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Form and Disorder in *The Tempest*

ROSE ABDELNOUR ZIMBARDO

HEN one is travelling through that wild terrain of criticism relating to Shakespeare's last plays, there is very little upon which to rely. One is faced with a thousand questions—Are the plays myth, romance, or an elaborate working out of the tragic pattern? Were they written because the poet wished to return to the forms he had used in youth, because he was bored, or because he was pandering to the tastes of a new audience? Is *The Tempest* a pastoral drama, a dramatic rendition of masque and anti-masque, or a religious parable? To each question there is a most ingeniously contrived reply. But, however sharply the critics disagree in their interpretations of *The Tempest*, there are two points upon which they stand together almost to a man. The first is that the last plays must be considered together; as Tillyard puts it, *The Tempest* “gains much in lucidity when supported by the others”.¹ The second point of agreement is that all of the last plays are concerned with the theme of regeneration, and that *The Tempest* realizes this theme most perfectly. It is upon these two points, I think, that the critics are most completely in error. *The Tempest* does not gain in being considered as part of a thematic whole that includes the others, rather its meaning becomes obscured in such a context. And the first error of tying the plays together leads inevitably to the second; it is always after a recapitulation of Thaisa's resurrection from the sea and Hermione's revival from the dead that the critics make an unjustifiable extension of the regeneration theory to include *The Tempest*. It is their unshaken belief that regeneration is the theme of the play that makes them slide over the key 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-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind; we are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

This speech and the epilogue sound the keynote, but it is a note that jars with the triumphant harmony that the last plays are thought to express.

The meaning of *The Tempest* can best be approached if we contrast it with

¹ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's Last Plays* (London, 1954), p. 49.

the other late plays. The most immediately perceptible difference between *The Tempest* and the romances is structural. Almost all critics of the play remark upon the closeness with which Shakespeare adheres to classical formulae in this work, a method both contrary to the poet's usual practice and almost inimical to the traditional structure of romance. For example, the unities of time, place, and action are preserved. Exposition of past action and the presentation of all the characters (except Stephano and Trinculo) occur before the end of the first act. The second act introduces the disturbance that must be resolved by the end of the play. In the third act the turbulence is intensified according to the formula for epitasis. The fourth act continues the epitasis with the threatened revolt of Caliban, but it also prepares for the comic ending with the union of the lovers. The peculiar insistence of the poet upon the classical structure becomes obvious at this point. As Kermode notes, "The apparently unnecessary perturbation at the thought of Caliban may be a point at which an oddly pedantic concern for classical structure causes it to force its way through the surface of the play."² The function of the disruption of the masque by the thought of Caliban will be treated later on, but one must agree with Kermode that here as well as elsewhere in the play, the rigorous formality of the structure forces itself upon the reader's attention. It is a fact impossible to ignore that Shakespeare deliberately constructed the play in accordance with neo-Terentian rules. But why, one is led to ask, did he choose so formal a structure in dealing with the extravagant materials of romance? Clifford Leech, in his article on the structure of the last plays has an interesting idea that may shed light on this strange paradox. The last plays, he says, deal not with single, limited incidents, as the comedies and tragedies, for example, do. Rather, they deal with situations that follow upon one another in haphazard concurrence with the flux that is the governing pattern in actual life. That is, in the last plays the beginnings and endings of the plays are not inevitable, but are arbitrarily set, so that we could imagine the characters having more adventures after the ending of the play. In *The Tempest*, because of the controlling magic of Prospero, the flux is arrested, but it remains as part of the undercurrent of the play, "in contra-puntal relationship to the act-structure."³ This idea, when it is pursued, can lead us to the heart of the play, for the theme of *The Tempest* is not regeneration through suffering, but the eternal conflict between order and chaos, the attempt of art to impose form upon the formless and chaotic, and the limitations of art in this endeavor.

In proving this hypothesis, it might be well to begin with an examination of the character of Prospero and the relation of the other characters to him. Prospero is not, as Tillyard would have him, a king who has made a tragic mistake and then repented it, nor is he Wilson Knight's superman, nor Churton Collins' idea of God. It would be going too far to say, with D. G. James, that Prospero is a poet and Ariel his imagination; but without falling into an allegorical interpretation we can safely say that Prospero is an artist of a kind. He uses music, the very symbol of order, in creating his effects, he attempts to manipulate the other characters to the end of creating or preserving order and form. We can say that for Prospero, as for the poet who is creating the play, all time is

² Frank Kermode, Introduction to *The Tempest* (The New Arden Edition, London, 1954), p. lxxv.

³ Clifford Leech, "The Structure of the Last Plays", *Shakespeare Survey* 11 (1958), p. 27.

present and all the action fore-known to and controlled by him. However, to counterbalance this image, which by itself might well cause a critic to mistake him for God, Prospero is also at times irascible, at times a bit ridiculous, and always under necessity to combat those forces of disorder which he cannot control. We might outline his role in this way: Prospero at the beginning of the play is in a position in which he can take his enemies (who represent disordered mankind, since they are usurpers) out of the flux of life—which is emphasized by their voyage from a marriage feast back to the affairs of state. His enemies are Antonio and Sebastian, the center of the forces of disorder, and Alonso and Ferdinand, who will be permanently influenced by their experience; with them is Gonzalo, who already stands on the side of the forces of order. Prospero will place the travellers on an enchanted island which he controls almost completely through order and harmony—I say almost because he cannot wholly bring Caliban, the incarnation of chaos, into his system of order. He takes Alonso, Antonio, and Co. out of the flux of life and into a kind of permanence, a change which Ariel describes:

Full fadom five thy father lies
 Of his bones are coral made
 Those are pearls that were his eyes
 Nothing of him that doth fade
 But doth suffer a sea-change
 Into something rich and strange.

The process is not one of regeneration into something more nobly human, and despite the interest of the Twentieth Century in Frazier's *Golden Bough*, there is nothing here that suggests fertility, rather the human and impermanent is transfixed into a rich permanence, but a lifeless one. Potentially corruptible bones and eyes become incorruptible coral and pearls; form and richness are fixed upon what was changing and subject to decay. Prospero takes the travellers out of the world of change and places them on his enchanted island, which is permeated with an ordering harmony. Caliban describes the effect of the harmony upon him,

Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices
 That if I waked after long sleep
 Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming
 The clouds methought would open and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me, that when I wak'd
 I cried to dream again.

This harmony first renders the animate inanimate and then reveals riches. Prospero will subject the travellers to the ordering influence of his art. Upon some of them he will impose an order that (we suppose) will stay with them even after they have returned to the world of change, some of them will be influenced only for the moment, as Caliban in the passage quoted, because they are agents of disorder. But in the end, all of them, even Prospero once he has abandoned his art, will have to return to the world of mutability.

I have said that Prospero is an artist who controls through his art. There is no suspense in the play because Prospero can control future as well as present ac-

tion. His foreknowledge enables him to control all that occurs within the confines of the play. Kermode says that “. . . the qualities of the poor isle which gave [the characters] new birth, which ‘purged Alonso’s guilt and taught the princely skill to submit his fury to his reason, are the main theme of the play’” (p. xxx). But the qualities of the isle have nothing to do with Prospero’s art. In the exposition he tells us that he brought his art with him to the island, that Sycorax, the very mother of chaos, had employed the qualities of the island before Prospero’s art brought them under the control of form and order. Nor can we believe that Prospero has yet to bring his fury under the control of reason. If he really had to wait for Ariel to persuade him to mercy, would he have arranged the union of his daughter with Ferdinand? Prospero has already brought order to himself and his island before the play opens. In the play he will take disordered men out of the world and place them under a control that has already been established. There is no real conflict in Prospero’s world and therefore no suspense. The play is not one in which the theme evolves, it is rather displayed. The characters who are, as Pettet suggests,⁴ more than half pasteboard, are lined up as representatives of order or disorder. Open conflict between the two forces never really occurs, but we are shown the ways in which chaos is always threatening to overflow the boundaries which form has set upon it. And finally we are shown by Prospero the nature and limitations of his art.

We must first discuss the forces of order and the forces of chaos as they are lined up in the scheme of the play. Prospero, of course, is the center of order, but Ferdinand and Miranda, under his tutelage, become agents of order, and Gonzalo represents an order of his own which exists even before he is manipulated by Prospero. It is significant that the images of an orderer and creator are applied to Gonzalo as well as to Prospero. For instance, in the scene where we first encounter Gonzalo, Antonio and Sebastian are mocking him thus,

Ant. His words are more than the miraculous harp

Seb. He hath raised the wall and houses too.

Ant. What impossible matter will he make easy next?

Seb. I think he will carry this island home in his pocket and give it to his son for an apple.

Ant. And sowing kernels of it in the sea, will bring forth more apples.

Gon. [having pondered] Aye.

Gonzalo, who we are told in the exposition was the one man who aided the exiled Prospero, is described by the men who mock him as a builder, a planter of seeds. It is true that he is a comic character; much of what he says is ridiculous. But the desire for order in a world governed by change is, to an extent, ridiculous. Prospero lives on an enchanted island where his word is law. Gonzalo lives in a world of mutability, governed by agents of disorder, like Antonio. His dream of order in such a world is bound to seem ridiculous. It is significant, however, that Gonzalo is made to long for the return of a golden age.

. . . treason, felony,

Sword, pike, knife, gun or need of any engine

Would I not have; but Nature should bring forth

Of its own kind all foison, all abundance

To feed my innocent people.

⁴ E. C. Pettet, *Shakespeare and the Romance Tradition* (New York, 1949).

Preposterous as it is, his account of an ideal kingdom makes its point. His fantasy is, at least, constructive; the chaffing of Antonio and Sebastian, destructive. There are two tests provided in the play that distinguish the advocates of order from the agents of disorder: obedience to laws governing political order, and obedience to laws governing personal, emotional order.

The emphasis that Prospero puts upon chastity and the sanctity of marriage has been interpreted as an indication that this play is a kind of elaborate fertility rite, or that a new, more mature love relationship is being considered here. But the love of Ferdinand and Miranda, as love, is unimportant. The lovers hardly come alive as characters, there is little actual wooing involved, and since we know from the beginning that Prospero approves of the match, suspense plays no part in our reaction to the love affair. But why should Prospero impose the rather meaningless task of log-carrying upon Ferdinand, and why should he be so insistent in urging the lovers to be chaste until the marriage ceremony is performed? Surely in comedy or romance the audience takes for granted that the lovers will be chaste until the wedding day. If there were to be some conflict involved, some reason to suspect that they would break, or at least be tempted to break, their promise to Prospero, this would be sufficient reason for the emphasis that he puts upon their vow of chastity. But Ferdinand and Miranda are so obviously chaste, so obviously obedient, that one questions why the issue should be raised at all. The answer is that ceremony, vows, all attempts to train human behavior to order are important. Ferdinand is made to carry logs, not because log-carrying is necessary, but because he must submit himself to the discipline of a test to win Miranda. He must submit will and pride to order, and when he does, Prospero gives him Miranda as "thine own acquisition/ Worthily purchased". Chastity before marriage is necessary because it is part of the formal code to which human beings must submit that life may be meaningfully ordered. Ferdinand vows chastity in the hope of gaining "quiet days, fair issue and long life", a good and orderly existence, not wildly romantic love. He promises not "to take the edge off the [wedding] day's celebration". The emphasis is not upon love, nor upon fertility, but upon order, ritual, ceremony.

However, the emphasis is not achieved through action (Ferdinand's trial is purposely made the dull chore of carrying logs) but through contrast. If Gonzalo, Ferdinand and Miranda, with Prospero in the fore, are the creators of and submitters to a system of order, Antonio and Sebastian, Stephano and Trinculo, with Caliban in the center, are creators of disorder. Again the two qualities that distinguish them as agents of chaos are sexual intemperance and the refusal to submit to political authority. Since Caliban is the very incarnation of chaos and an active creator of disorder (as Prospero is of order) it may be well to consider him first. Kermode has said that Caliban is the natural man, unqualified for nurture and existing on the simplest level of sensual pain and pleasure. But Caliban is not just nature stripped of grace and civility, he is unnatural; he is not simply unformed nature, he is deformed. He is not only incapable of receiving form, but he is also potentially able and eager to extend his own disordered nature. To begin with, Caliban is not a pastoral figure, a natural inhabitant of the island. He is not a man at all, but is "legged like a man and his fins like arms", he is an unnatural half-man, half-fish. His very birth was inhuman, for his mother was Sycorax, a witch, and his father was the devil; he is, therefore, the

offspring of active malignancy. G. Wilson Knight has said that Caliban is part of Prospero's nature, basing his argument upon the speech at the end of the play wherein Prospero owns Caliban his. But Caliban is not part of Prospero, he comprises that element of the disordered that Prospero's art cannot reach, and Prospero claims him as a deficiency or limitation of his art. Caliban is actively opposed to Prospero's order. Prospero cannot enchant him into goodness, he controls him with agues and pinches. Caliban is a "lying slave/ Whom stripes may move not kindness". At times he can be enchanted by the harmony of the island, but only for brief moments. Prospero's order must be constantly enforced and preserved against the ever-threatening encroachment of Caliban's disorder. It is significant that it is those very bulwarks of order, temperance and obedience, those qualities which Prospero so insistently exacts from Miranda and Ferdinand, which Caliban's disordered nature resists. In the first scene in which the monster appears we learn that his past response to the ordering influence of Prospero has been an attempt to ravish Miranda. His thwarted design is the desire to "people . . . this isle with Calibans", almost a symbol of chaos threatening to overwhelm order. The idea recurs when Caliban promises Stephano that Miranda "will bring thee forth brave brood". Just as Ferdinand's obedience to order promises to reward him, after due ceremony and in proper time, with "fair issue", so Caliban's rebellion against order threatens to people the isle with monsters or drunken usurpers. This brings us to the second manifestation of Caliban's disordered nature, rebellion. G. Wilson Knight's description is apt. Caliban, he says, "symbolizes all brainless revolution such as Jack Cade's in 2 *Henry VI*, and the absurdity of the mob mentality in *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*."⁵ The whole scene with Stephano and Trinculo is an exquisite parody of the power-quest theme. Stephano's attempts at high diction, "by this hand I will supplant some of thy teeth", and "the poor monster's my subject and he shall not suffer indignity", are delightfully comic. But there is a serious undertone throughout. Caliban's mistaking a drunken churl for a god, the alacrity with which he would exchange worth for worthlessness,

A plague upon the tyrant that I serve!
I'll bear him no more sticks, but follow thee
Thou wondrous man.

But more important is the unrelenting malignancy of Caliban. Stephano and Trinculo are clowns who are drunken and silly; they can be diverted from their usurpation by the sight of a few glittering garments, but Caliban's is an active evil. He prods them to their task constantly with, "When Prospero's destroyed", and "Let's alone and do the murder first". His will is set upon the destruction of order and goodness even when he has almost nothing to gain from his revolt, for he is, after all, merely exchanging one master for another. He has promised the same service to Stephano that he had begrudged Prospero, "I'll pluck thee berries/ I'll fish for thee, and get thee wood enough". His expected freedom is illusory for he has already pledged himself to slavery. His desire then is for the destruction of order and the creation of chaos.

Just as Gonzalo represents Prospero's kind of order as it appears in the world outside of the enchanted island, so Antonio represents Caliban's kind of disorder

⁵ G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life* (London, 1947), p. 211.

as it appears in life. Antonio, like Caliban, promotes evil for its own sake. He has nothing to gain from the usurpation by Sebastian of Alonso's throne, yet he prods Sebastian into rebellion and attempted murder for the sake of disrupting order. G. Wilson Knight finds countless verbal and imagistic echoes of *Macbeth* in the scheming of Antonio with Sebastian. This scene, by recalling the tragedies and histories, achieves a seriousness of tone that is rather startling in the atmosphere of the enchanted island. The serious undercurrent that runs through the Caliban-Stephano-Trinculo scenes here breaks the comic surface, and evil for its own sake, the urge of disorder to extend itself, stands fully revealed. Of course, Prospero's magic can control this manifestation of disorder; Ariel wakes Alonso, and all the travellers are put under a spell; but this control is only temporary. As Wilson Knight says, ". . . poetic honesty leaves Antonio's final reformation doubtful" (p. 213).

This brings us to the final question considered by the theme, the limitations of art in imposing order upon chaos. Prospero is a great artist, as we have said, but he is not to be confused with God. He has limitations. In the first place, he is mortal. His great art is a power which is not constant but which is assumed and which must finally be abandoned. Prospero's humanness is revealed to us at the very beginning of the play in two different scenes. The first is that in which he is revealing his past history to an almost completely inattentive Miranda. "Dost thou attend me?", he asks. "Thou attend'st not", he gently chides. "I pray thee, mark me", he insists. A slight diminution from the great magician to dear old Daddy occurs here. But in the scene with Ariel where the mighty magician threatens the wisp of a spirit, "If thou murmur'st, I will rend an oak/ And peg thee in his knotty entrails till/ Thou hast howl'd away twelve winters", Prospero earns the name that many critics have bestowed upon him of a crusty and irascible old pedant.

But though the artist is proved a man, that does not answer the question of the limitations of his art. What, we must ask ourselves, does Prospero's art finally accomplish? It has established an ordered future for Ferdinand and Miranda; it has wrought a permanent change upon Alonso; but it has not been able to touch the deeply disordered natures of Antonio and Sebastian and it had never been able to fix form upon Caliban. Prospero's art then can order what is amenable to order, but it can only affect temporarily that which is fundamentally chaotic. W. H. Auden seems to have recognized this problem of the inadequacy of Prospero's art. At the end of "The Mirror and the Sea" he has a stanza which is Antonio's:

Your all is partial, Prospero
 My will is all my own
 Your need to love shall never know
 Me! I am I, Antonio
 By choice myself alone.

The will, the refusal to submit to order, is at the center of the evil that cannot be reached by Prospero's art.

Prospero is himself aware of the limitations of his art. The masque which has been the jumping-off place for so many of the theories that would describe the play as a fertility celebration, is, we are told by Prospero, only the enactment

of his wishes for the blessing of an ordered life upon Ferdinand and Miranda. He describes the figures in the masque as,

Spirits which by mine art
I have from their confines called to enact
My present fancies.

The masque reveals Prospero's desire for order and goodness, but his wish cannot be realized unless those upon whom he wishes this blessing themselves desire it. The masque is simply the projection of Prospero's imagination; it shows its frailty by dissolving when the great artist thinks of something else. The stage directions are quite explicit at this point. "They join with the nymphs in a graceful dance, toward the end whereof Prospero starts suddenly and speaks, after which to a strange hollow and confused noise, they heavily vanish." Prospero tells us that they are airy nothing, and as they vanish, he warns, all the endeavors of men at creation, palaces, cloud-capped towers, solemn temples are doomed to fade away. It is significant too that it is the recollection of Caliban, the threat of disorder and the coming of chaos, that drives the masque into thin air. The ordering influence of art can throw up only temporary bulwarks against change, disorder and decay. Prospero is fated, at last, to abandon his art and his enchanted island and to return to being a mere man in a world of change, facing final decay:

Now my charms are all o'erthrown
And what strength I have's my own
Which is most faint. . . .

. . . Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant
And my ending is despair
Unless I be reliev'd by prayer. . . .

Only in a world of art, an enchanted island, or the play itself, does order arrest mutability and control disorder; but art must at least be abandoned, and then nothing is left mankind but to sue for grace.

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