and the last for the Theatre. Prologue and epilogue, prelude and coda in one consummating chronotopic match of page and stage for the mutual satisfaction of both parties, the two historical denominations of Shakespeare-worship, the congregations of readers and viewers alike. *The Tempest*, when read, is a book of a play, when seen, is a play of books. The most bookish play of the Bard – even by the scholarly humanistic measures of its age – and the most theatrical one as well, that could satisfy the expectations of the Jacobean audiences of three stages – the Globe of the groundlings, the Blackfriars of wealthy burghers and the Whitehall of the masque-mad aristocracy with an increased appetite for lavish stage entertainment pleasing eyes and ears alike. It is the polyphonic, counterpointed interplay of the two rivalling instruments accorded by the same key in unison. A testamental piece of its author for the posterity evoking through his Will the true spirit of the Bard himself or at least – as Horatio would put it – “a piece of him.” The Hamlet analogy is more than telling in this respect as well. The last romance as a sovereign relative of the first great tragedy seems more than kin in spirit and less than kind in body, i.e., by the genre. *The Tempest* revises *Hamlet* through echoing the canonical duplicity of scholarship and art, page and stage. It glorifies the fruitful match of the humanist man of letters and the craftsman of the stage, the master of arts and the artist of voices and visions, the magician of theatrical illusions. The distinguished dramatic role given to books and acting, Hamlet’s intellectualism and expertise in playing and stagecraft – confirmed by the crucial role given to the play within the play – make *Hamlet* the tragic forerunner of Prospero’s concluding romance. It is only the matter of taking sides in time and place via prospection or retrospection to see the successor in the predecessor’s mirror or the other way round. Through visible analogies and sound correspondences the two plays open up a new dimension of the oeuvre confirming thus their mythical status in Shakespeare.

If Heminge and Condell, with the graceful support of grandmaster Jonson, did want to erect a lasting monument for the playwright that his fame like the

sonneteer’s in black ink too may still shine bright in the future, to open the Book of Shakespeare with *The Tempest* was, indeed, an editorial masterstroke convincing even the most cautious customer that this book of plays was worth buying and perhaps even reading. Ben, Shakespeare’s closest peer as *poeta doctus*, *poet laureate*, masque-master and chief of the rhymers’ tribe, knew what was at stake when he gilded the beloved author’s monument with his shining lines. He had had by then seven years of his self-wrought immortality behind him since the publication of his *Collected Works* in 1616.

Prospero’s Book as the first play of the mighty collection occupies a central position in the metonymical sequence of succession, itself being a composition of books without and within the play. Without: the favourite authors of Shakespeare: Virgil, Ovid and Montaigne, within: a cryptic collection of certain volumes from Milan, objects of his secret studies, the Hermetic sources of his art that he “prized above” his dukedom.

*The Tempest* as a book, the corpuscular manifestation of Shakespeare’s art, is no less worthy of such appraisal. Its professional editorial execution must have further increased the prestige and the competence of the medium expecting a future as prosperous as its counterpart’s, that of the stage. The reader-friendly features of the Folio-text also justify the inverted chronotopic placement of the Bard’s Book of Revelations in his Book of Books soon to become the Bible of the Shakespeare-cult. It is still undecided whether these distinctive qualities – testimonies of exceptional editorial care: its clean text, list of *dramatis personae*, frequent indication of locality, clear structural division and elaborate stage directions – are of authorial origin.<sup>1</sup> We do not know whether they were the playwright-manager’s providential gestures in his absence toward his company in lieu of live instruction (maybe even with potential readers in mind), or the strategic contributions of the editors themselves. This way or that, they are formal signifiers of the play’s conceptual design in full accord with its bookish occupations and Prospero’s humanistic practices in scholarship, political leadership, education and stagecraft.

In *The Tempest*’s case perhaps right this creative duplicity, this polyphonic self-reflection, the counterpointed texture of the two instrumental voices woven into one organic composition is the secret of the play’s unique charm and the source of its emblematic status in the Shakespeare-canon. This representative authority accompanied by the muted voices of personal allegory endow the last romance with a mythical quality in perfect unison with the Shakespeare-myths – the one created of him through the worship of a living cult and the one called to life by him in the play.

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<sup>1</sup> Frank Kermode in his introduction to the play in the 1954 edition (pp. xi-xiv) provides a convincing list of textual marks as evidence of special editorial care.

The scholarly attitude, the bookish qualities of *The Tempest* are also apparent in its rich thematic texture. If *Hamlet*, the play, tuned to the spirit of its studious hero, is an open university of lectures and tutorials on diverse issues delivered by half a dozen self-appointed experts, *The Tempest* in its abundance of themes is a lavish banquet of learning, the final revelation of Orphic wisdom, some eschatological truth to conclude a troublesome oeuvre full of dread and doubts. Theme-minded readers may view the play as Shakespeare's dramatic directory of timeless and topical issues. The critically sanctioned list of its thematic occupations is academic matter, standard stuff for introductory literature courses: Nature, Culture, Art, Knowledge, Nurture, Education, Civilization, Colonization, Nobility, Baseness, Crime, Retribution, Illusion, fiction, time, mortality, revenge, redemption, freedom, service, slavery, Old World and New, mercy, magic, rule, power – to mention only a few.

For a less conditioned approach, however, the meaning – the treated topics – and the underlying method, the way they are organized and presented, should be of equal concern. Each and every dominant theme, character, motif, idea, emotion and impression has its counterpart, is matched with its opposite accorded by counterpoint with its antithesis. As if Shakespeare had thus wanted to compensate for the lack of serious drama, a fatal conflict of good and evil, bringing the latter under full control by Prospero's magic mastery. The abundant complex of symmetrically structured binary oppositions (revenge-mercy, slavery-freedom, natural-artificial, primitive-civilized, realism-idealism, past-future, baseness-nobility, ignorance-knowledge, earthly-airy, subhuman-superhuman, seriousness-levity, ugliness-beauty, gloom-joy, sensation-imagination, noise-music, etc.) suggest that this arrangement is not only part of the play's conceptual design, but a dominant device of Shakespeare's dramaturgical strategy as well – a compositional principle and instrument in one that accords the worlds of conception and perception, thought and sense, page and stage. This densely-woven polyphonic texture of antitheses, the all-pervading dialectical dynamism of the *Tempest*-world is also a strategic force of myth-making.

As plays may read ill in the library – a charge occasionally brought up even against Shakespeare's most popular pieces – books may play poor on stage. Shakespeare, being master of both arts, knew how to balance the scales. He knew that books are the past and the future for the scholar and the poet respectively, but the stage is the present for the playwright – the world of the here and now. Prospero with his Hamletian mind of a "large discourse looking before and after" still was a man of his time. As the successor of his master's tragic avengers and the advocate of Shakespeare's reformed faith, he possessed the truth and justice that transcended the finite world of tragic consciousness. He knew that the prime concern of the dramatist who matches memory and imagination is to transcend its own temporal and spatial limitations. If *The Tempest* is the most bookish play

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content-wise, overloaded with the topical issues of humanist thought and the current cultural concerns of its age, it is also the most stage-bound piece abounding in self-reflective metatheatrical devices.

The stage in words may glorify knowledge as a way to wealth in soul and mind, in deeds though it prefers practices to please the lower faculties of the audience. Thus even thoughts on stage are meant not so much for scholarly treatment as for artistic entertainment. Prospero is fully aware of both the power and the limitations of language. That “words without thoughts never to heaven go” but he knew too, that the same “words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.” That only the fruitful combination of action and reflection create true dramatic experience, it can produce the desired end, can turn the stage into the promised land of temporary redemption. And who else could be the master of such ritual ceremonies but the omniscient Neo-Platonic mage, the adept of the stage, the director of the “great Globe” itself to whom vision and sight, fantasy and fact, seeming and feeling are one – two sides of the same coin –, Prospero’s potent Art prised above his dukedom.

Prospero is maker and make, creator and creature in one, a character who makes himself in a play of his own making. A Nietzschean superman of radical self-reform, who earns through spiritual perfection the right to reform others as well. His sole limitation is the stage, the spatial confinement of his magical practices, a limited world in space and time that he turns into a temporary place of habitation. His utopistic island lies between fact and fiction, the past and the future, the Old world and the New. It is a liminal place where magic can have its day. The *Tempest*-world, through permanent self-reflection, is fully aware of its own nature knowing and showing itself for what it is as if theatre found narcissistic joy in its own reflection winning such a deep delight in its self-forged illusions that it makes us believe the make-believe, that “nothing is but what is not.” What makes it live and breathing, however, is not the project itself, the desired end of the performance (nearing the conclusion Prospero’s mood darkens, he gets more aloof, melancholic and detached as his “project gathers to a head”) but the exhilarating excitement of its making, the Blakean energy of execution that lends life to mere visions, bodies forth the unknown and gives sense to nonsense. This creative autonomy, this self-generating exclusiveness that still includes everything to present a global experience, is a unique quality that drama, again, inherited from its mythical ancestors.

The *Tempest*-world in its chronotopic setting is an idealized utopistic combination of the Hestian and the Hermetic vision turned into dramatic shapes in a state and a way of life: way for the travellers to whom it is a temporary location – the group of the shipwrecked party from Naples and Milan – and state for the natives to whom it is home and permanence – the placial source of their identity. The two protagonists, Prospero and Miranda occupy a central position in between the two poles drawing dramatic force from both spheres. They are not inhabitants

but residents of the Island through a long-term, yet temporary spell – a stage of growth, change, physical, mental and spiritual transformation leading towards a higher, nobler state of being. What is at stake plot-wise, however – keeping in mind that it is a play of strict Aristotelian discipline in terms of observing the unities and the priority of the plot – is more than questionable. The humanistic concept of moral reform is the mere ideology that may or may not work in the long run when applied to human relations in the real world back in Naples and Milan. Prospero's art – its power, worth and validity – is not as sound as it seems. It is undermined by malicious mockery, farcical foolery and apish satire displaying its fallacies and imperfections, and overshadowed by modal changes casting the shadow of doubt and scepticism on the enterprise.

*The Tempest* as a dramatic utopia is a place-world where governing concepts of religion, philosophy, politics, education and art – the spiritual treasures of humanistic thought – are inseparable from the place of their making and representation. The unique charm, the myth-making magic of *The Tempest* comes as much from the island itself: a place sensually embodying the spatial abstractions of the utopistic mind. The world of the sense – of the Apollonian intellect, form, order and control – is planted deep in the soil of the senses, the Dionysian body of organic life demanding freedom, provoking revolt and displaying the uncontrollable vitality of the Green world. It is a space of poetic implacement,<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare's Neo-Platonic khora<sup>3</sup> called to a mythical life by the interplay of its two creative forces: the art of culture – Prospero's magic – and the art of Nature, i.e., the Island's spell. Nowhere else in the oeuvre can we find another play of such autonomy and integrity. It is a self-sufficient world of its own making defined in its own terms. This sense of completeness comes as much from below, from the genius and *corpus loci* of the island as from above, from Prospero's regenerative magic, from the providential control of his art.

The active and permanent presence of the elements – endowed with both poetic and dramatic agencies – keeps up the keen sense of place, of where-being from the opening sea-storm to the closing lines of the epilogue expecting gentle winds of release and safe homecoming. Beneath the airy apparel of poetic figurations – the patterns of metaphorical analogies – lies a more solid ground, a layer of deeper correspondences that render all characters, according to their

<sup>2</sup> I use the term in the context elaborated by E. Casey in his seminal study of place and space (*Getting Back to Place*), where implacement signifies modal location, the highest state of spatial being achieved by the accord and creative interplay of body and place.

<sup>3</sup> Plato's khora in Derrida's view as it is presented in his essay entitled by the very term (*Khora* 1993), is the enigmatic third spatial dimension of being beyond the confines of dialectics, that transcends the limits of the perception-conception, logos-mythos type of binary oppositions and thus provides an ideal sphere (connotatively also space, place, region, location, frame, vessel and receptacle) for implacement.

hierarchical position, to the elemental constituents of the Island-world. This richly orchestrated Neo-Platonic harmony of the human, the animate and the inanimate spheres of being is one of the distinct mythical qualities of the play. The earthbound Caliban, the airborne Ariel, the sea-changed voyagers controlled by the Promethean fire of Prospero’s Art – all take their share in the topical metamorphosis turning the epilogue’s “bare island” into a natural habitat of myth-making – a topia of dramatic implacement. Thus the Island is not a mere topos of fictitious, temporary location but a lived-in place, the fifth element of the Hermetic formula that gives local habitation to its inhabitants and itself becomes a generative force of creation.

Beside the placial definition of belonging and identity, the topographical arrangement of the characters also contributes to the formation of the *Tempest*-world. In spatial perspective they are all carefully arranged both along the vertical and the horizontal axes. The vertical hierarchy – which is independent from social position or dramatic weight – mirrors their moral stature, their level of spiritual nobility or baseness: Prospero-Miranda-Ferdinand-Ariel-Gonzalo-Antonio-Sebastian-Stephano-Trinculo-Caliban. The horizontal arrangement divides them into groups of extant or newly-formed alliances: Prospero-Miranda, Prospero-Ariel, Prospero-Gonzalo, Miranda-Ferdinand, Antonio-Sebastian, Stephano-Trinculo-Caliban. It is also an effective means of dramaturgical implacement, activating spatial relations as an aspect of place-being.

The New World of Shakespeare’s utopia is the only place where myth can be reclaimed from the past, from the distant worlds of narrative poetry and fiction, where we can leave the mind’s bookish abstractions – space and time – behind to find our way back to place where life itself is rooted.<sup>4</sup> It is the spell of the Island that realizes the fictitious, domesticates the fantastic and naturalizes the supernatural to provide Shakespeare’s utopia with a dramatic shape. Without its local charms – thunders and sweet airs, noises and songs, lights, fresh springs, brine-pits, Ariel’s spirits and Caliban’s fish, flesh and fowl – Prospero’s art would remain as barren as the stage he leaves behind in the epilogue.

Myths, like utopias, are chronotopic phenomena of the mind with a keen awareness of space and time. When narrated on page – a way of linear rendering – time takes the lead adapting space to the needs of chronology. When put on stage by performance, by the act of presentation, place gains priority, and embracing time in its complexity, generates a sense of presence – the base of the dramatic experience. This increased need of the time-bound stage for location and placement may explain the unusually – at least by Shakespearean standards – naturalistic rendering of the opening storm. As a scene of overall dissolution it leaves reality behind and opens up

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<sup>4</sup> This contrastive view of space/time and place is in full accord with E. Casey’s grounding statement in his book cited above.



the world of fiction – live. It is so lifelike for it is sheer fiction. It is the canonical combination of the two dimensions – time and space – brought to unison that turns Prospero’s utopia into Shakespeare’s mythtopia – a polyphonic vision of a place-world where the fantastic is the natural, where illusion is taken for granted, where drama – matching the kindred spirits of art and nature, page and stage, logos and mythos – comes home in the choric place of its own making.

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