

Learning to Feel: Self-Discovery and the Quest for God in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

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Abstract

This essay interprets Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* as a forum for the re-assessment of established ideas about self and God. It examines the process by which several (but not all) characters move from a stance of self-centered disregard for others to a commitment to society and its moral standards. Learning to feel, this is to say, experiencing the emotions that are triggered by the fear of death, is described as the play's key to the portrayal of characters that develop into responsible members of society. Referring to the tradition of the Logician sublime, this essay argues that *The Tempest* dramatizes deeply unsettling emotions as important experiences that guide the individual on the journey towards self-discovery and a more personal relationship with God, which were important concerns at a time when religious ideas of certainty were crumbling and had to be replaced by new epistemologies and new ideas about the self and its place in a metaphysical account of the world.

Introduction

When Psalm 107 seeks to strengthen the bond between humankind and God it admonishes its readers to "praise the Lord for his goodness" (107.1) and his "loving kindness" (107.43), explaining that times of hardship bring the believers closer to God. It offers an evocative description of a storm at sea to argue that mortal danger brings about a first-hand experience of the Lord's presence: "They that go down to the sea in ships that do business in great waters; These see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep. For he commanded, and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waters thereof. They mount up to heaven, they go down again to the depths: their soul is melted because of trouble. They reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end. Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he brunet them out of their distresses. He market the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then they are glad because they be quiet; so he brunet them unto their desired haven." (Psalm 107.23-30)

I have quoted this passage at length because this account of the life-changing experience of a storm reads like a summary of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. So much so that it is conceivable, that Shakespeare had this passage in mind when he devoted his last play to studying an experience of profound reorientation. Regardless of whether his readers and spectators are reminded of this passage, its description of a tempest calls to mind the finite nature of human life and raises questions about divine influence. As a moment of crisis, a tempest forces its sufferers to abandon all sense of control and hence enables a new understanding of self and world. However, this does not mean that everyone will take this opportunity.

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When Gonzalo comments at the end of the play that it was an experience when “all of us ourselves [found] / When no man was his own” (5.1.212-13),² he fails to grasp that this statement does not apply to everyone, notably excluding Caliban but also disregarding the comic traitors. In spite of these exceptions, self-discovery features as a major concern of the play. The dramatic plot suggests that insight into the nature of self and world is enabled by a confrontation with death. By portraying characters who either think that they are about to die or believe their loved ones to be dead, *The Tempest* explores fantasies and speculations about the ultimately unknowable space beyond the boundary between life and death. The characters that experience the vicinity of death are forced to confront their own ideas about the existence of a god and other forces that might negotiate between humankind and eternity. In any event, it is throughout impossible to say whether the theatrical spectacle is meant to render the concrete conditions of an enchanted island, as they are experienced by those who set foot on it, or whether we are witnessing the projected fantasies of individual characters.

Any experience that is associated with ideas of death and dying elicits powerful emotions. The meteorological and psychological phenomenon of the tempest is therefore well suited to studying the feelings associated with the idea of God. But there is a vast difference between feelings, as embodied responses to the world, and their expression in verbal or other forms of language. On the one hand, we are dealing with physical responses, experienced in preverbal fashion and, on the other hand, we are dealing with expressions that have translated pre-conscious phenomena into language. It is only after feelings have been the subject of linguistic reflection that it becomes possible to comprehend the origins and ramifications of these physiological responses.³ The focus of this essay is on the metaphorical and allegorical imagery which makes it possible to communicate emotional experience. The use of language makes it possible to express uniquely individual responses, but contextualizes these experiences in the conventional expectations about when it is appropriate to have particular emotions, such as fear, anger and joy. This creates a contradiction that forces us to re-think the influence of language and representation.

An aesthetic theory that had long dealt with literature's possibility of studying powerfully moving experiences is the sublime. Although it does not purport to be a theory of emotion, it similarly concentrates on language, or rhetoric, as an instrument for eliciting particular emotions. As a discourse that characterizes experiences of uncertainty, Longinus is particularly interested in literary portrayals of extreme danger. Since responses to danger change along with the philosophy and beliefs of different ages, the early modern sublime became a literary aesthetic that explored the ramifications of changing ideas about divine assistance and protection. In the words of Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, a completely new self-understanding was called into existence by the “change from an epistemology based in theological belief and debate to one in which man must find from within himself the grounds of knowledge.”⁴ Exploration of self is hence closely linked to a quest for God, as the instance that empowers and limits the self's sphere of influence.

This essay concentrates on the role of emotion in *The Tempest*, arguing that the play is structured around a trajectory from knowing to feeling. The most important events of the play are occasions when a number of key characters find themselves (or simply find out more about themselves) by means of experiencing intense emotions. The tempest, which shakes them to the roots of their being, enables a learning journey of those who struggle to acquire the repertoire of emotions considered appropriate to their social role.

²All references to the play are to *The Tempest*, eds. Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Mason, *The Arden Shakespeare*, London: Cengage Learning, 1999.

³Owing to the difficulty to differentiate between “feeling”, “affect” and “emotion”, even leading neuroscientists use the terms quasi-synonymously. In this essay I am following Lisa Blackman and John Cromby and use the term “feelings” when referring to physiological responses and “emotions” and “affects” in order to describe the emotional responses after they have entered the realm of linguistic representation and communication. Cf. Blackman and Cromby: Introduction to *Affect and Feeling*, a special issue of *Critical Psychology* 21 (2007), pp. 13-14: “feelings [are] embodied states that may be shot through with discourse, and indeed exist in a dialectical relationship with it, but are nevertheless not reducible to language.”

⁴Andrew Ashfield and Peter de Bolla, “Introduction”, *The Sublime: A Reader in British Eighteenth-Century Aesthetic Theory*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 1.

On the whole, there is a trajectory towards reconciliation, but when the play explores the complexities of affects and passions; it also raises questions that endanger the idea of a peaceful conclusion. Much depends on whether a production reinforces the interpretative line of romance. The impossibility of deciding on the true intent of the text confronts us with the possibility that the play may be interpreted along radically divergent lines. Gonzalo's optimism, for example, is not only openly ridiculed by some characters but his naivety also questions his announcement that we are about to witness a happy end. While the play indicates awareness that it is never possible to be absolutely sure whether a positive solution may not ridicule too simplistic expectations, it does not dismiss the possibility of successful self-discovery, either. As David Lindley argues, *The Tempest* is one of Shakespeare's great experimental plays precisely because it challenges us to accept the simultaneous presence of radically divergent strands of interpretation.⁵

Prospero's Feelings

Prospero speaks almost thirty per cent of the lines of *The Tempest* and indeed is one of the most domineering characters of Shakespeare's dramatic work.⁶ In combination with his manipulating activities, his extraordinary physical presence has given impetus to the idea that he should be read as the creative originator and stage director of the play. According to the fiction of *The Tempest*, his mind is the origin of the meteorological and psychological disturbances that set the scene for the discussion of public and private relations that have gone wrong: tyranny, rebellion, treason and witchcraft. But the same tempest allows for the budding of romantic love, loyalty and mutual attachments which assert themselves against a veritable axis of evil.

Owing to the play's opening emphasis on Prospero's superhuman power, it is not surprising that postcolonial and feminist criticism has identified him as the epitome of the colonizer and tyrant who wields absolute power over his subjects and family.⁷ The idea that he is vastly superior to his dependents is emphasised from his first appearance, when he treats his daughter as if she was an instrument of his making without a will of her own. Her warm-hearted and empathetic response to the suffering of the victims of the shipwreck stands in stark contrast to Prospero's emotional distance. It is true that she does not know that the ship carries villains but her father's endeavour to punish the wrong-doers shows little interest in the sailors who are dragged into his plot. Miranda's love for her father supports his assertion concerning the care with which he brought her up (1.2.172-74), which places Prospero in the ambit of good characters, but by lulling his daughter into sleep, even after he has taken off his "magic garment" (1.2.24), he reveals himself as a character with little respect for the will of others.

It also has to be noted that Prospero demonstrates hardly any emotion himself, but he possesses remarkable knowledge of the workings of emotion in others. That he was banished shows him to have failed as a politician. We cannot tell whether he had been unable to act on knowledge which he had long possessed or whether he acquired it subsequently. In any case, when he talks to his daughter, he displays a Machiavellian understanding of the means by which his usurping brother alienated the attachment of his subordinates:

Being once perfected how to grant suits,
How to deny them, who t' advance and who
To trash for overtopping, new created
The creatures that were mine, I say, or changed 'em,
Or else new formed 'em; having both the key
Of officer and office, set all hearts i'th' state
To what tune pleased his ear ... (1.2.79-85)

⁵For a discussion of the experimental qualities of *The Tempest* and its development of multiple strands of meaning that challenge interpretation, see David Lindley's edition of *The Tempest*, The New Cambridge Shakespeare, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

⁶Cf. Marvin Spevack, *A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare*, 9 vols, Hildesheim: Olms, 1968-80), 1.36-62.

⁷The concern with Prospero's brutal disregard of Caliban's rights led Jyotsna Singh to conclude that "*The Tempest* is considered the primary text on which post-colonial criticism first took root", see: "Post-colonial criticism", *An Oxford Guide to Shakespeare*, eds. Stanley Wells and Lena Cowen Orlin, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 499. For a critical assessment of postcolonial readings of *The Tempest*, Deborah Willis, "Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Studies in English Literature* 29 (1989): 277-89.

Although he gives “bettering of my mind” (1.2.90) as the objective of his studies, the lengthy description of a prince’s habits of granting and denying suits, advancing some and rejecting others, shows him seriously versed in the principles of ruling over people. The pun on “key”, a term that can be interpreted as a device for opening a door and a musical scale, is used to explain how an inferior is turned into an instrument in the hands of his ruler. As a matter of fact, the musical metaphor draws attention to the fact that the effectiveness of a ruler’s treatment of his inferiors depends on his skill in touching their hearts and playing on their feelings. This is to say that a sense of loyalty, or a reliable bond, can only be forged if the heart is involved. In this passage, Prospero describes Antonio, whom R.S. White describes as the truly problematic tyrant,⁸ as an irredeemably selfish character who is only interested in tunes that “pleased his [own] ear.” Lacking the will – or the power – to make sure that his principles of government please the majority of his subjects, Antonio is presented as a typical member of a courtly environment in which loyalty can only be found as an exception. In spite of his position as fairly uninvolved observer of the storms that shake up those around him, Prospero also has his passions: for example, he describes himself as “transported / And rapt in secret studies” (1.2.76-77). The context explains that his studies were aimed at uncovering the secrets of nature, embracing the precincts of natural and ceremonial magic.⁹ However, it is possible to detect another reason why he may have consulted his books: Prospero may be suffering from an inability to understand how people feel and express their feelings. So he might be consulting his books as a guide to reading the features and body postures which go with particular states of mind.¹⁰ If we accept that the “plot’s various strands are Prospero’s interventions in the other characters’ lives and psyches”,¹¹ Prospero, as stage director, also projects his own shortcomings onto his creatures. Ariel, for example, seems to regurgitate rote learning when he describes the posture of Ferdinand, offering a formulaic account of the dejection of this mourning young man:

The King’s son have I landed by himself,
Whom I left cooling of the air with sighs,
In an odd angle of the isle, and sitting,
His arms in this sad knot. (1.2.221-24)

Ariel tends to be described as a character that is not quite human and therefore possesses an only rudimentary spectrum of emotions. It should be noted, however, that his supposed inability to feel is projected onto him by Prospero: “Hast thou, which art but air, a touch, a feeling” (5.1.21). It has to be granted, though, that his mocking description of Ferdinand’s grief as “cooling the air with sighs” and his decision to parody the physical gestures of dejection come across as an indication of a conscious disregard for Ferdinand’s suffering. Still, he primarily entertains his master with an account of the consequences of his orders; revealing extraordinary sensitivity in his understanding of what will entertain his master and enacting a moment of complicity that shows up Prospero’s indifference. The play is structured around the deeply transformational experiences of several characters. We are shown the spectacle of terror experienced by the three traitors after Antonio has mockingly asserted that “I feel not / this deity [conscience] in my bosom” (2.1.276-79). When Ariel addresses them in the guise of a harpy, speaking against the backdrop of thunder and lightning, the culprits are shaken to the roots of their being because they believe themselves to be facing the Day of Judgment. Ariel’s accusation “you are three men of sin” (3.3.53) therefore leads Alonso to exclaim:

O, it is monstrous, monstrous!
Me thought the billows spoke and told me of it;
The winds did sing to me, and the thunder –

⁸R.S. White, Introduction to the *New Casebooks* edition of *The Tempest*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999, p. 5.

⁹For a discussion of contemporary preoccupations with the boundaries between natural and supernatural, see B. J. Sokol, *A Brave New World of Knowledge: Shakespeare’s “The Tempest” and Early Modern Epistemology*, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003, especially pp. 150-153.

¹⁰A historical point of reference is to emblem books, originally compiled by Jesuit scholars and later collected in Francis Quarles’ immensely popular work *Emblemes*, London: sold at J. Marriott’s shop, 1635. For a discussion of the emblem tradition, see Andrew Sanders, *The Short Oxford History of English Literature*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, p. 201. See also Lindley’s introduction to *The Tempest*, p. 6.

¹¹Introduction to Mason Vaughan and Mason’s edition of *The Tempest*, p. 14.

That deep and dreadful organ pipe – pronounced
The name of Prosper. (3.3.95-99).

Although the depth and reliability of the three traitors' conversion may be doubtful, the plot of *The Tempest* presents this scene as a moment when immoral characters are transformed into useful members of society as a result of experiencing overpoweringly strong emotions. That this formula does not always work, however, is demonstrated by the exposure of the comic traitors: Stephano and Trinculo comply simply because they recognise that they have been overpowered. In the context of romance, the young lovers, particularly Miranda, evolve into mature adults as a result of experiencing the passion of love. They learn to affect and be affected in response to their own desires, even though they follow the behaviour patterns prescribed by their society. But what about Prospero, the domineering character who definitely needs to become more responsive to the feelings of others? Interestingly enough, there is no scene or event that shows him going through a life-changing experience, unless we interpret the moment when the comic traitors disrupt the deities' blessing as an occasion that puts him in his place, revealing that he is only human. In other words, the dramatisation of his shortcomings as magician and playwright may be taken as a confirmation of his humanity: as a limitation and an accolade.

The Sublime

At this point, I want to come back to the initially quoted passage from Psalm 107. If it served as an inspiration for *The Tempest*, it clearly underwent major transformations. Still, it is striking how many of its individual components are taken up. Even drunken man features, although he has been relegated to the sphere of burlesque, so that the play's drunkards offer a comic parallel to the main plot's theme of treason. A telling detail concerns the fact that the significance of religion has dwindled after the opening scene dramatised the devotions of the crew of the sinking ship and its passengers. In the extremity of danger and distress, most of them may be at prayers but once they are on safe ground again, they think of other matters. Alternatively, it is possible to argue that Prospero acts as if he was a god. This idea is supported by the fact that Miranda's first address to her father utilises the form of prayer: "If by your art, my dearest father, you have / Put the wild waters into this roar, allay them." (1.2.1-2). This passage tends to be interpreted as an illustration that Prospero has set himself up as a god in the eyes of his daughter, and hence is taken as evidence for his hubristic aspirations. It is true that his constant struggles to retain control over magical and other forces describe a human being that aspires to move beyond the pale of human skills. However, he undeniably has magical – or superhuman – powers and invites us to speculate whether he might be more than human.

The impossibility to pin down the extent of his skills adds an intriguing dimension to the play. Considering that Prospero is a dramatic creation, rather than a historical character, it makes little sense to ask what he really is. It makes a lot more sense to stay in tune with his explanation "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on" (4.1.155-6), which amounts to saying that the critic's task is that of analysing the fantasies embodied by the play. Few would deny that Prospero is an analysis of contemporary ideas of the magician or expert in secret arts, as they were practiced by historical characters, such as John Dee. While accepting this interpretation, I want to argue that the play also embarks on an analysis of ideas about God and the powers of the invisible world. True to the commitment to studying "the stuff of dreams", it is a study of the shortcomings and weaknesses attendant on human projections of God and the sacred. It is the recognition that the imagination plays a seminal role in human ideas of the sacred that led Joseph Addison to praise the extract from Psalm 107 quoted at the beginning of the essay for its capacity to elicit a visceral sense of mortal danger. He describes it as a text that "has gathered together those circumstances which are the most apt to terrify the imagination"¹² and hence says that it is an excellent example of the sublime.

Far from eulogising sensationalist or gothic fiction, this statement deals with fiction's capacity for rendering abstract ideas concrete. An ungraspable God, who explicitly forbids the conception of images,¹³ becomes more palpable through a description of his reasons for terrifying his creatures.

¹² Joseph Addison, *The Spectator*, Saturday, September 20, 1712, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/12030/12030-h/SV3/Spectator3.html#section417> <accessed on 21 Dec. 2015>

¹³ Cf. *Exodus*, 20.4.

The underlying argument of Psalm 107 hence suggests that storms and other calamities are called into existence as an instrument of teaching humankind not to stray from the path of righteousness. "O give thanks unto the Lord, for he is good" (verse 1) is presented as the logical inference that will be made by "whoso is wise" (verse 43). What appeared as an arbitrary act of inflicting pain, so the argument runs, needs to be recognised as an instance of divine love. Addison's praise of the passage's means of "terrifying the imagination" talks about the power of linguistic descriptions to create sensory or affective experiences of God. In Addison's view, words are able to terrify the imagination because they have found ways of saying what cannot be said and by doing so generate emotions whose intensity unsettles everything that had been believed and felt before. Addison's explanation of the sublime as an instrument for eliciting strong emotions is explicitly based on Longinus. By contrast, with the Romantic definition of the sublime as an experience that breaches all that is ordinary and conventional,¹⁴ Longinus and his neoclassical followers were primarily interested in an account of imaginative, or aesthetic, experiences that gave rise to those sentiments which characterised a responsible member of society.¹⁵ Morality and appropriate standards of behaviour, Longinus thinks, are the logical consequence of certain emotions. Since literature can create scenarios that call forth lofty emotions, the sublime comes to be understood as an instrument for the refinement of literary taste. Reading is hence idealised as an important playground of the imagination because it generates elevated emotions. Not any emotion, moreover, but the kinds of emotion which characterise exemplary members of society: those who have undergone catharsis as a means of cleansing their minds or souls of everything that is vulgar and common.

Longinus, and those who followed in his footsteps, were intensely aware that creative works strike a chord in their readers or spectators. The Longinian theory of the sublime accordingly examines the ways by which language, or rhetoric, makes it possible that emotions can be shared between readers and spectators. He argues that a proper artist should possess certain characteristics because "true eloquence can be found only in those whose spirit is generous and aspiring".¹⁶ The study of rhetoric becomes an urgent concern because it provides rules for interpreting and assessing the ideas associated with particular creative innovations in poetry and other art forms. He goes on to say that "[i]t is natural to us to feel our souls lifted up by the true Sublime, and conceiving a sort of generous exultation to be filled with joy and pride, as though we had ourselves originated the ideas which we read."¹⁷

Longinus' argument about the divine origins of genuine, or appropriate, passion underlines this essay's argument about the significance of affect for a new conceptualisation of identity. Longinus says that "nothing is so conducive to sublimity as an appropriate display of genuine passion, which bursts out with a kind of 'fine madness' and divine inspiration, and falls on our ears like the voice of a god."¹⁸ The ultimate instance of appeal in Longinus' understanding of the sublime is a god. The only means by which such a god manifests himself, however, is through language: the voice of a god. Once this voice speaks through a particular character, he or she is inhabited by a god. If we apply this idea to Prospero we realise that he lost the ability to differentiate between being inspired by a god and being a god. The result of this is that he behaves like an angry god. Prospero is a complex character:¹⁹ he is "a man of moods, swinging between triumphant vindication, anger, and despair", as R.S. White describes him.²⁰

In so far as he is not just a major creator of the play's spectacles, but also the spectator of many scenes, he demonstrates parallels both to the playwright and to the reader/spectator of the play. The question how he is affected by the events of the drama therefore runs parallel to the question concerning our own abilities to change and develop – morally and emotionally – in response to reading and watching the play.

¹⁴Cf. for example, Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender and Political Economy in Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

¹⁵ Cf. Ashfield and de Bolla, *The Sublime*.

¹⁶ Longinus, *On the Sublime, Aristotle's Poetics, Demetrius on Style, Longinus on the Sublime*, introd. John Warrington, London: Dent, 1963, p. 146.

¹⁷ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, p. 143.

¹⁸ Longinus, *On the Sublime*, p. 145.

¹⁹ Compare Jonathan Bate's observation that too stringent criticism of Prospero fails "to appreciate the critique of Prospero that is built into the play;" *The Genius of Shakespeare*, London: Macmillan, 1997, p. 241.

²⁰ White, Introduction to *The Tempest*, p. 7.

Magic and the Power of Emotion

For the 21st-century critic, *The Tempest's* use of magic tends to be explained as the encyclopedic knowledge of Prospero. However, in the early seventeenth century, the term "magic" largely embraced skills which had been received from supernatural sources, notably the Devil.²¹ From whatever sources magic may have been received, it describes an empowerment that goes beyond the mere possession of knowledge. In his last essay, which he actually dictated on his death bed, Aldous Huxley argues that magic "is an attempt to establish the complete mastery of the self over everything. It is a technological device making the self all-powerful and so imitating God,"²² which is why Huxley argues that magic attempts to breach all boundaries.

With its setting outside the polity, *The Tempest* explores the borderlines between legitimate and abusive power; it also explores different types of empowerment. For example, patriarchy models power relations on the idea that the believer is a child to God, the father. Therefore, imitation of God – especially through Christ – is not only legitimate but also desirable, as long as the striving for similarity does not aspire to complete identification. Hubris and ideas of heretical transgression come into play only when the existence of a model that is imitated is denied or disregarded, so that the self is set up as an instance that wields supreme power. The result of this, Shakespeare suggests, is bad rulership, illustrated by Prospero's flawed ability to manage his plot. Prospero's lack of control is emphasised by the detail that he remembers the conspiracy in the middle of the pastoral ceremony, when the deities from classical antiquity bless the union between Ferdinand and Miranda. If it had not been for Ariel's independent forethought and initiative, Prospero could easily have been murdered by the farcical conspirators.

Prospero's attempt to hold all strings in his hands disrupts his web of control, so that he becomes a parody of the omnipotent, godlike, ruler. This idea becomes all the more prominent if we remind ourselves that power always harbours the desire to expand its reaches, which explains why *The Tempest* has attracted so many postcolonial approaches to the play's expansionist visions. Amongst earlier interpretations, there had been a consensus that its dramatic actions should be interpreted as an inner battle projected onto a mythic place where deeply human conflicts can be resolved.²³ While this essay concentrates on the struggle for a self-understanding authenticated by affective immediacy, it nevertheless does not want to lose sight of the political ramifications of the play. Therefore I want to emphasise that in addition to its overt analysis of the instability of political hierarchies, illustrated in the plots around treason and insurrection, the play shows that all processes of self-discovery harbour expansionist visions. All thematic strands of the play study power as a craving for an expansion of control over people and places. So conflict becomes endemic and peaceful coexistence remains possible only if the participants of the various conflicts curb their desires for unlimited power. This means, if they become less self-centred and learn to have emotions that benefit society. The dangerous consequences of a ruler who has not tamed his desires, or mastered himself, is illustrated when the play elaborates on Prospero's very real powers of harming others. Regardless of whether he hurts the Italian visitors by playing on the powers of their imagination or whether he makes Caliban suffer physical pain, he is not just a kindly practitioner of "white magic", who uses his art for the benefit of others. Prospero's noxious qualities come to the foreground when he raises spirits to torture Caliban, who says about himself: "Sometimes am I / All wound with adders, who with cloven tongues / Do hiss me into madness." (2.2.12-14).

Prospero also uses magic to triumph over his enemies, so that he can declare: "At this hour / Lies at my mercy all mine enemies" (4.1.263-4); and by his own account he conjured up the spirits of the dead: "graves at my command / Have waked their sleepers" (5.1.48-9). The pride with which he handles his secret skills is illustrated by the account that he sends Ariel off to satisfy trivial whims: "to fetch dew / From the still-vexed Bermudas" (1.2.228-9). That he orders his invisible helpmates around like dogs is illustrated by the literal appearance of serviceable spirits in the guise of hounds who hunt down the traitors.

²¹ James I's *Daemonologie* (published in 1597) is an eloquent reminder of the period's belief in magic as an undeniable reality. Cf. Sokol, *A Brave New World of Knowledge*, p. 151.

²² Aldous Huxley, "Shakespeare and Religion", *Huxley and God: Essays*, London: HarperCollins, 1992. Also available on: <http://www.sirbacon.org/links/huxley2.htm> <accessed on 16 January 2016>

²³ Cf. Jonathan Bate, "The Humanist Tempest", *Shakespeare: La Tempête: Études critiques*, Actes du Colloque de Basançon: Université de la Franche-Comté, 1993. Also compare: *Northrop Frye on Shakespeare*, ed. Robert Sandler, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986.

Prospero's trajectory is marked by a whole series of conflicts which cause him to use force, that is, make him resort to magical instruments in order to round up and gain control over his opponents. The most striking confrontation is between Prospero and Caliban. Their first appearance together on stage is a moment when they measure their strength. Their encounter is a ritual of aggression in which two characters perform their identities by means of demonstrating their power over the other. Caliban may emerge as the loser of the conflict but his significance is acknowledged in Prospero's preliminary explanation to Miranda:

We cannot miss him; he does make our fire,
Fetch in our wood, and serves in other offices
That profits us. (1.2.312-14)

The main task demanded of Caliban is that of carrying wood. Considering that, Ferdinand is equally forced to carry wood, critics have sometimes wondered at the extraordinary heating requirements of Prospero's simple cave. Be this as it may, it is also possible to read "fire" figuratively, in the sense that Caliban is forced to be the one on whom Prospero vents his anger, implying that Caliban has to provide fuel for the fire which allows Prospero to experience his power. As a matter of fact, it is the fire of this conflict that enables Prospero, along with the spectator, to reflect on the foundations of this master-servant relationship.

Their first encounter begins with mutual intimidations, recalling the behaviour of the combatants of an archaic battle. After Prospero has opened the confrontation with open abuse "Thou poisonous slave," Caliban retaliates with similar invective: "As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed / with raven's feather from unwholesome fen / Drop on you both" (1.2.320-24). The first phase of their encounter is marked by raw passion. However, as soon as Caliban begins to defend himself, the brutal violence of the encounter gives way to something else. It is perfectly convincing that it is Caliban's recognition of his inferiority that makes him withdraw from a battle between two magi who are calling evil down on each other.²⁴ Caliban himself explains that he has no chance in an attempt to measure his magical strengths against Prospero. When he enters into the ground of human relationships, however, Caliban suddenly has advantages. Although Shakespeare's stage directions make it impossible to determine whether Caliban is fully human, he is the one to express the most deeply human sentiments. Not only does he possess the knowledge necessary for living with nature but also he shows himself to be attuned to the magical sounds of the island: "The isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not." (3.2.135-6). Michael Neill comments that "the orchestrating power of the magician's 'potent art' is questioned [...] there are other measures that [Prospero] cannot hear: the noises and sounds, to which Caliban responds with such uncharacteristically tender lyricism, may be of quite another order than those that 'rough magic' can summon."²⁵

That Prospero's magic lacks enchantment or charm is already implied in his first confrontation with Caliban. "And then I loved thee" is the culminating conclusion to Caliban's narrative of Prospero's attempt to win him by, for example, feeding him "water with berries". Prospero defends himself against the accusation of tyranny by protesting that he used him "with humane care" (1.2.347) but, tellingly enough, he uses non-emotive terms to describe his side of the story, implying that he indeed did not reciprocate Caliban's love.

When assessing Prospero's capacity for love and affection, it is important to note how deeply moved he is to watch the mutual attractions between Ferdinand and Miranda developing according to his plan. Prospero's decision to make Ferdinand perform menial duties in order to win Miranda was undoubtedly affected by a reluctance to let her go. While Prospero uncompromisingly rejects Caliban's desires for his daughter, Prospero is nevertheless moved to watch the mutual demonstrations of tenderness between the young lovers: "Fair encounter / Of two most rare affections!" (3.1.74-75).

²⁴The idea of a duel between two magi was familiar from the Bible. Compare, for example, the confrontation between Elijah and the Prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, 1 *Kings* 18, 20-46. Stephen Greenblatt has shown that in the early struggle for superiority between Columbus's Christian party and the "pagan" natives, they mutually measured the efficacy of their beliefs. The simple force of manpower and arms became less important than the claim that their respective religion could control the natural course of events; cf. *The Greenblatt Reader*, ed. Michael Payne, Oxford: Blackwell, 2005, pp. 376-7.

²⁵Michael Neill, "'Noises, / Sounds, and sweet airs: The Burden of Shakespeare's *Tempest*", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 59.1 (2008): 36-59, p. 57.

Prospero is coaxed into forgiveness by Ariel ("if you now be held them, your affections / Would become tender, " 5.1.18-19), but the play refuses to grant its chief character an unconditional capacity for loving his fellow creatures. It is in keeping with Prospero's deeply rooted aversion to Caliban that his final address to him is prefixed with the comment "He is as disproportionate in his manners / As in his shape" (5.1.291-2). That his pardon to his wronged, quasi-adopted son is granted grudgingly reminds us that even the most cathartic experience of a (real or imaginary) tempest cannot cleanse the complete landscape of human emotions. Prospero's comment "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (5.1.275-6) has been interpreted as an epitome of his hatred of Caliban.²⁶ However, if the play is interpreted on the subjective level, as an allegorical study of Prospero's inner conflicts, we witness a moment of self-indictment in which he acknowledges his own dark side. If we follow the subjective line of interpretation, according to which Caliban represents a part of Prospero, we hear him giving voice to his inability to nurture the idealistic love of his youth, when he delighted to "name the bigger light and how the less / That burn by day and night" (1.2.336-7). Particularly with regard to Caliban, the multiple interpretative solutions subvert the possibility of formulating one single, conclusive interpretation. Time and again, *The Tempest* confronts us with an excess of thematic strands that force us to acknowledge that they slip out of our hands as soon as we try to fit them into a coherent whole.

In spite of the complications caused by the existence of multiple possibilities of interpreting the text, *The Tempest* reinforces the idea that power is an obstacle to a deeply felt experience of what it means to be human. Prospero hence promises to "break my staff" and to "drown my books" (5.1.50-57). In the Epilogue he comments, presumably after having carried out his promises, that "Now my charms are all o'erthrown, / and what strength I have's mine own, / which is most faint." At this point, he speaks for the first time as a human being to other human beings. It is in recognition of Prospero's final assertion of his humanity that Huxley observes: "We must learn to come to reality without the enchanter's wand and his book."²⁷ Huxley concludes his interpretation of *The Tempest* with the idea that it teaches us to cultivate "a mood of timelessness, of the sense of eternity." Prospero's request to be "relieved by prayer," with which he concludes the Epilogue, gestures towards a conventional Christian's focus on eternity. It also leaves us with ambiguous feelings about his ability to accept the consequences of his recognition that although he himself is the only source and access to metaphysical knowledge, he is not God.

Conclusion

My interpretation of *The Tempest* has concentrated on the close entanglements between the play's discussion of self-discovery and its attempt to redefine the psychological or emotional foundations of religious bonds. Because open discussions of religious issues were banned from the Elizabethan stage,²⁸ Shakespeare addressed them indirectly. But he leaves his readers and spectators discomfited since he tried to cover too many and too complex topics, while reminding us that religion is a topic that exceeds representation. *The Tempest* is a literary work that portrays its characters' quest for themselves, and for God, at the same time as it seeks to offer an unsentimental discussion of treason and political intrigue. It also strives towards a final moment of peace and harmony, suggesting that reconciliation is grounded in self-discovery.

The Tempest's description of a violent storm shows us that life-endangering experiences provide an ideal context for finding and redefining ourselves. By reminding his characters – and his audiences – that life is limited, Shakespeare confronts them with the need to discover how this experience has affected them: in what ways it has changed their relationships to each other and in what ways it has brought them further in their quest for God.

²⁶Cf. Paul Brown, "'This Thing of Darkness I acknowledge Mine': The Tempest and the Discourse of Colonialism," *Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism*, eds. Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994, pp. 48-71.

²⁷Aldous Huxley, "Shakespeare and Religion".

²⁸Kenneth J. E. Graham explains that Elizabeth and her ministers outlawed "any unauthorized play 'wherein either matters of religion or of the governaunce of the estate of the common weale shalbe handled or treated';" *Shakespeare and Religious Change*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 119.