CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion:
The Culmination of the Alchemical Quest:
*The Tempest* as Philosopher’s Stone

Alchemy and Transformation in the Dramas of Jonson and Shakespeare

Jonson’s treatment of alchemy is hardly subtle, although it is assiduously accurate with regard to the language and imagery of the contemporary practice of the art. As I proposed in the previous chapter, while Jonson’s depiction of alchemy seems to be unconditionally negative, there is evidence, both intra- and extra-textually, to suggest that he was *au fait* with the underlying theoretical principles of alchemical transformation. Many in Jonson’s audience, although perhaps not as intimately acquainted with the technical jargon of alchemy, would have been as immersed as the author in the milieu of esoteric symbolism and allusion, and would have been quite readily able to appreciate the various levels of meaning available in the play.

Exposed as they were to a culture of emblematic and symbolical representation, a significant proportion of the Renaissance theatre-going public would have been equally proficient in discerning multivalent references in drama less obviously ‘alchemical’. It is likely that many members of Jonson’s audiences would have had the opportunity to see both *The Alchemist* and Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* performed, as the plays were staged only a year apart, the former in 1610 and the latter in 1611. Given the general temporal and ideological contexts, these theatre-goers may have drawn likely connections between two plays treating of the world of magic and make-believe. At the risk of imprecision in attributing catholicity to an inevitably diverse audience, it is nonetheless helpful to recognise that at least
some theatre-goers would have been literate in relation to the often symbolic referentiality of drama. It seems to be with this understanding that James Bednarz asserts that:

The techniques they [Jonson and Shakespeare] evolved for mutual self-reflexivity required modes of interpretation that went beyond the formal limits of individual plays, as their discussion of self-construction helped create a sophisticated audience capable of attending to both the philosophical and personal issues involved in their debate (8).

So, while the very title of Jonson’s play immediately directs the attention towards things alchemical, Shakespeare is much less strident in his ministration of the art’s philosophies. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a neat, chronological parallelism between the alchemical stages and the phases of Prospero’s development as an individual. However, in this play, Shakespeare seems to assume the alchemical processes as a given. Shumaker makes the point that “Obviously, Shakespeare underwent an influence from Hermeticism in the sense that he introduced occultist notions into his plays … His plays accordingly testify to the currency of occultist ideas but not necessarily to his acceptance of them as true” (297). In *The Tempest*, the alchemical processes of *severatio, ablutio, conjunctio, mortificatio*, and *resurrectum*\(^1\) are bodied forth in both action and theme. We might say, then, that Shakespeare uses occult ideas to inform the progressive trajectory of the plot, without finding it necessary to make explicit associations.

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\(^1\) Contemporary alchemical treatises contain a large variety of lists of terms for the processes involved. See for example Jonson, *The Alchemist* (ed. F.H. Mares) II.iii.182-183: 

SURLY: What else are all your terms,  
Whereon no one o’ your writers ‘gree with other? 

Cf. II.v.20-25.
With regard to poetic practice during the Renaissance, Hawkes suggests that “Whereas a modern reader might imagine the poet as inventing … resemblances and imposing them upon objects that are actually different and distinct … poetic genius consists in the ability not to invent but to recognize them” (149). He goes on to draw a parallel that is very cogent to the reading I propose in this chapter. Thus, “alchemists, like poets, felt free to use symbols with a purely subjective significance” (150). This is not to suggest that Shakespeare’s symbolic representations would have been entirely idiosyncratic and incomprehensible to his audiences, because however subtle Shakespeare’s treatment might have been, for an audience such as I have described, the alchemical message would have been implied, if not apparent.

I hope to demonstrate in this chapter the accuracy of Hawkes’s observation that “alchemical images and concepts inform the writing of this period to an extent unimaginable to those unfamiliar with its technical terminology” (159). Although this statement might be more directly applicable to Jonson, I believe that it has a significant bearing on our understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest.*

Although I am wary of making direct comparisons between Shakespeare’s Prospero and actual historical figures such as Dee\(^2\) or even Shakespeare himself, I do believe that the intellectual and cultural climate was conducive to symbolic interpretations of the play. I use the plural of ‘interpretation’ advisedly, as *The Tempest* lends itself to myriad constructions and understandings. In this chapter, I will focus only on the development, or transmutation, if you will, of the character of Prospero. In so doing, I will

\(^2\) Please see Footnote on p. 243.
explore the possibility that an appreciation of alchemical doctrine can help us towards a nuanced apprehension of both character and action in the play, especially with regard to the transformation of Prospero as he progresses from the baseness of selfishness and isolation to the gold of tolerance and integration\(^3\). I will also argue that Prospero’s development provides a deeper understanding of theories of epistemology proposed in previous chapters of this thesis.

On the surface, as I have suggested, *The Alchemist* is a grandiose monument to Jonson’s undeniably vast knowledge and masterful manipulation of the external factors of alchemy. The tension between Jonson’s blatant critical satire, directed at the abuse of what we may call exoteric alchemy, and his more covert validation of the esoteric principles and theories which inform the art\(^4\), seem to me to be so perfectly balanced that it almost inevitably results in a kind of stasis in the play. This ‘inertia’ problematises to some extent the portrayal of character. None of the characters manifest any signs of development or growth. Our three main protagonists, Face, Subtle, and Dol, start out as scheming adepts who employ their ‘politically’ shrewd Machiavellian knowledge to dupe the less knowledgeable gulls. By the end of the play, these three show no sign of, or inclination towards, changing their ways. Similarly, at the denouement the dupes remain as ignorant and gullible as they have been throughout the course of the action, albeit somewhat materially worse off. Jonson’s appreciation of the alchemical theory of transformation is thus reserved for his dramaturgical practices as playwright-reformer, rather than for any intratextual dramatic portrayal. The

\(^3\) The issue of Prospero’s development, or lack thereof, has been interrogated from almost every angle in recent literary criticism, and I acknowledge that most postcolonial scholarship approaches the play, and Prospero’s character very differently. Peter Hulme offers a very useful survey of recent critical debate around *The Tempest* in his essay on ‘Stormy Weather: Misreading the Postcolonial Tempest’, available at [http://eserver.org/emc/1-3/hulme.html](http://eserver.org/emc/1-3/hulme.html).

\(^4\) Hawkes makes it clear that “Throughout his satire … Jonson treats the philosophical assumptions of true alchemy with respect, and his mockery of the greedy gulls is the sharper for this respect” (158).
transformation therefore occurs, or is meant to occur, at the level of creativity, as Jonson transmutes the base materials at his disposal into the gold of a complete and ‘perfect’ product – the play. Furthermore, as a poet with a didactic impulse, Jonson is at pains to direct his satire at the vices and follies prevalent in his society. In doing so, he hopes to transform, or at least provoke towards transformation, both the attitudes and behaviour of his audiences.

In *The Tempest*, by contrast, all the characters, with the noteworthy exceptions of Antonio, Trinculo, and Stephano, may be said to undergo manifest transformations to a greater or lesser degree. In addition to the dramatic character developments, the many alignments that have been made between Shakespeare and Prospero testify to the author’s deliberate exposition on the nature and function of art in relation to life. By depicting Prospero as artist, creator, and teacher, Shakespeare not only explores how life is transformed into art, and vice versa, but also makes a statement on how the right apprehension and use of art can contribute to the transformation of both the individual and the wider society. In *Time, Tide and Tempest*, Douglas L. Peterson explains that “art in these [final] plays is taken more broadly to include not only the theatrical art of pretending to be what one is not, but all of the various skills by which man perfects and directs his life” (34). Shakespeare, like Jonson, also investigates how language itself may be seen as a form of alchemy. While Jonson’s protagonists use language to manipulate their dupes and so transform their imaginative promises into the gold of hard cash and goods, Prospero and Miranda claim that their language transforms Caliban from a brute and ‘mute’ beast into a person with choice, volition, and an understanding of his nature as an individual.

5 I do not intend here to gloss over Caliban’s perspective on the relationship among language, knowledge and power. This issue will be addressed later in this chapter.
I would like to suggest that the differences in the respective treatments by Jonson and Shakespeare of the phenomenon of transformation stem from their different conceptions not only of alchemy, but also of self-knowledge, self-fashioning (or self-creation), and the human potential for significant change. While Jonson’s scathing satire suggests a negative or at least pessimistic view of the human condition, Shakespeare’s romantic comedy seems to set forth a more sympathetic and optimistic appreciation of human nature. Notwithstanding the wit and cleverness of Jonson’s protagonists, their dubious schemes and practices undermine to some extent our identification with them. However, we have perhaps even less sympathy for the gulls, whose unmitigated greed and almost absurd stupidity render them much less attractive than the con-artists. This, of course, is part of Jonson’s overall didactic agenda, as he expects us to reflect on our experience of revulsion towards the vices and faults of all the characters. But we are not invited to contemplate the possibility of change within these characters, or to extrapolate from them to ourselves in this respect, because they do not undergo any meaningful change at all.

Shakespeare’s didacticism, if he has anything like such a programme, seems to be manifest in his underlying belief that change is not only possible, but also that it is possible across the wide spectrum of human society, which includes the intellectual and behavioural variables epitomized by the different characters. Unlike Jonson, who brings his audiences hard up against the unromantic and often unattractive reality of mundane life, Shakespeare transports his spectators from the world of dross reality into the sublime realms of remote islands, airy creatures, supernatural masques, and frightening though artificial tempests and shipwreck.
However, it is within the context of this land of fantasy that real and lasting change is obtained⁶. Within the context of this fictionalised representation of the world, there are undoubtedly scenes of horror (or mock-horror), sin, and human ugliness; but there are also moments of beauty, wonder, and human love. This seems to be Shakespeare’s *modus operandi* – we are to take from his drama the lesson that change is possible precisely because very little in our world is either black or white: human nature is neither irredeemable nor absolutely intractable; nor is the charming naivety of Miranda totally without a degree of guile. Even the laws that govern nature – and that includes human nature – are not carved in stone, and are therefore subject to change. And it is Shakespeare’s seemingly unshakeable faith in human nature that determines, in this late play, that change, for the most part, tends towards that which is best and most noble in human beings. This does not mean, however, that what is ‘best and noble’ is perfect or without conflict. On the contrary, human beings in relationship with each other are almost unavoidably involved in interplays of power. Thus Greenblatt argues that:

Shakespeare’s play offers us a model of unresolved and unresolvable doubleness: the island in *The Tempest* seems to be an image of the place of pure fantasy, set apart from surrounding discourses; and it seems to be an image of the place of power, the place in which all individual discourses are organised by the half-invisible ruler (*Negotiations*, 158).

However, while conceding the validity of postcolonialism’s ‘guilty’ verdict against Prospero, one may grant that the island is a hetero-cosmos in which the conflicts, violence, deprivation, and injustice of human life are probed

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⁶ Jean Howard provides an explanation of this phenomenon in relation to literature in general: “Literature is one of many elements participating in a culture’s representation of reality to itself, helping to form its discourse on the family, the state, the individual, helping to make the world intelligible, though not necessarily helping to represent it ‘accurately’” (*The New Historicism*, 29).
and realigned in such a way as to allow the different elements to sustain a hopeful orientation. In keeping with this reading, Peterson proposes that:

Shakespeare, in turning from tragedy to tragicomedy, makes a decisive shift in thematic interests. He turns from the destructive power of evil to the restorative power of good … He was … seeking more effective ways of dealing with the metaphysical and epistemological problems with which the tragedies had begun to involve him. The result was a radically new mode of tragicomedy which, by appropriating the improbable fictions of romance, allowed him to celebrate the restorative power of the good and to affirm, in the face of growing Jacobean scepticism and despite all appearances to the contrary, a morally coherent universe (3-4).

Yet Shakespeare is not sanguine about the ‘goodness’ of human beings. Rather, he seems to acknowledge that ‘evil’ is very much part of the human psyche. In *The Tempest*, as in nearly all his plays, he investigates those commonplaces that seem to epitomise the less-than-good dimension of human existence. And although we are alerted to the final outcome, as signalled by the genre of romantic comedy, the play truly is an investigation as Shakespeare pushes the boundaries between good and evil. Peterson comments on Shakespeare’s treatment of the fundamental, even cosmic, opposition between good and evil:

[In] every instance generative and destructive love are contraries in a dialectic that works itself out in the action. The resolution of that dialectic … is an affirmation of the sustaining, restoring, and renewing powers of human love in a precarious world of sudden and
violent natural catastrophes and nearly overwhelming human depravity (15).

The Tempest as Alchemical Symbol

Even before we are drawn into the action of the drama, the title provides an intimation of the underlying opposition. It is easy to overlook the significance of the title, for it seems to refer only to the first scene, a small part of the entire play. However, both the title and the opening scene are strategic in that they make us, as audience or readers, receptive to the idea of conflict and opposition that permeates the play as a whole, and, paradoxically, unifies its overall meaning. Thus Peterson argues that

It is easy to understand how tempests, especially tempests at sea, come to symbolize the general turbulence and affliction of man’s lot. It is a short step from the emblematic reading of literal storms at sea to the use of such storms as emblematic of the adversity that man encounters on his voyage through life (50).

Once open to the theme of conflict, whether internal or relational, we become aware of the parallels between the tempest of the play, and the movement and processes of the psyche. For just as the teeming, boiling sea seems first to unsettle and then cast up the voyagers into a new world to evolve and mature, so too do the churning depths of the psyche disrupt and eventually hurl those hidden or denied facets of one’s being into the light of consciousness. These facets reflect and refract the light of consciousness onto the self, leading to self-illumination and self-knowledge through a process of change and growth. Barbara Rogers-Gardner seems to suggest something of this analogy in her observation that “The explorer in
Shakespeare’s time was a metaphor of the interior voyager in strange seas of thought” (79).

The importance of the tempest is recognised by G. Wilson Knight who sees its significance diffused throughout the Shakespearian oeuvre. Indeed, he is adamant that the tempest is “Shakespeare’s intuition of discord and conflict”, or even “Shakespeare’s intuition of tempestuousness at the heart of existence” (16). If this is so, then it is consistent with the assertion that “The tempest dominates and orders the action” in The Tempest (Rogers-Gardner, 89). Consequently, it seems quite likely that “The storm that rages around the island” at the beginning of the play is an obvious metaphor of the conflict within Prospero himself” (Rodgers-Gardner, 89). The tempest, then, coming as it does between the past in Milan and the present situation on the island, may be seen as an ‘objective correlative’ signifying Prospero’s psychological state within both contexts. The macrocosmic tempest at the start of the play is thus reflected in the microcosm of one individual. By means of the tumultuous storm, we are, in one sense, plunged into Prospero’s psyche in medias res. Peterson explains that:

The sense of urgency and crisis which is so strong throughout the play is the result of the particular way in which both past and future are brought to focus on the present … If the light of the future reveals the urgency of the present, it is the perspective of the past which reveals the present as climactic: an action initiated years earlier,

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7 Hulme and Sherman argue that “Since the epics of Homer and Virgil, and especially during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, islands were sites par excellence of encounters and transformations. What seemed natural on the mainland gave way, on the island, to alternative stories and new perspectives” (75). Reuben Brower, too, recognises the aptness of an island location for this play: “The island is a world of fluid, merging states of being and forms of life. This lack of dependable boundaries between states is also expressed by the many instances of confusion between natural and divine” (194).
or an occasion provided by Prospero’s negligence as governor, is now about to be resolved in one way or another (220-221).

The action that follows the opening storm is a compelling dramatization of the inner transformation of Prospero from a psychologically disordered personality – bodied forth by tempestuous and troubled nature – towards a healthier and more balanced individual. Prospero’s evocation of the past is skilfully juxtaposed with “the present business / Which now’s upon’s” (I.ii.136-137), so as to introduce the concept of psychological change⁸, by contrasting the aloof and self-absorbed reclus of the past with the relatively more other-aware father of the present. Almost the first words uttered by Prospero, when contrasted with the subsequent retrospective narrative, provide evidence of change, for he assures Miranda that “I have done nothing but in care of thee, / Of thee, my dear one, thee, my daughter” (I.ii.16-17). The other-directed concern suggested by these words is vastly different from the self-interest which characterised Prospero in Milan twelve years previously, and seem to validate Hobson’s opinion that “The progress [in The Tempest] is from egoism to altruism, and to love” (8). The change is merely hinted at here, but becomes increasingly apparent as the play progresses, and as Prospero negotiates the various conflicts, internal and external, that he encounters on his journey towards self-knowledge and acceptance of the ‘Other’.

Reuben A. Brower, in his analysis of ‘The Mirror of Analogy’ in The Tempest, suggests that change is the “key metaphor” that informs and unites “the various continuities” in the play. He explains that “Shakespeare’s most direct

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⁸ Peterson’s definition of ‘emblematic narrative’ seems to be particularly relevant to Prospero’s expository speech. The ‘emblematic narrative’, then, employs “a method of development [which reveals] a moment of crisis in the lives of the principal characters through correspondences and parallels rather than through sequential action” (217). Thus, “The present in The Tempest, viewed as it is from the double perspective of past and future, discloses the same levels of meaning that are present in the emblematic tempest scene” (223).
expression of his key metaphor is ‘sea change’, the key phrase of Ariel’s song … ‘Sea change’,” he elaborates, “is a metaphor for ‘magical transformation’, for metamorphosis” (193). Metamorphosis presupposes a process of change from one state of being to another, and it is precisely this transformation which was the motive power behind the alchemical endeavour. As has been shown, this hoped for transformation, or metamorphosis, was not necessarily limited to material substance, but very often was applied to the metaphysical realm. Hulme and Sherman, the editors of *The Tempest* and its Travels, provide a useful explanation of the relationship between magic and change, regarding both the physical and the metaphysical realms:

That ‘magic’ accounts for much of this sea-change in the play should not blind us to its applicability to actual experience in early modern London, itself a site of numerous flows and convergences, which bourgeois economics would later attribute to an (equally magical) ‘invisible hand’. Shakespeare’s play turns to a familiar and soon-to-be-anachronistic discourse - magic – to work through a novel crisis in the social order, as is typical at moments of radical disruption (25).

In relation to *The Tempest*, and to Prospero in particular, the process of metamorphosis began twelve years before the action of the play. In alchemical terms, the treachery, usurpation, and exile of twelve years ago may be seen to constitute the massa confusa, or confused mass, which confronts the alchemist – or, in this case, Prospero – at the start of his labours. The tempest metaphor is particularly apt at this point as it not only recalls emblematically the political, social, and filial confusion of the past,
but also bodies forth the psychological, or spiritual, state of the main characters, especially Prospero.9

**Severatio**, or, **Divisio**

However, before the process of metamorphosis can begin, Prospero has to be able to accept responsibility for his own part in the calamity of the past. This kind of accountability requires a degree of detachment and objectivity. Of course, the twelve year hiatus has provided a sort of ‘time-out’, but it becomes clear in his expository speech to Miranda that Prospero needs to attain a psychological or emotional separation from the vengeful bitterness if he is to progress to the next phase of metamorphosis. This inner phenomenon of detachment is symbolised in the alchemical process of **severatio**, or **divisio**. In the physical or material realm, this phase of the Great Work involves methods of distillation, or clarification, through which the pure is separated or extracted from the impure by the action of searing fire.

The act of separation may be seen to occur on various levels in the opening scenes of the play. Not only is separation evident in the whole setting of the drama, which takes place upon a magic island set apart from the rest of the world, but the ‘now’ – the present time of the action – is clearly divorced from the throng and intrigue of political and social imperatives characteristic of court life. The boatswain articulates as much in his seemingly insolent remark: “What cares these roarers for the name of king?” (I.i.17-18). Separation may also be inferred from Gonzalo’s wretched exclamation: “We split, we split, we split!” (I.i.62), as the seafarers are violently torn from what seems to be their one haven of safety in the eye of the storm. In this sense,

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9 The multireferentiality of the tempest symbol is supported by G. Wilson Knight’s assertion that the Shakespearian tempest “is not a symbol of any one thing in particular but holds rather a number of suggestions” (14).
the ship itself could be seen as a sort of projection of the old world, the
world of Milan and Naples where the old rules apply and where the status
quo remains unchallenged. For change to occur, all the vestiges of the past –
the confidence, guarantees, and certainties – have to be set aside, or
separated from the priorities of the present moment.

As king is separated from subject, and father is separated from son,
Prospero continues the theme of separation during the course of his
exposition to Miranda. It is during this verbal presentation of past events
that we come to a clearer understanding of Prospero’s disposition as it was
in the past. In light of the information we are given by the magus himself,
the ‘impure’ or immature side of Prospero’s personality became evident
twelve years before the opening of the action on the island. It would be easy
to overlook the shadowy foreboding of future catastrophe if Prospero did
not himself admit to Miranda that:

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being so reputed
In dignity, and for the liberal arts
Without a parallel, those being all my study –
The government I cast upon my brother
And to my state grew stranger, being transported
And rapt in secret studies.
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(I.ii.72-77)

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10 The following argument by Peterson provides a useful gloss on the process of separation – of past
from present – as a prerequisite to significant and responsible change: “Consideration of the past as
memory and its influence upon the future leads to the deepest concerns of the play … [There] is in the
Shakespearian view a past that is shared by all humanity and which is always manifest in the present. It
is the joint legacy of self-destroying and renewing love which we have seen variously represented in
each of the earlier romances. Each is latent in the personal present, a potentiality waiting to be realised
through choice and action” (222).
Prospero’s exposition to Miranda does not only provide the background to the present circumstances as they are dramatized in the play, but also serves to transport us, the audience or readers, back in time. Prospero’s speech thus evokes both the events and his psychological disposition at the time of his withdrawal from responsibility as ruler, and his subsequent exile. Through his words, we get to know Prospero as he was, not as he is or is becoming, although there are already intimations of a metamorphosis not yet complete. Arguing the case for metamorphosis as the ‘key metaphor’ in this play, Brower suggests that “Prospero’s narrative … tells us of the past and describes the present situation while symbolizing the quality [of metamorphosis] of The Tempest world” (185). We, as audience, are invited to observe, perhaps even participate in, this process as we follow Prospero’s potentially tragic tale. In relation to both the theme of ‘separation’ and the nature of audience participation, Greenblatt argues that “The audience’s tension … enhances its attention; prodded by constant reminders of a gap between real and ideal, the spectators are induced to make up the difference, to invest in the illusion of magnificence, to be dazzled by their own imaginary identification with the conqueror” (Negotiations, 63).

But the ‘conqueror’ in this case is initially vanquished by his own obsessive preoccupation with studious contemplation, which speaks of a psychologically unhealthy insularity. This inner-directedness may be inferred from the predominance of first-person pronouns in his account of the past. Through statements such as “my state”, “my study”, “The creatures that were mine”, “my princely trunk”, “my mind”, and so forth, Prospero conjures up his prevailing self-absorption in the past. The ascendancy of this self-interest at the expense of his responsibility to others inevitably led to an imbalance, not only psychologically, but also throughout the wider social and political spectra of Milan. This imbalance produced a vulnerability which was
ignobly, but nevertheless successfully, exploited by Antonio. Hobson endorses this reading of Prospero’s earlier disposition in his argument that “The individual, placing himself at the centre of things, asserting his private will, violates the WHOLE, disrupts the political and social order … and, striving to gain the whole world for himself, loses his own soul” (27). This idea of loss of soul is important to the present argument, and will be discussed at greater length later in this chapter.

For the moment it is enough to realise that Prospero, in his retrospective narration\textsuperscript{11} to Miranda, discloses that he had self-indulgently elevated his speculative propensities to the detriment of participation in the affairs of the government of Milan. He was in an unhealthy state of introversion, which led to a condition of oblivion that, in turn, impeded him from adequately attending to his duties as duke. Prospero’s vice of self-gratification – however studious it may have been – means that he was engrossed in purely subjective reflection to the exclusion of external realities and consequences. By not taking the objective world into consideration, Prospero himself initially made the situation conducive to treachery and revolt. The word ‘cast’ from the above quotation connotes a sense of dismissal and negligence, which, for a leader of Prospero’s stature, would almost inevitably spell ruin. Of course, Antonio was not tardy in taking advantage of the situation. But it was Prospero who left his brother free to foment the coup that led to the duke’s expulsion from Milan.

\textit{Shakespeare and Machiavelli}

\textsuperscript{11} Frank Kermode suggests that “The obvious result of this very intensive form [of narration] is to throw the whole weight of the play on to the recognition, for the preliminary disaster can only be talked about, not represented” (\textit{Critical Controversy}, 176).
An interesting correlation of this situation is to be found in Machiavelli’s *The Prince*. Robin Kirkpatrick recognises that “Shakespeare displays an interest as searching as Machiavelli’s own in the practice, psychology and play of political power” (*Italy of The Tempest*, 83). Although Machiavelli focuses on the art of war, one can also apply the following extract to non-aggressive but active participation in the affairs of state:

> [It] is seen that when princes have thought more of ease than of arms they have lost their states. And the first cause of your losing it is to neglect this art; and what enables you to acquire a state is to be master of the art (79).

It is obvious from both Prospero’s speech and from Antonio’s subsequent actions that it is the latter who is the master statesman in Machiavellian terms. Machiavelli illustrates his point by reference to the then recent history, which, incidentally, includes Francesco Sforza, who became the Duke of Milan. Machiavelli criticizes the leisurely life pursued by Sforza’s sons, and offers an account of their eventual descent from potential leaders to powerless citizens:

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12 Kirkpatrick argues convincingly for the availability of Italian literature in England at this time: “Knowledge of the Italian world would have been available through the information disseminated by merchants, cultural travellers, political propagandists, spies and exiles. Equally, the achievements of Italian literature had for generations been an open book to scholarly and passionate readers. Information and opinion may often have been distorted … [but] misrepresentation itself ensured that … the English mind had developed by Shakespeare’s time a potently self-generating and chimeric myth of Itlay” (*Italy of The Tempest*, 78).

Qualifying the negative press aimed at Machiavelli during the Renaissance and since, Kirkpatrick explains that “Machiavelli’s works – some of which by 1600 had been published surreptitiously in England in Italian versions by John Wolfe – taught, not immorality, but a realisation that in politics we should, in Bacon’s admiring words, consider the actions of men ‘and write what they do not what they ought to do’” (81).

13 In their introduction to ‘European and Mediterranean Crossroads’, Hulme and Sherman argue that “In The Tempest, Prospero’s usurping brother Antonio has furnished the most obvious example of Machiavellian cynicism in action” (74).
For among other evils which being unarmed brings you, it causes you to be despised, and this is one of those ignominies against which a prince ought to guard himself (79).

He goes on to enumerate the useful activities in which a leader should be exercised. Within the context of the following passage from *The Prince*, it becomes clear that Prospero’s downfall was almost inevitable, as he withdrew from all involvement in and contribution to the political and social life of his realm:

As regards action, he ought above all things to keep his men well organized and drilled, to follow incessantly the chase, by which he accustoms his body to hardships, and learns something of the nature of localities, and gets to find out how the mountains rise, how the valleys open out, how the plains lie, and to understand the nature of rivers and marshes, and in all this to take the greatest care (80).

It is only once Prospero arrives on the island that he is forced to ‘take care’ – or, notice – his physical surroundings, and it is ironic that he is initiated into this world of sensory rather than rational knowledge by the one person he deems base and ignorant. Yet this was not always the case. Initially, his relationship with Caliban seems to have been mutually respectful and profitable. Hobson notes that “When Prospero, the colonist, first arrived on Caliban’s island, there was a genuine exchange of knowledge and experience, and of affection, a two-way process of education …with its high degree of motivation by affection and altruistic drive on both parts” (48). Caliban himself describes the nature of their interaction on Prospero’s arrival on the island:
… When thou cam’st first
Thou strok’st me and made much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in’t, and teach me how
To name the bigger light and how the less
That burn by day and night. And then I loved thee
And showed thee all the qualities o’th’isle:
The fresh springs, brine pits, barren place and fertile.

(I.ii.333-339)

Patricia Seed, however, sees Caliban’s narrative in a less positive light than does Hobson. Thus:

In Caliban’s version of the events following the arrival of the first Europeans, Prospero masked his initial dependence on Caliban for information about the island with displays of often-physical affection. Prospero’s abrupt abandonment of the affection for Caliban has left Caliban angry and deceived, as the apparent kindness revealed itself to have been less than caring, merely a pretence of humanity in order to find out all the knowledge of the island. Once found, that knowledge is put to Prospero’s use while Caliban is confined … Once petted, Caliban now remains penned like a pig, but on a rock barren of all food (203).

One could argue the merits of either interpretation, but what is most interesting about Seed’s view and its bearing on this thesis is her emphasis on the relationship between knowledge and power, and how this affects one’s view and practice of politics.
Prospero’s ‘Machiavellian’ Magic

Hulme and Sherman introduce the consideration of magic into the play of politics and point out that quite a lot of ambiguity surrounds the depiction of Prospero as mage, for “it is difficult to distinguish between magic as knowledge, magic as metaphor, and magic as political ruse” (75). Greenblatt refers to the “potent and disturbing power of magic” in *The Tempest*, explaining that “Prospero’s chief magical activity … is to harrow the other characters with fear and wonder and then to reveal that their anxiety is his to create and allay” (*Negotiations*, 142). Kirkpatrick develops this argument, expounding on the dubiousness of Prospero’s magic:

On one view, Prospero is the descendent of thinkers such as Pico della Mirandola, who famously saw a magical power in human nature to marry the elements of the universe … On the other hand, asking whether Providence has any place at all in *The Tempest*, we may look askance at Prospero’s providential or benevolently magical actions … Is he not himself the cause of all subsequent disasters? Does it not all stem from Prospero’s original unwillingness as ruler of Milan to cultivate that *virtù* that, for Machiavelli, is the (albeit shady) ground in which liberty and honour must always be rooted? (88)

In Milan of the past, Prospero’s pursuit of occult knowledge led directly to his disempowerment as political leader. By contextualising Prospero’s previous apprehension of the nature and uses of knowledge within Machiavelli’s framework of statecraft, we can begin to understand the almost inevitable cause-and-effect scenario of his downfall. Machiavelli indicates how knowledge of the physical world, rather than the metaphysical, is vital to the exercise of political rulership:
Firstly, he learns to know his country, and is better able to undertake its defence; afterwards, by means of the knowledge and observation of that locality, he understands with ease any other which it may be necessary for him to study hereafter ... And the prince that lacks this skill lacks the essential which it is desirable that a captain should possess (80-81).

Obviously, Prospero lacked this skill as Duke of Milan. Ironically, it is on the island of exile – with only three subjects, if one includes Miranda – that Prospero begins to develop the techniques of power recommended by Machiavelli. Unfortunately, although Prospero gains this ‘skill’ of observation and appreciation of his ‘locality’, the state of harmony and integration does not last. Caliban continues his narration, and taunts Prospero with his account of the regressive course of their relationship:

This island’s mine by Sycorax, my mother,
Which thou tak’st from me …

... All the charms

Of Sycorax – toads, beetles, bats – light on you,
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you keep from me
The rest o’th’island.

(332-3, 340-5)

Consequently, despite what seems to be a promising start, Prospero’s weaknesses as a leader are replayed and accentuated in his relationship with Caliban. It is very telling that Caliban’s claim of proprietorship is never
actually denied by Prospero. Indeed, the audience can scarcely avoid an inference of guilt when considering that Prospero responds to Caliban’s claim “only with hatred, torture, and enslavement” (Greenblatt, Negotiations, 156). Perhaps it is the recurrence of a threat close to home – represented by Caliban’s attempted rape of Miranda, and, later, by his attempted usurpation with Stephano and Trinculo – that brings out the worst in Prospero. And it is this ‘worst’ in his nature that seems to reverberate with that which is “capable of all ill” in Caliban (I.ii.353). Perhaps fearing that he too – and indeed all humanity – is “capable of all ill”, Prospero reacts by subjecting Caliban to cruel and unremitting tyranny. But, just as his perverse exercise of power brought out the worst in his brother in Milan, so too does it provoke Caliban’s rebellion and hatred. As a result, the tension between them is unrelenting. Prospero is always on guard lest history should repeat itself, with Caliban rising up and overthrowing him. On the other hand, Caliban is in constant fear of Prospero’s ability to inflict hurt upon him. In order to contain what he believes to be Caliban’s ‘ill’ nature, and given his own deep-seated fears, Prospero becomes increasingly repressive to ensure his dominance on the island. But Prospero’s attempt at addressing both the internal and external tension is inadequate, for it merely perpetuates the destructive cycle of repression and rebellion.

Yet, at some level, Prospero seems to recognise that he needs to break the destructive cycle, or, perhaps, to complete the disrupted cycle of learning and growth. We know that he possesses the powers to imprison Caliban within “this hard rock” (I.ii.344), in the same way that there is substance to his threat to “rend an oak, / And peg [Ariel] in [its] knotty entrails” (I.ii.294-295). However, it is his acknowledgement, eventually, of the right of both to independence, and his release of them from the thrall of illegitimate power that distinguish Prospero’s magical art from Machiavelli’s realpolitik, for it is
once he distances himself from his “rough magic” to pursue a course of forgiveness and reconciliation that the process of transformation can continue. Kirkpatrick suggests that Shakespeare – and perhaps also Prospero – “transcends Machiavelli; and this derives from his concern with the deeply problematical question of how one human perceives another – and also of how the experience of art may bear upon that perception” (84).

Magic as Power?

Greenblatt’s reading of *The Tempest* serves to expound the relationship among perception, art, and power with regard to the meta-theatrical dimensions of the play:

[The audience’s] perception would perhaps be overwhelmed by the display of Prospero’s power were it not for the questions that are raised about this very power. A Renaissance audience might have found the locus of these questions in the ambiguous status of magic, an ambiguity deliberately heightened by the careful parallels drawn between Prosper and the witch Sycorax (*Negotiations*, 156).

While Prospero himself confirms, however unwittingly, these similarities\(^1\), one has to admit the fundamental differences between them as worked out

\(^{1}\) Compare: His mother was, and one so strong  
That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs,  
And deal in her command without her power.  
(V.1.269-271)

and:

I have bedimmed  
The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,  
And ’twixt the green sea and the azured vault  
Set soaring war …  
… graves at my command  
Have waked their sleepers, ope’d and let ’em forth  
By my so potent art.  
(V.1.41-50)
in the plot structure. Marina Warner’s explication of the distinction between Prospero and Sycorax is particularly pertinent with regards to the theme of transformation:

The contrast between the two magi of the play – the living male duke and the dead female hag – does not lie so much in polarities of white and black magic … It lies rather in the difference between metamorphosis and stasis, between a condition of continuing somatic, elemental and unruly mutation and a steady-state identity. The one is subject to the random strike of the magician’s wand, or other spells … the other is achieved by the flash of epiphanic conversion (‘Circean Mutations’, 98).

In applying this on a psychological level, it is clear that Prospero has the choice either to continue using his art to exercise illegitimate power or to marshal the disparate fragments of his knowledge to effect good. As the play progresses, it becomes more and more evident that he chooses the latter course as he acknowledges – however grudgingly – his need for the “Abhorred slave” (I.ii.351). He admits to Miranda that “We cannot miss him” (I.ii.311), or, do without him. Prospero is forced to admit to his need of that which he detests.

But his acknowledgement of his need for the ‘Other’ only occurs as his perceptions of himself, his art, and of others are transformed into true knowledge. The play charts his movement towards tolerance, both of himself and of others. Peterson proposes that the genre of romance, as shaped by Shakespeare in his last plays, allows for this development of knowledge, not only in and amongst the characters, but also, by extension,
in the audience: “[The romances] adopt a new mode of imitation … to explore the dependencies of perceiving and knowing upon faith, and require … a kind of ritualistic participation of [the audience]” (10). As suggested previously, this ‘participation’ would have been easier for contemporary audiences than for those who are both temporally and spatially divorced from the rich texture of symbolism and analogy that made up much of the fabric of Renaissance society.

Ablutio, or, Baptisma

While some in Shakespeare’s audience might have missed the symbolic significance of *severatio* in Prospero’s opening speech, most, if not all, would have appreciated the symbolism of the storm. In keeping with Knight’s view of the multivalency of symbols, one could argue that while the tempest dramatises the turbulence and breakdown of political and personal relationships, it may also be seen to intimate rituals of cleansing and renewal. Kermode recognises this paradox of the tempest. Thus, “The sea may appear to be random and cruel to these castaways, but it is the agent of purgation and reunion” (174). This reading is substantiated by Gonzalo’s amazement at the peculiar, almost supernatural, state of the castaways’ garments, despite their tumultuous immersion in the broiling tempest:

> But the rarity of it is, which is indeed almost beyond credit –
> That our garments being, as they were, drenched in the sea, hold notwithstanding their freshness and gloss, being rather new-dyed than stained with salt water.

(II.i.60-66)

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15 Peterson expounds on this theory, as it relates to the ‘working out’ of the romantic purpose: “As an imitation of an action *The Tempest* combines precept with example. It creates dramatic illusion out of the improbable events of romance to the very purpose which Prospero within the play creates illusion: it holds up to nature a mirror that reveals ‘truths’ which in the author’s view man must ‘see feelingly’ if he is to be moved to virtuous action” (216).
This ‘drenching’ analogy is further developed towards the end of the play when Prospero promises to “drown [his] book” (V.i.57). The drowning of his book is an emblematic representation of the alchemical process of *ablutio* or *baptisma*. This stage of the Great Work involves washing or whitening leading to reunion and integration. However, the significance of this ritualistic action lies not only in the ‘drowning’ but also in the ‘book’ and all that it betokens. Hulme and Sherman point out that “Prospero’s power comes from his books” (7).\(^{16}\)

It is important, however, to emphasise the distinction between Prospero’s occult power and the power that transcends even magic. It is only as he undertakes to eschew his supernatural powers that Prospero is able to engage the power of being human, with free will and agency, tempered and directed by true and humane knowledge. Peterson explains why Prospero’s occult powers are ultimately insufficient:

> As the play moves towards its conclusion, Prospero faces his most serious challenge. He must accept the fact that his art is not omnipotent. Although it has allowed him to control the present, it cannot definitively shape the future. He will finally have to be willing to surrender his power over time and the elements, and trust that those he has held captive will use their freedom well (236).

\(^{16}\) They go on to substantiate this point by explaining the often-asserted parallel between Prospero and the notorious John Dee: “The name most commonly associated with such mastery [magical power over the forces of nature] and most commonly proposed as the inspiration for Prospero is John Dee. Dee was one of the pre-eminent scholars at Queen Elizabeth’s court and the owner of the period’s largest library: with nearly 4000 books, a large collection of scientific instruments, maps and globes, and an accompanying alchemical laboratory, his library was England’s most famous repository of scientific and occult learning” (8).
It is thus a paradigm shift in his perception of the knowledge/power association that allows Prospero to experience the freedom of submission to ‘humanness’.\(^{17}\) This freedom is evident not only in Prospero’s decision to forgive rather than to avenge, but also in his changing attitude towards both Caliban and Ariel, epitomised in Prospero’s relinquishment of illegitimate power in honouring the others’ right to freedom. By the end of the play, Prospero has explicitly set Ariel free (V.i.317-318), and indicates as well his willingness to return the isle to Caliban if the latter will “be wise hereafter / And seek for grace” (V.i.294-295). It is intimated that once Caliban has “trimmed” Prospero’s cell for the final celebration after the end of the play, Prospero will depart with Miranda and the shipwrecked company. He will leave Caliban once again to be “[his] own king”. This freedom is not Caliban’s only, but also Prospero’s, for while the latter continues to brand him a “demi-devil” (V.i.272), he also has the courage to recognise and accommodate Caliban as an integral part of himself, hence, “this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine” (V.i.275-276). Greenblatt suggests that although these words may be read as Prospero’s “declaration of ownership … it is difficult not to hear in them some deeper recognition of affinity, some half-conscious acknowledgement of guilt” (Negotiations, 157).

_Conjunctio_

Apart from recognition of personal accountability, true psychological wholeness necessitates reconciliation on a broader social scale. The imminent meeting of erstwhile antagonists is evocative of the alchemical operation of _conjunctio_. True rapprochement, however, can only be achieved

\(^{17}\)“The art to which he has devoted so many years of study is limited to externals. It does not enable him to alter the fundamental nature of things. Although it affords him a means of partially controlling the present and of constraining evil, it affords him no means of altering the round of time” (Peterson, 241).
within the context of identification and empathy. Although Prospero stands apart from the other characters by virtue of his magical powers, Shakespeare is careful to convey Prospero’s humanity. It is clear throughout the play that Prospero is not always or completely in control, either of himself and his life, or of other characters and events, despite his supernatural powers. He is therefore at the mercy of Antonio's ambition in Milan; he has only limited power over Caliban, stooping to the tyranny of pinches and cramps; the fortuitous arrival of the ship, as Prospero admits, is outside his direct control; even the reactions of the castaways cannot be absolutely guaranteed by Prospero’s magical intervention, as can be deduced from his relative failure to effect change in Antonio. Peterson points out that:

Prospero’s art, too, is limited … [and] he must finally acknowledge its limits. He must accept the persistence of evil in the world and the fact that man’s attempts to eradicate it … are futile. He must finally give up his magic, the art which isolates him from the community of man, and resume his obligation to govern; and finally, he must affirm his humanity by forgiving the guilty (34).

But before he can forgive the “men of sin”, he has to confront the anarchic threat, not only to himself, but also to society ordered by a system of reciprocal rights and responsibilities:

I had forgot that foul conspiracy
Of the beast Caliban and his confederates
Against my life. The minute of their plot
Is almost come.

(IV.i.139-142)
Prospero’s timely remembrance at this point calls to mind the other murder plots in the preceding action. It is perhaps at this point that

The violence though increased is now religious and moral; the imagery has become expressive of the strenuous punishment and purification of the ‘three men of sin’. So by the continuity of his varying metaphor Shakespeare has expressed an unbroken transition from actual storm to the storm of the soul. This sequence, which expresses both physical and metaphysical transformations, points very clearly to the key metaphor of *The Tempest* (Brower, 189).

*Mortificatio* and *Resurrectum*: The Cycle of Life

If we accept Brower’s suggestion that the ‘key metaphor’ is metamorphosis, then it is significant that while the threat of violence is necessary in provoking change, none of these threats are actually realised. The initial plot to ‘get rid’ of Prospero was foiled by Gonzalo’s kindness. The murderous scheme of Antonio and Sebastian against Alonso and Gonzalo is brought to nought by the intervention of Ariel\(^\text{18}\). Even the supposed drowning of Ferdinand – which, if it were true, could arguably have made of Prospero a murderer – is eventually shown to be an illusory death. All these ‘near deaths’ are symbolic of the mystical death in the alchemical process. *Mortificatio* is a mandatory development in the process towards the philosopher’s stone. Rather than representing either end or completion, *mortificatio* presages renewal and rebirth. Peterson’s emphasis on the cyclical nature of the play reinforces our understanding of the nature of life that it

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\(^{18}\) Kermode explains that “The plot against Alonso, invented by Antonio and Sebastian, recapitulates the old usurpation, and although we are aware of Ariel’s presence, and the absolute control of Prospero, this is a fine, tensely written scene, economically suggesting the depth of Antonio’s baseness, and the feeble but perhaps not irredeemable conscience of Sebastian” (180). This reading is relevant to a later point made in this thesis.
mirrors, perpetuated by an unending sequence of birth and death (62). The *resurrectum*, or rebirth is enacted by Prospero’s “rabble” (IV.i.37), and the fruitfulness and potentiality of the projected ‘new life’ are eloquently articulated by Juno and Ceres:

JUNO: Honour, riches, marriage-blessing,
Long continuance and increasing,
Hourly joys be still upon you;
Juno sings her blessings on you.

CERES: Earth’s increase, foison plenty,
Barns and garners never empty.
Vines with clustering bunches growing,
Plants with goodly burden bowing;
Spring come to you at the farthest,
In the very end of harvest.
Scarcity and want shall shun you’
Ceres’ blessing so is on you.

(IV.i.106-117)

The masque is dramatically situated between the death of the old and the birth of the new19, and exemplifies the psychological watershed confronting Prospero, who is in the process of experiencing the passing away of the old order. It is at this point that Prospero declares:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air;

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19 This notion carried with it Scriptural authority and corroboration: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.” (II Corinthians 5:17)
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. Sir, I am vexed;
Bear with my weakness; my old brain is troubled.
Be not disturbed with my infirmity.
If you be pleased, retire into my cell
And there repose. A turn or two I’ll walk
To still my beating mind

(IV.i.148-163)

Prospero’s recognition of his own humanity and mortality, as I have argued, is informed by an acceptance that evil and death are unavoidable, and paradoxically vital, aspects of regeneration and healing. And Prospero’s own healing as human being is contingent upon the ‘death’ of Prospero the mage. Thus he relinquishes his occult powers in favour of the limitations and vulnerabilities of a mere mortal. The acknowledgement of his own humanity is probably most dramatically evident in Prospero’s commitment to abjure his magic power, and to renounce that which made him ‘superhuman’: powerful, but a misfit alienated from communion with the ‘Other’. The juxtaposition of his potency as mage and his potential as a mortal, frail, and erring individual serves to highlight the psychological significance of Prospero’s decision to choose the latter life:

… I have bedimmed
The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,  
And ’twixt the green sea and the azured vault  
Set soaring war; to the dread-rattling thunder  
Have I given fire and rifted Jove’s stout oak  
With his own bolt: the strong-based promontory  
Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up  
The pine and cedar; graves at my command  
Have waked their sleepers, ope’d and let ’em forth  
By my so potent art\textsuperscript{20}. But this rough magic  
I here abjure; and when I have required  
Some heavenly music (which even now I do)  
To work mine end upon their senses that  
This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,  
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,  
And deeper than did ever plummet sound  
I’ll drown my book.

(V.i.41-57)

This dramatic renunciation is an indispensable prerequisite to Prospero’s “embrace” (V.i.109, 121) of his former foes within the circle of reunion before his cell (V.i.33 – S.D.). The psychological wholeness epitomized by this action is further reinforced by the stark contrast between the opening tempest and Prospero’s assurance of peaceful closure and return:

And promise you calm seas, auspicious gales  
And sail so expeditious that shall catch

\textsuperscript{20} Apropos of this speech, Marina Warner once more draws attention to the porous boundaries between the sorcery of Sycorax and Prospero’s ‘Art’: “when Prospero makes his fervent speech of renunciation, he describes his conjuring of the tempest in terms that reveal his similar mastery over the elements [just as Sycorax ‘could control the moon, make flows and ebbs’ (V.i.270)] … He thus acknowledges that his art too exercised power over the elements with the same ‘rough magic’ he abjures” (100).
In his Epilogue, Prospero declares “Now my charms are all o’erthrown, / And what strength I have’s mine own, / Which is most faint” (Epilogue, 1-3). It is the contiguity of fortitude and surrender in this grand finale that suggests that however diminished he may be as to his supernatural abilities, Prospero is now infinitely extended as a psychologically healthy and whole human being, in proper relationship with the rest of humanity. His bond and affinity with the rest of the group on the island is crystallized as Prospero asserts “myself, / One of their kind” (V.i.22-23)\(^{21}\).

Self-Knowledge and Transforming Power

Through a process of increasing self-knowledge, progressing throughout his time on the island, Prospero begins to develop a broader knowledge and more just appreciation of his own and others’ humanity, and the common thread that binds them together. He can now afford to lay to rest the vengeance which consumed him at first. Approaching self, he can appreciate the selfhood of others and he matches this inward experience of integration with outward action: “Go release them, Ariel: / My charms I’ll break, their senses I’ll restore, / And they shall be themselves” (V.i.30-32)\(^{22}\). Gonzalo, able, perhaps, to perceive the deeper psychological significance of the physical encounter, seems to capture the very essence, or quintessence, of

\(^{21}\) According to Peterson, “[Prospero] demonstrates his full acceptance of the conditions into which all men are born by accepting the legacy of sin and death and the public burden it imposes upon those who have public time in their keeping, and by reaffirming his faith in the legacy of renewing love” (243).

\(^{22}\) Once again, Peterson’s analysis is useful in understanding Prospero’s action: “Having accepted the legacy of evil, Prospero proceeds to affirm, through his resolution to forgive his old enemies, his faith in that other legacy, the renewing power of love through which fallen man may redeem the past and renew the future. The readiness to forgive … originates in nosce teipsum – in the knowledge that all men born of Adam stand in need of mercy” (245).
their experience by echoing Prospero’s sentiment: “all of us found ourselves / When no man was his own” (V.i.212-213). This finding and knowing of self and the concomitant change it effects may be seen as the ultimate goal of the alchemical endeavour, that most compelling of magic arts. G. Wilson Knight elucidates most eloquently this goal of metamorphosis:

So tempests are stilled on the island of song and music. This last vision encircles all former visions like an arching rainbow, vaporous and liquid, diaphanous, yet strangely assured and indestructible. And it contains a description of magic art necessarily apt to Shakespeare’s work as a whole. *The Tempest* reflects the whole Shakespearian universe (265).

Acceptance of the validity of this universe requires not only suspension of disbelief, but also the active engagement of an imaginative audience. Shakespeare draws his audience into the ‘otherworld’ of the island, while at the same time projecting the fictional into the real so as to effect change. Prospero’s power to enthrall the other characters is an echo of Shakespeare’s power to captivate his audience. This power, Greenblatt argues, “belongs to whoever can command and profit from this exercise of the imagination, hence the celebration of the charismatic ruler whose imperfections we are invited at once to register and to ‘piece out’” (*Negotiations*, 64). He goes on to explain that “As in a theatre, the audience must be powerfully engaged by this visible presence and at the same time held at a respectful distance from it” (64). As I have suggested, Shakespeare achieves this distance, or romantic detachment, by coaxing his audience out of their material existence while paradoxically merging the real and the imaginative.
The Imagination as Soul

Given the ubiquity of symbolic discourse during this time, it seems that imagination was not only an important discursive tool, but also a fundamental characteristic of the Renaissance mindset, a necessary lens for distilling the relevant essence of multi-layered signification. In her study of Elizabethan psychology, Ruth Leila Anderson stresses that

One should note especially that the imagination holds a crucial position among the faculties of the soul: it not only evolves ideas and, under normal behaviour, recommends to the consideration of reason those that are of sufficient magnitude, but it also communicates with the heart, where the affections reside (134).

The imagination is especially significant to the artist-as-creator, a designation which refers equally to God as the alleged alchemical prototype, Adam as the first human alchemist, Shakespeare as poet and dramatist, and Prospero as mage. And we, as audience, are also subject to the power of imagination, if not Prospero’s, then certainly Shakespeare’s. Hobson holds that:

Imagination … is a faculty whereby we know things as they are without having seen them. What happens in a play, which is itself an island of dream, of thought and of art, is, or can be, a kind of preparation for life. But it can be so only in so far as it is an image, not merely of what life is or has been but of what it may be and perhaps should be. Taking its material both from what is and what is dreamed, The Tempest is a vision of happiness that may be – but on hard ‘realistic’ conditions (71).
The symbolic pilgrimage to the island as a species of Eden and the exposure to the alchemist’s Art, are both creative acts of Shakespeare’s imagination. They are meant to make possible the psychological awakening not only of the characters confined within the realm of make-believe, but also of those in the ‘real’ world who make themselves susceptible to this Art by willingly entering the theatre of the imagination. Hobson argues that *The Tempest*:

charts the human situation both as it is and as it might be. It is an island of thought or dream in which discoveries are made about ourselves. It is a play in which life is ‘acted out’. It is a place of preparation and discovery. The ‘inner’ life of the mind underlies and conditions the ‘outer’ life of society and event … What happens in Prospero’s island prepares for the return to Naples. What happens in the inner life prepares or should prepare for what happens in the external world (71).

The process of preparation and discovery is enacted in and through the various moments of ‘creation’ or ‘fashioning’ that occur throughout the play. Prospero’s self-fashioning is not only implicated in his eventual acceptance of Caliban, but also in his active participation in the ‘alchemical’ work by fashioning not only his own soul, but also the ‘soulish’ natures of the others on the island. As Adam may be seen as co-creator with God due to his identification and nomination of the animals in the Garden of Eden, Prospero, too, becomes the creator-adept of the island through his acts of ‘creating’ and ‘re-creating’ those who cross the threshold into his island domain.23

23 In his discussion of ‘Island Logic’, Roland Greene suggests that an island is “an ideologeme, a conceptual formation that proposes an imagined solution to a social contradiction” (140). In other words, the island is a transcendental space of detachment (*severatio*) from the ‘mainland’ that allows not only for solutions but also for transformations. The distinction between ‘island’ and ‘mainland’ is endorsed by Greene’s assertion that “Shakespeare posits a plurality of worlds – that is, symbolic orders
Language as Power

And he does this through language. Burke explains:

It was that one method by which the magus could control nature was through language. Hermes or Thoth … was the messenger of the gods, the bearer of the divine Word, and the inventor of language. Words, then, according to this magical theory of language, are not just verbal symbols attached to things by conventional usage; they have a very real connection with things; there is direct correspondence between a word and the divine idea it expresses. Properly applied by a magus, words could produce extraordinary effects (102).

However, while this may have been the hope of the magus, it would not do to extrapolate from Burke’s account of magical language to Renaissance society in general. In learned circles of this society, there were debates about the intrinsic power of language and Bouwsma points out that “Language was losing its supposed correspondence to reality; as a sign it increasingly seemed arbitrary in many areas” (37). But however arbitrary the correspondence between sign and signified may be, the power wielded through language is inescapable. According to Roland Barthes:

Language is legislation … speech its code. We do not see the power that is in speech because we forget that all speech is classification, and that all classifications are oppressive … But if we call freedom not only the capacity to escape power, but also the capacity to subjugate...
no one, then freedom can exist only outside language. Unfortunately, language has no outside: there is no exit from words (460).

This theory of ‘word power’ is illustrated by reference to the conceptions of language posited by various characters. While Prospero and Miranda claim that their language bestowed both knowledge and identity upon Caliban, one cannot ignore the abuse and oppression which so concerns Barthes:

… When thou didst not, *savage,*
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst *gabble* like
A thing most *brutish,* I endowed thy purposes
With words that made them known.

(I.ii.356-359 – italics mine).

While Caliban acknowledges that he has learnt their language, he eloquently expresses in that very language his recognition that enslavement is the corollary to that learning:

You taught me language, and my profit on’t
Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language …
… I must obey; his art is of such power
It would control my dam’s god, Setebos,
And make a vassal of him.

(I.ii.364-6; 373-5)

Although one may try to argue that this power is neutralised in the theatre – the site of islands and make-believe – one cannot escape the exertion of the power of language in this place of speech. We as audience are almost
irresistibly drawn into this imaginative world as we witness how the other characters who arrive on the island come under the spell of the inspired fabrications of Prospero’s fertile imagination spoken aloud.

Both the process of transformation from a dream world to real life, and the process of ‘soulish’ awakening – or metamorphosis from ignorance to knowledge – may be seen symbolically as a consequence of the ‘alchemy’ – the language of transformation – in which both Shakespeare and Prospero are engaged. Unlike Jonson, who seems preoccupied with the corrective potential of drama but who achieves only limited transformation in both characters and audience, Shakespeare appears to exemplify the alchemical working of purification and distillation leading to knowledge in both characters and audience. Kermode explains that “As in the other plays, the focussing of attention on the moment of recognition … involves the illumination also of related ideas … The Tempest describes the healing of a political wound and the forgiveness of enemies” (178). Prospero describes in vivid metaphor the process of psychological illumination:

The charm dissolves apace;
And as the morning steals upon the night,
Melting the darkness, so their rising senses
Begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle
Their clearer reason.

(V.i.64-68)

**Coming Full Circle**

Prospero’s metaphorical application of the cycle of night and day to signify the growth and development of knowledge gains new significance when
brought into relation with the Jonsonian ‘broken compass’ discussed in the previous chapter. While Jonson seems unable to break free from and move beyond the interrupted circle of incompleteness and hampered growth, Shakespeare allows for closure and consummation. Not only is Prospero about to return to Milan, the place of departure twelve years ago, but he is also now accepted as he was not ever in the past, as an integral part of that particular circle, both personally and politically. But his acceptance into the ‘home’ circle is contingent upon his forgiveness and acceptance of his one-time enemies. This is the nature of what we may call the ‘closed’ or completed circle, within which opposites are accommodated, though not necessarily within an utterly healed and unfractured community. The accommodation of opposites is portrayed, first, in the discovery of Ferdinand and Miranda playing at ‘war’ within Prospero’s cell, and then in their betrothal as a type of the ‘chemical wedding’.

The anticipated union and the completion of the process, like much that happens in the play, are dramatically bodied forth so that we as audience may recognise and share in the evolution of inner transformation experienced by the characters. Thus, Prospero’s act of inviting his enemies into the circle before his cell symbolizes not only his forgiveness and acceptance of the others, but also the imminent closure of the circle of transformation towards unity and wholeness. Marjorie Nicolson aids our understanding of this notion of circularity in relation to Prospero’s progression. Thus:

The cosmology of the Renaissance poets … was most often interpreted in terms of the circle – a circle that existed in the perfect spheres of the planets, in the circular globe, in the round head of man. This was not mere analogy to them; it was truth. God had made
all things in the universe, the world, and the body of man as near his own symbol, the perfect circle, as their grosser natures would allow (7).

Hobson, too, recognises that “For centuries the circle had been accounted not only the perfect form, but also the symbol of eternity. Eternity embraces time and mortality but is itself unchanging and incorruptible; so that in eternity all transient things, this ‘great globe’ and ‘all which it inherit’, are present at once” (84). Hobson’s argument is substantiated through reference to Henry Vaughan’s poem, ‘The World’. Vaughan’s twin brother, Thomas, was a renowned alchemical philosopher, and Henry himself subscribed to many of the theories of the art, which may be seen to inform his conception of eternity:

I saw Eternity the other night,
Like a great Ring of pure and endless light,
All calm, as it was bright,
And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years
Driv’n by the spheres
Like a vast shadow mov’d, in which the world
And all her train were hurl’d.

(In Martz, 324)

Hobson further argues that Prospero’s conception of the ‘full circle’ “inspires calm acceptance of the mystery rather than world-weariness, an awed humility rather than despair or cynicism” (84). Thus Peterson can write that “it is Prospero’s faith in the power of man to renew himself that completes the restorative pattern figured forth in the play” (246). It is, therefore, this belief in the possibility of reform to completion that
essentially sets Shakespeare apart from Jonson, whose understanding and appreciation of the alchemical project is irrevocably qualified by his deeply rooted pessimism about human nature.

However, it would be simplistic to think that Shakespeare offers us an unambiguous ‘happy-ever-after’ denouement, for Shakespeare is as aware as Jonson is of the murky and benighted dimensions of human nature. Not only does Prospero come to recognise the limitations of “our little life” (IV.i.157), but he seems also to accept with relative equanimity the prospect of growing old and eventually dying. Without his supernatural powers, his mortality becomes a very real point of consideration for the future, hence his prediction that “Every third thought shall be my grave” (V.i.311). Yet there is no sense of despair. Rather, we discern the humility which allows us to identify and empathise with a man who is as human as the rest of us. Thus, as Greenblatt puts it, “At the play’s end, the princely magician appears anxious and powerless before the audience to beg for indulgence and freedom” (Negotiations, 157).

Although by the end of the play we have witnessed Prospero asserting his individuality, affirming his connection with the rest of humanity, and reconciling himself to his own mortality, he is not totally free from conflict. The most obvious area of continuing strife and opposition involves his relationship with his unrepentant brother, Antonio. While Alonso, almost instantly, repents of his former villainy – “Thy dukedom I resign, and do entreat / Thou pardon me my wrongs” (V.i.118-119) – Antonio remains ominously mute in the face of Prospero’s disclosures24. This continuing fraternal conflict is significant, for it suggests that the problem of twelve

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24 Peterson sums up the discordant situation and its future significance: “Antonio and Sebastian represent in their silence those who remain a threat, even in the moment of reconciliation and renewal, to communal harmony and the civic virtues” (244).
years ago has not, and perhaps cannot, be resolved. Suggesting the significance of Shakespeare’s ‘full circle’, Kermode recognises that “Antonio seems to stand unmoved outside the circle of the reconciled”. But this is a deliberate and eloquent omission on the part of the playwright, for “Shakespeare is not here interested in a high harmony” (182).

But Prospero is altered, and just as he is now able to accommodate the opposite poles of life and death within his psyche, so too is he now better equipped to deal with the opposition embodied in his relationship with Antonio. This apparent conflict does not undermine Prospero’s development towards self-knowledge and love for others, but rather works towards precluding a complacent expectancy of a comedic idyll that refuses to accept the less attractive realities of human existence. Like alchemy itself, which balances and integrates base and often-repulsive materials with the promise of beauty and perfection, Shakespeare offers us a representation of life at its most authentic. Real life, Shakespeare seems to be saying, embraces both the potential for good and the acknowledgement of the tense realities of human relationships.