

Educating Prospero: Misappropriating the Author(ity) of Books in *The Tempest*

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This paper addresses the problematic function of books in *The Tempest*. It begins with a brief discussion of the character of Prospero, tracing the shifting critical attitudes to this complex character in ‘colonial era’ and ‘post-colonial’ readings of *The Tempest*. Prospero’s inconsistencies, and those of other characters in the play, are deemed in part to be the result of their reading: the literary currency of their (ancient and contemporary, ‘local’ and globalising) Mediterranean world. Similarly, it is argued, the contents of Prospero’s books – the ideologies informing them and informed by them – have been used to justify and perpetuate the process of colonisation. By contrast, Shakespeare’s play-world (considering the wider Renaissance context of the play’s composition) is seen to offer a critique of the printed word; his treatment of ‘book history’ in *The Tempest* in fact suggests the need for a reappraisal of the reception and dissemination of Shakespeare-as-author(ity).

The actor taking the part of Prospero has a daunting task: his character is simultaneously Miranda’s loving but stern father, Ferdinand’s brooding and persecuting father-in-law, Ariel’s severe master, Caliban’s tormenting slave-driver, Antonio’s (eventually) forgiving brother and the merciful but nevertheless manipulative rightful Duke of Milan. Here is a character fraught with apparently contradictory values, impulses and sentiments. Traditionally, critics have approached these contradictions sympathetically, praising Prospero’s conscious effort to exercise ‘my nobler reason ’gainst my fury’ (*The Tempest*, V. i. 26).¹ In the second half of the twentieth

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Frank Kermode (Walton-on-Thames, 1998). All references are to this edition.

century, however, the potentially abstract psychological and philosophical debates expressed through Prospero as a character in the text became largely overshadowed by the focus on his status as a symbol – grounded in a concrete historical reality – of the patriarch, the imperialist and, in a word, the coloniser.

The sheer force of post-colonial criticism over the last sixty years has rendered a post-colonial perspective on the play almost inevitable.² Prospero's presence on the island and his relationships with Caliban and Ariel have a representative value far beyond the 'New World' of Virginia and the Bermuda islands or the ancient world of the Mediterranean. The colonial power that he harnesses is not only applicable to Shakespeare's England but is available to be, and has been, appropriated to stand for every form of imperial project.³ *The Tempest* contains elements that are recognisable forms of the dirty history of the colonial process – a process that invariably reflects poorly on the coloniser. If, despite his all-too-human failings, we view Prospero sympathetically, how do we reconcile this view with the acknowledgement that he is a figure of oppression? It is not enough simply to accept his faults as quirks of personality, nor can we easily accept his apology as to Ferdinand: 'Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled; / Be not disturbed with my infirmity' (IV. i. 159–160). The Prospero known of old – a figure admired by Johnson, Coleridge and Wilson Knight – is, it seems, lost to us.⁴

² Jonathan Bate offers some interesting insights in 'Caliban and Ariel Write Back', *Shakespeare Survey* 48 (1995): 155–62.

³ See Barbara Fuchs, 'Conquering Islands: Contextualising *The Tempest*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 48, (1997): 45–62.

⁴ Samuel Johnson notes that Prospero ultimately 'repents of his art' because it 'was held [in Shakespeare's time] by all, though not equally criminal, yet unlawful'; he also acknowledges Ariel's and Caliban's desire for liberty, but considers such matters to be 'trifles'; see *Dr Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt (Harmondsworth, 1969), pp. 100–101. Miranda was much admired by Coleridge – he called her Shakespeare's 'favourite character' – but he was most effusive in praising the poetry of Prospero's speech and the way in which Ferdinand and Miranda's relationship is contrived; see *Coleridge on Shakespeare*, ed. R. A. Foakes (London, 1971), p. 108. Coleridge was also careful to point out that through Ariel 'Shakespeare contrasts the [implicitly more benign] treatment of Prospero with that of Sycorax' (p. 112). Wilson Knight considers Prospero to be 'a composite of

Those who still subscribe to this earlier critical tradition, failing to acknowledge a direct correlation between the role of Prospero and that of the (guilty) coloniser, are often accused of a ‘romantic’ or idealistic reading that is at best naive and at worst deliberately indifferent to important post-colonial issues. As Mark Fortier has affirmed, however, ‘the central elements of romance’ are ‘more than the weapons or self-deceptions of colonial practice’.⁵ He defines romance not as an idealistic (and therefore a delusional) form, but as a dialectical, oppositional form. The oppositions in the play – foremost among them our sense that ‘Prospero presents a divided sensibility within a single character’ – establish a dialogue that provides ‘something liberatory to be explored in the Shakespeare text itself’.⁶ Opposition implies alternatives; thus David Norbrook, in attempting to rejuvenate utopian readings of the play, emphasises its ‘libertarian impulse’ that ‘subjects traditional institutions to a systematic, critical questioning’.⁷ Events and speeches, from Prospero’s conjured wedding-masque to Gonzalo’s imagined commonwealth, are constantly framed or undermined. This prohibits a single-minded approach to the play. John Turner (who, like Fortier and Norbrook, reconciles *The Tempest*-as-romance with *The Tempest*-and-resistance) invokes Blake’s ‘contraries’ to argue that Shakespeare recognised the self-questioning and ambiguity inherent in ‘the fundamental paradox

many Shakespearean heroes’, specifically those heroes who have been betrayed or wrongfully deposed – although he also recognises that Prospero is ‘akin . . . to all princes whose depth of understanding accompanies or succeeds political failure [Hamlet, Brutus, Richard II, Henry VI]’ and is ‘in straight descent from those other impractical governors [Agamemnon and Vincentio]’. Knight nonetheless defends Prospero and his ‘monastic life’ for being ‘out of joint with a society of which he clearly sees the decadence and evil’; see G. Wilson Knight, *The Crown of Life* (London, 1948), pp. 204–07.

⁵ Mark Fortier, ‘Two-Voiced, Delicate Monster: *The Tempest*, Romance, and Post-Colonialism’, *Essays in Theatre* 15 (1996): 90–101 (p. 94).

⁶ Fortier, ‘Two-Voiced, Delicate Monster’, p. 95.

⁷ David Norbrook, ‘“What cares these roarers for the Name of King?”: Language and Utopia in *The Tempest*’, in *Shakespeare: The Last Plays*, ed. Kiernan Ryan (London, 1999), pp. 246, 250.

of theatre': it is an illusive art, a space in which 'things both can and cannot be'.⁸

If we consider the characterisation of Prospero in the light of this dual truth, it becomes clear how he can demonstrate 'sensitiveness to wrong' and exercise 'unflinching justice' – as Edward Dowden claimed on behalf of nineteenth-century critics⁹ – in the very moments that post-colonial critics have identified 'the brutality of Prospero's "reason" and its historical suppression'.¹⁰ Irrespective of these conflicting hermeneutics and the changing motivations behind critical study of the play-text, the fictional characters themselves experience a world in which things both can and cannot be; consider, for instance, the (dis)belief expressed by Gonzalo, Alonso, Sebastian and Antonio in response to the 'living drollery' of Prospero's illusory banquet (III. iii. 21–34). Yet the play's illusions do not depend solely on magic or the supernatural. As this article will attempt to show, on at least one level they occur through an acquired self-deception on the part of the protagonists. Prospero can honestly claim to Caliban that 'I have us'd thee, / Filth as thou art, with human care' (I. ii. 347–48) because he believes that he has not acted wrongly in enslaving the 'hag-seed' (line 367). He is not a hypocrite – rather, he is beguiled. He cannot understand Caliban's desire for freedom, and so acts of rebellion seem beastly ingratitude, deserving of torment and punishment (lines 370–73).

Prospero's treatment of Caliban in the final scene of the play is certainly different: instead of the threat of further rebuke, Prospero offers 'pardon' (V. i. 293). An optimistic post-colonial reading or performance of his words, 'this thing of darkness I / acknowledge mine' (lines 275–76), might discover an admission of responsibility for the destructive effects of colonisation (although the text itself does not suggest that this is a conscious act of contrition on Prospero's

⁸ John Turner, 'Reading by contraries: *The Tempest* as Romance', in *The Tempest: Theory in Practice*, ed. Nigel Wood (Buckingham, 1995), p. 123.

⁹ Edward Dowden, 'The Serenity of *The Tempest*', in *Shakespeare: 'The Tempest', A Selection of Critical Essays*, ed. D. J. Palmer (London, 1991), p. 62.

¹⁰ Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester, 1989), p. 153.

part). Nevertheless, we do observe significant changes in Prospero during the course of the play: one of the reasons that critical appreciations such as Dowden's strike us as inaccurate is that, viewing Prospero as a fully developed and mature figure of authority at the start of the play, they preclude the possibility that he will be changed and manipulated by his own author – that Shakespeare has something to 'teach' him, just as Prospero has attempted to teach Miranda, Ferdinand and others. Michael Dobson, discussing Dryden and Davenant's Restoration adaptation of *The Tempest*, suggests that the adaptation is ultimately a 'conservative' one because Prospero is 'restored to his throne . . . without ever having to learn anything'.¹¹

What, then, does Prospero 'learn'? His lengthy exposition to Miranda in the second scene of the play is, to a Machiavellian mind, an admission that he was rightly ousted from his position as Duke of Milan.¹² Books 'being all [his] study', Prospero cast the government upon his brother and 'to his state grew stranger'; his 'library / Was dukedom large enough' and he 'neglect[ed] worldly ends' (I. ii. 74–6, 89, 110). Surely these words do not describe a man who deserved to rule? Whether a Faustian lust for erudition or sheer dilettantism drove him to neglect his civic duties, Prospero – like 'widow Dido' (II. i. 96), 'Forgetful of her Fame, and Royal Trust' (*Aeneid*, IV. 280), or indeed like Aeneas, his voyaging precursor, who almost reneged on the task of founding Rome through his 'long ling'ring' (*Aeneid*, IV. 345) – was guilty of irresponsible leadership.¹³ Prospero refuses to acknowledge these faults overtly in his opening exposition to Miranda, but the most significant decision that he takes towards the end of the play, as he prepares to return to rule in Milan, is to drown his book(s) 'deeper than did ever plummet sound' (V. i. 56–7).

Along with the secrets of 'rough magic' (V. i. 50), Prospero's books contain the learning and knowledge that he used to make

¹¹ Michael Dobson, *The Making of the National Poet: Shakespeare, Adaptation and Authorship, 1660–1769* (Oxford, 1992), p. 42.

¹² For a different view of Machiavelli and *The Tempest*, see Arlene Oseman, 'The Machiavellian Prince in *The Tempest*', *Shakespeare in Southern Africa* 22 (2010): 7–19.

¹³ Virgil, *Aeneid: Translated by John Dryden*, ed. Frederick Keener (London, 1997), pp. 96–7.

himself master over Caliban and Ariel. As he has inadvertently revealed, it was the excessive devotion to books that made him a bad governor in the first instance. The eventual abandonment of his precious book(s) is a performative recognition of their detraction (as a distraction) from effectual authority.¹⁴ Yet in the play's 'pre-history' having once caused Prospero's occupation of the island, books established his power on it. If we are to understand how this occurred, some conjecture is required as to what may have been found in Prospero's books. Moreover, insofar as their owner's experience represents aspects of the colonial experience, we must consider how their contents (and the ideologies informed by and informing them) were used to justify and perpetuate the process of colonisation.

II

For an ostensibly aural and visual drama, *The Tempest* is an overwhelmingly meta-textual work, brimming with possibilities for directors. Peter Greenaway's 1991 film *Prospero's Books* provides an extravagant display of the mage's scholarly richness: Greenaway's Prospero has gleaned his magical power from a thorough study of ancient, medieval and early Renaissance learning in geography, mathematics, chemistry, biology, even anthropology. Nevertheless, to invert Pope's famous aphorism, much learning can be a dangerous thing. Prospero (ab)uses his 'Art' to control the rebellious Caliban through violence and cruelty: 'I'll rack thee with old cramps, / Fill all thy bones with aches, make thee roar' (I. ii. 371–2). During his earliest encounters with Prospero, by contrast, Caliban had submitted without being overpowered by magic: 'I lov'd thee', he says, for '[teaching] me how / To name the bigger light, and how the less' (I. ii. 336–38). This crude example of the knowledge contained in Prospero's books shows their power to subjugate. Shakespeare's brief depiction of the process of captivation (both senses of the word are apposite – 'making captive' through fascination) is, as Jean-Marie Maguin has pointed

¹⁴ Stephen Orgel notes the contemporary resonances of this act of renunciation: '[King] James would have concurred: for all his pride in his scholarship, he distrusted studiousness in monarchs – this is to the point if we wish to view Prospero as a version of the King.' *The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford, 1987), p. 21.

out, disturbingly accurate and applicable as a model of the early interaction between European explorers and the native inhabitants of what would soon become colonies.¹⁵

Various critics have commented on the connections between Prospero's books and his complicity in imperial expansion; notably, three essays in the collection *The Tempest and its Travels* (2000) suggest that this will remain a significant concern in twenty-first century readings of the play. According to Robin Kirkpatrick, '[Prospero's] proper orbit is the Book, the sacred homeland of the Renaissance, from which derives the power to rule all lesser territories.'¹⁶ This power derives not only from the provision of the means by which to dominate, but also from the motivation for domination: confidence in, and assuredness of, the merit of the colonial enterprise. Jerry Brotton infers that, insofar as 'the books . . . would undoubtedly have included some of the greats of the classical world, which allow Prospero a heightened understanding of his position in relation to space and geography', such a 'classical topography' could be used to 'legitimise' expansionist action.¹⁷ The claims to objective authority made by scientific learning are fused with the necessarily subjective – but no less persuasive – domain of the poet to create self-perpetuating ideologies of imperialism. As Barbara Mowat suggests, however, the conscious (and, she argues, unique) intertextuality of the play brings these ideologies into question. Virgil's epic *Aeneid* has long been recognised as a literary antecedent to the voyage genre in which *The Tempest* can be placed: it is an archetypal glorification and justification of imperial conflict. The *Aeneid*, like the mythical *Odyssey* and *Argonautika*, or the historically based tales of Alexander's celebrated conquests, formed the 'larger world context' in which 'the expansionists of Shakespeare's day placed their own yearning for an English empire as they looked into

¹⁵ See Jean-Marie Maguin, 'The *Tempest* and Cultural Exchange', *Shakespeare Survey* 48 (1995): 147–54.

¹⁶ Robin Kirkpatrick, 'The Italy of *The Tempest*', in *The Tempest and Its Travels*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman (London, 2000), p. 88.

¹⁷ Jerry Brotton, 'Carthage and Tunis, *The Tempest* and Tapestries', in *The Tempest and Its Travels*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman (London, 2000), pp. 132–33, 136.

the past and to distant lands for examples of proper national expansion'.¹⁸

At this point we may turn to consider the speculation surrounding the creation and location of *The Tempest*. The imprecise geography of an island that is both Mediterranean and part of the New World also confuses its temporal setting: we cannot ground the action in history. Some of the characters have been identified as belonging to fifteenth-century Italy, yet one imagines they would be more comfortable on the streets or in the courts of early modern England.¹⁹ Shakespearean anachronisms are as exhilarating as they are enigmatic, but they nonetheless increase the difficulty of grasping the implications of intertextual resonance. William Strachey's report on the shipwreck of the *Sea-Venture* contributes to *The Tempest* as much as ancient screeds – a textual manipulation in which author and audience collude in their awareness of the allusion.²⁰

At times, the literary references begin 'breaking through "the surface of the play"': the characters themselves, within their created reality, consciously participate in the intertextual games.²¹ Demonstrating familiarity with the mythology of the *Aeneid*, Sebastian, Antonio, Adrian and Gonzalo joke about 'Widow Dido' (II. i. 73–99). It is a commonplace of *Tempest* criticism that Ferdinand's 'Most sure the goddess' (I. ii. 37) is quoting Virgil's 'O dea certa' (*Aeneid* I. 327). It has also been suggested that Prospero's control over the fate of 'the King and 's followers' (V. i. 7) recalls the divine wrath of Zeus, Poseidon and Aeolus, stirring up sea storms or plaguing miscreants with harpies. Although Mowat discusses this evocation, she neglects the possibility that the well-read Prospero is consciously styling himself on the vengeful deities of the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* or the *Argonautika*. This possibility adds an ironic dimension

¹⁸ Barbara A. Mowat, ' "Knowing I loved my books": Reading *The Tempest* Intertextually', in *The Tempest and Its Travels*, ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman (London, 2000), p. 35.

¹⁹ See Frank Kermode's introduction to *The Tempest*, p. lxix.

²⁰ See Strachey's 'A True Reportory of the Wreck and Redemption of Sir Thomas Gates, Knight, upon and from the Islands of the Bermudas', in *A Voyage to Virginia in 1609*, ed. Louis B. Wright (Charlottesville, 1964), pp. 4–14.

²¹ Mowat, 'Knowing I loved my books', p. 30.

to Mowat's argument – that the partial resemblance serves only to emphasise by contrast, in light of his changing roles from victim and sea-voyager to persecutor and pardoner, Prospero's palpable human frailty – for perhaps Prospero realises that the classical comparisons diminish his status. The lengthy speech preceding his announced decision to 'abjure' the 'so potent Art' that is also 'rough magic' (V. i. 50–51) is a well-documented borrowing from Ovid: the (Sycorax-like) witch Medea's incantation. There was no doubt also a copy of the *Metamorphoses* in Prospero's library.

III

Different kinds of 'mythologies' inform the way that other characters think and therefore speak. Alden and Virginia Mason Vaughan have attempted to assess the ways in which the figure of Caliban has been creatively reconstructed in the European imagination. Writing about the first encounter between the 'lads' (V. i. 255) of Alonso's company and Caliban, the 'monster of the isle' (II. ii. 66), they suggest that,

Trinculo and Stephano describe him as a monster because they have heard so many travellers' tales of grotesques. When they are shipwrecked on a desert island, they find (they think) what Renaissance tales and romances have led them to expect.²²

If, as David Norbrook claims of *The Tempest*, 'when characters project an image of a new world they cannot escape the conceptual apparatus they have brought from the old', this ideological stubbornness is due in no small part to books, which both create and are used to perpetuate certain fixed notions.²³ The power – the authority – that literature holds over its reader, however, is inherently problematic. Ultimately, as useful as Mowat's essay is in considering

²² Alden Vaughan and Virginia Mason Vaughan, *Shakespeare's Caliban: A Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1991), p. 78.

²³ Norbrook, 'What cares these roarers', p. 252. Consider also Marx' description – in a revolutionary context – of those who 'in the creation of something which does not yet exist . . . timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow the names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language.' See Karl Marx, 'The Eighteenth Brumaire', in *Surveys from Exile*, ed. D. Fernbach (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 146–7.

the complex layering of intertextuality within *The Tempest*, she fails to acknowledge the logical conclusion of her argument: if the literary allusions within the play are not only multi-vocal but ‘rhetorically oppositional’, then none of them can be exclusive or authoritative.²⁴

The best-known extended ‘borrowing’ in the play is found in Gonzalo’s commonwealth fantasy (II. i. 143–51: echoing Florio’s translation of Montaigne’s essay ‘Of the Caniballes’). A more detailed examination of Montaigne’s self-conscious position as Renaissance writer may reveal much about Shakespeare’s own attitude. Although Montaigne suggests that his traveller’s source is reliable – more so, indubitably, than Stephano and Trinculo’s – he remains characteristically sceptical. On this occasion, however, the subject of his scepticism is ‘the [writing] of the ancients, who obviously did not know anything’.²⁵ How can we invest any faith in Plato’s imagined Republic if he was evidently unaware of real ‘republics’ entirely different from those he knew? Montaigne’s humanism is not based on ‘the very conceptions and yearnings of philosophy’, nor the presumed knowledge of past generations, as would have been recorded in Prospero’s books. Moreover, as Montaigne wrote elsewhere, works of literature ‘have several senses and several ways of being understood’; the multiplicities implicit in the hermeneutical process should, therefore, encourage a healthy distrust of the written word.²⁶ M. A. Screech is persuaded by Montaigne’s work (and here, I would argue, he may equally be describing Shakespeare) that his ‘moral interests were based more on experience than on books’.²⁷

With his disdain for certain misperceptions on the part of classical poets and historians, Montaigne was by no means the first to recognise that there is more than one interpretation to any told story. Keeping in mind the central place of the *Aeneid* in *The Tempest*, it is important to consider Howard Felperin’s assessment of their relationship:

²⁴ Mowat, ‘Knowing I loved my books’, p. 35.

²⁵ Michel de Montaigne, ‘On the Cannibals’, in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London, 1991), p. 232.

²⁶ Montaigne, ‘On Books’, in *The Complete Essays*, p. 460.

²⁷ M. A. Screech, Introduction to ‘On Glory’, in Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, p. 702.

The Virgilian epic of the founding of Rome as the hard-won outcome of divine conflict and of human displacement, suffering, and sacrifice – for all its argument of celebration – is a vision of history as essentially tragic, as instinct with ‘the tears of things’ and pervaded by mortality and loss. . . . This tragic sense of history, quintessentially Virgilian, is never very far away in *The Tempest*.²⁸

Implicit in the comparison made by Felperin is a sense that great writers recognise both the permanent and the evanescent as implicated in the process of reading and writing literature. Empire builders, although they may not be aware of this flux, are certainly not immune to it. Even if they leave an enduring legacy, their empires cannot last; *sic transit gloria mundi*. Prospero’s Mediterranean was strewn with the ruins of the ancient world to remind him of this. In contrast, as Blake Morrison imagines in his novel *The Justification of Johann Gutenberg*, the vision that inspired the invention of the printing press was a challenge to uncertainty and transience: ‘With books it is different. A book can be reborn. . . . Buildings fall, statues crumble, canvasses tear, music is gone in an instant . . . a book need never die.’²⁹ Prospero lists ‘gorgeous palaces’ and ‘solemn temples’ with all that ‘shall dissolve’ (IV. i. 152–4). It might seem, then, that Prospero’s books stand in condescending opposition to the ‘insubstantial pageant’, more durable and therefore more valuable. The corollary is, however, that words in print (unlike dramatic presentation) are accessible for an indefinite period, potentially long after they have lost what might be termed their ‘ideological currency’.

Robert Egan, in *Drama within Drama: Shakespeare’s Sense of his Art*, provides a fascinating assessment of the wedding masque in *The Tempest* in terms of its abrupt disintegration: ‘The product of Prospero’s art, having failed to acknowledge or come to terms with things as they are, cannot endure in the presence of that reality.’³⁰ This

²⁸ Howard Felperin, ‘Political Criticism at the Crossroads: The Utopian Historicism of *The Tempest*’, in *The Tempest: Theory in Practice*, ed. Nigel Wood (Buckingham, 1995) p. 53.

²⁹ Blake Morrison, *The Justification of Johann Gutenberg* (London, 2000), p. 148.

³⁰ Robert Egan, *Drama within Drama: Shakespeare’s Sense of his Art* (New York, 1975), p. 108.

failure has serious moral implications and is, in part, analogous to the myopia of colonialism; again, the imperial imagination underlying the masque is forcefully questioned when it is inverted on the Shakespearean stage, but such imposition is more easily suppressed on the Folio page. Egan suggests that Prospero's 'moral system ignores and is clearly at odds with a large sector of human reality' – just as the colonial enterprise has historically depended upon a moral system of 'othering' – and for this reason,

the artistic embodiment of that system fails to establish a viable connection with reality . . . Prospero has set himself a greater goal than the depiction of an ideal; he means his art to encompass and directly influence reality. . . . [H]e has drawn no distinction between the cosmic scheme of the masque's world and that of the world outside it. . . . The failure implied in this premature termination of the masque is painfully evident to [him].³¹

For Shakespeare, a far more accomplished dramatist than Prospero, the unbridgeable gap between performance and reality does not constitute a failure. Rather, it hints at a profound truth, which can be understood once we accept that The Globe is 'the great globe' – and that its actors, no less than the characters they portray, 'are such stuff as dreams are made on' (IV. i. 156–7). The self-conscious impermanence and artifice of the stage is more true to life than the artificial permanence offered by the book. 'Shakespeare's sense of his art', moreover, is predisposed to avoid the kind of one-dimensional interpretation of literature that can be so dangerous: the nature of dramatic dialogue is multi-vocal, like the 'contraries' of romance or the 'several ways of being understood' demanded by Montaigne. Finally, whether or not Gonzalo knows that he is quoting Montaigne, and whether or not the audience is sufficiently familiar with Montaigne to recognise the quotation, the structure of dramatic form allows Shakespeare to bring the 'commonwealth' fantasy into question: Gonzalo's 'No sovereignty' is met by Sebastian's 'Yet he would be king on't' (II. i. 152).

³¹ Egan, *Drama within Drama*, p. 109.

IV

Shakespeare critiques Montaigne just as Montaigne censures Plato. The great minds of antiquity, likewise, questioned the authority of authorship – of the subjective imagination – and the flawed reconstruction of reality in works of fiction. Plato would have had poets and playwrights ousted from his Republic because ‘their art corrupts the minds of all who hearken to them, save only those whose knowledge of reality provides an antidote’.³² The laws that Aristotle described in his *Poetics* limit the innovation of the author within ‘pre-established systems, rules or conventions’.³³ Richard Waswo proposes that, in turn, many Renaissance scholars challenged classical notions (such as the Platonic model of language as imitation) and reached conclusions comparable to those of post-structuralist theorists who proclaim the ‘Death of the Author’. The renewed interest in classical thought was accompanied, however, by the well-documented revolution that followed Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press and the proliferation of the printed word. Despite ancient and contemporary sceptical voices, the authority of the immortal book was conferred on poets and philosophers alike.

The anachronistic elements in *The Tempest* suggest that it may be seen to span a period of over a hundred and fifty years: the very years in which the printed book became a widespread commodity. On the one hand, Prospero is a product of the Italy of the *rinascita* – the fifteenth-century revival of Petrarch and his successors, ‘the first born sons of modern Europe’ – which, according to Elizabeth Eisenstein and many other book historians, ‘came to Italy before printing was developed’.³⁴ On the other hand, he is a bibliophile who has been influenced by the power of the printed word – and ‘it is a “neologism” to use the term “man of letters” before the advent of printing’.³⁵ Here

³² Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Richard Sterling and William Scott (New York, 1985), p. 285.

³³ Sean Burke, *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern* (Edinburgh, 1995), p. 6.

³⁴ Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1983), p. 110.

³⁵ Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution*, p. 100.

Eisenstein is referring to the seminal work of Henri-Jean Martin and Lucien Febvre, *L'apparition du livre*, an assessment of the increasingly dominant role that books played in every aspect of early modern European life. One of the conclusions that Martin reaches (perhaps in too celebratory a tone for some readers) is especially relevant here:

Almost contemporary with the invention of the printing press . . . other great 'discoveries' rapidly enlarged the horizons of the world known to Western man. These discoveries were geographical and with them a new epoch began in European history, as Europeans struggled to master the expanses of land and sea which opened up in front of them. They entered into relations with worlds previously unknown to them, or only glimpsed through more or less legendary accounts. The epoch which begins with these discoveries has yet to come to an end, and throughout it Western civilisation has acted to transform the rest of the world. In this process of transformation the printing press has had its own role to play.³⁶

Prospero represents precisely this interplay between the expanding realm of the book and the colonial process. Through him, Shakespeare the playwright was able to explore and question the Renaissance learning that Shakespeare the scholar had inherited – and to which he would contribute.

Martin joyfully depicts scenes from early book and printing fairs, such as that in Frankfurt, where scholars and book merchants took centre stage, in their enthusiasm literally pushing aside players from travelling companies who had come to ply their trade; he suggests that Shakespeare himself would have found it a fascinating sight. Fascinating, perhaps – but also disappointing, insofar as it was a manifestation of a broader process. At his death, Shakespeare could not have foreseen the closure of the theatres during the civil war; it is unlikely he anticipated the publication of the 1623 Folio collection, nor the enormous consequences of his becoming a printed author. It seems that the Restoration's version of a Prospero who had nothing to 'learn' marks the beginning of a process whereby the self-conscious

³⁶ Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, trans. David Gerard (London, 1977), p. 207.

and self-critical dialogue/dialect in Shakespeare's plays (the romantic 'contraries' of Fortier and Turner) was increasingly suppressed.³⁷ Shakespeare, in book form, became appropriated into the institutions of authority and, as an icon of cultural capital, complicit in the imperial process. If an English Prospero had been cast out of London/Milan 200 years after Shakespeare's death, Gonzalo would undoubtedly have furnished him with a copy of the *Complete Works* – companion and inspiration to the explorers and governors of the Victorian Empire, for whom (in Stephen Greenblatt's words) 'Shakespeare's theatre had become a book'.³⁸

Not just *a* book, but *the* book. This idolatry is all the more unfortunate given that even those poetic works produced by Shakespeare with a possible view to the press, such as the sonnets, hint at the limitations of the printed word. Most readers remember only claims to immortality: 'So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee' (Sonnet 18); 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme' (Sonnet 55). Yet these declarations are brought into question in other sonnets that 'monumentalise' their subject, undermining the effect by amplifying the imagery of ruin and deterioration (see Sonnets 60–64), encouraging an acceptance of the ephemerality of poetry and a meta-mimetic awareness: a wariness of words-as-representation. Howard Felperin calls the language of the sonnets 'unstable, polymorphous, and perverse'.³⁹ Authors are not always reliable authorities; in Sonnet 17, Shakespeare foresees '[t]he age to come' which would say that 'this poet lies'.

We have seen that, although the ready availability of books for critical re-reading, evaluation or interpretation ought to foster in the reader a suspicion of any absolutism or polemical purpose, it also creates a space for the manipulation of meaning towards a particular

³⁷ See also Dobson, '“Remember / First to possess his books”: The Appropriation of *The Tempest*, 1700–1800', *Shakespeare Survey* 43 (1991): 99–108.

³⁸ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearian Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford, 1988), p. 163.

³⁹ Howard Felperin, *Beyond Deconstruction: The Uses and Abuses of Literary Theory* (New York, 1985), p. 195.

end. Felperin suggests that in *The Tempest*, ‘the great monologue [IV. i. 151–8] seems to grasp . . . that *no one owns anything* and *never did own anything*: the condition of death or apocalypse or utopia’.⁴⁰ Discussing the indistinct geography of the play, Crystal Bartolovich infers that this ‘nowhere’ in fact ‘encourages the imagining of *anywhere* as one’s own proper place’.⁴¹ Such philosophical abstractions might be misused to provide a retrospective (and regressive) justification for colonisation: what could be wrong with taking over land that does not ‘belong’ to anyone? In this light, Karl Mannheim’s reflection on the limitations of Renaissance bibliophilic scholarship serves as an important caveat to the twenty-first century literary academy: ‘The secluded study and dependence on printed matter affords only a derivative view of the social process.’⁴²

In a post-colonial age, critics who ignore Caliban’s insistence that ‘this island’s mine’ (I. ii. 333) risk complicity with Prospero the coloniser. Alternatively, critics who identify with Caliban’s desire to ‘possess [Prospero’s] books’ (III. ii. 90) and who would ‘re-appropriate’ *The Tempest* may make the mistake of identifying Prospero’s ideologies with those of his creator. Shakespeare as *playwright* recognises the problematic authority of the book. Prospero had initially wished to pass down the ‘knowledge’ inscribed in his books to Miranda, an endowment that would have perpetuated the process of misreading them. It is important, then, that we – as both readers and spectators – remain cautious when encountering the dogmas (inherited and imprinted) that separate us from Shakespeare as *author*.

⁴⁰ Felperin, ‘Political Criticism at the Crossroads’, p. 57.

⁴¹ Crystal Bartolovich, ‘“Baseless Fabric”: London as a “World City”’, in *The Tempest and Its Travels*, p. 18.

⁴² Cited by Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution*, p. 101.

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