

“Brave Son Versus Braver Daughter” – Invisible Relatives in Prospero’s “Present Business”



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I am the husband, and the whole island is my lawful wife; I am the head, and it is my body.

[King James’s speech in Parliament, 1603]

The word business in Shakespeare is a word “rich and strange.” King Claudius defines himself in his agony as “a man to double business bound” [Hamlet, III.iii.], meaning both to his “strong intent” to pray and also to the burden of his “stronger guilt” of having committed his “rank offense.” When Edmund hears that the Duke of Cornwall is staying tonight at Gloucester’s, he exclaims: “The duke be here to-night? The better! best! / This weaves itself perforce into my business” [King Lear, I.ii.], referring to the devilish treacherous plot against his brother Edgar. Iago agrees to give Cassio “access” to Desdemona and even promises “to draw the Moor / out of the way, that your converse and business / may be more free.” Once the seeds of a terrible misconception as to the nature of this business have been implanted in his master’s mind, he swears that “to obey shall be in me remorse / what bloody business ever.” [Othello, III.iii.] Seeing her husband waive in his “dark intent,” Lady Macbeth demands that he “put this night’s great business into my dispatch,” [Macbeth, I.v.] and the last instance of his resistance is expressed in his resolution “we will proceed no further in this business.” [Macbeth, I.vii.] For the final restoration of Hermione to be possible, her faithful maid Paulina encourages the spectators to “awake their faith,” and demands that “those that think it is unlawful business / I am about, let them depart.” [The Winter’s Tale, V.v.]

In all of these few examples, the connotation of the word “business” is highly suspicious, denoting some exceedingly dark, impertinent, deceptive, if not utterly villainous and criminal undertaking. In all its aforementioned uses it is marked by a certain elusiveness obfuscating its factional reference. It is this elusiveness that connects all of these examples with Prospero’s own “present business” [I.ii.136], the execution and accomplishment of which The Tempest might be seen as a whole. This essay is a close reading of two crucial scenes of the play: of scene two of act one,

during which his "present business" is embarked on, and of act five, scene one, where his "present business" achieves its strange fulfillment.

It is worth keeping in mind the obvious, if somewhat puzzling fact that *The Tempest*, on the formal level, observes the three dramatic unities as proposed by the late Renaissance Italian and early Classicist French theory of theater. It follows that *The Tempest* is one of Shakespeare's least actional and most narrative, reflective, plays, moreover – its total immersion in the past, in "the dark backward and abysm of time," is quite unparalleled in any other Shakespeare's comedy or tragedy.¹ Here, just as in a Sophocles tragedy, the entire present situation, action, is utterly meaningless and irredeemable without deep knowledge, and indeed the correct interpretation, of the past myth, narrative, "without the which this story / were most impertinent." [I.ii.137-8]

Act one, scene two, opens with a conversation between Prospero and Miranda, father and daughter, a would-be duke and a duchess-to-be. For, here, Prospero is not a sorcerer – his "art is lying" on the ground in the mantel he takes off. Miranda is still awe-struck at the horrid spectacle of the tempest of the previous scene: "If by your art, my dearest father, you have / Put the wild waters in this roar, allay them." [I.ii.1-2] Prospero's "art," in its first mention in the play, is in the conditional. Throughout this scene, Prospero's art seems to consist in telling the others (be it Miranda, Ariel, Caliban, or Ferdinand) what "thou art:" "I have done nothing but in care of thee, / Of thee, my dear one, thee, my daughter, who / Art ignorant of what thou art." [I. ii. 16-18]

Now the time has come for Prospero to narrate the "his-story" of who he and his daughter are. Miranda "must now know farther" her father, and, by knowing him, know herself. One of the most noteworthy passages in the whole scene is the following:

PROSPERO Twelve year since, Miranda, twelve year since,
Thy father was the Duke of Milan and
A prince of power.

MIRANDA Sir, are not you my father?

PROSPERO Thy mother was a piece of virtue, and
She said thou wast my daughter; and thy father
Was Duke of Milan; and thou his only heir
And princess no worse issued.

MIRANDA O the heavens!

What foul play had we, that we came from thence?
Or blessed was't we did?

PROSPERO Both, both, my girl:

By foul play, as thou say'st, were we heaved thence,
But blessedly help hither.
MIRANDA O, my heart bleeds
To think o' the teen that I have turn'd you to,
Which is from my remembrance! Please you, farther.
PROSPERO My brother and thy uncle, call'd Antonio –
I pray thee, mark me – that a brother should
Be so perfidious! – he whom next thyself
Of all the world I loved and to him put
The manage of my state; as at that time
Through all the signories it was the first
And Prospero the prime duke, 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. Thy false uncle—
Dost thou attend me? [I.ii.53-78]

Prospero divulges to his daughter “who he was” and is immediately questioned as to who he is. However, he defers for his fatherhood to Miranda’s mother, a “piece of virtue,” who said Miranda was his daughter, his only heir. Fatherhood here is indirect, referential, anchored in the utterance of the mother. So is, for we are dealing with nobility, Miranda’s legitimacy as a “princess no worse issued.” Were it not for her mother’s word, Miranda’s daughterhood to Prospero would be in question. The crucial familial (and political) relationship of the play’s two key characters hinges on a statement of a third one who remains absent throughout the play. This is Prospero’s wife’s only “appearance.”

When spurred by the curious Miranda to proceed “farther,” Prospero starts his narrative – and stumbles. His sentence, laden with parentheses and accumulated clauses, never completes the subject “My brother and thy uncle” with a verb; Prospero actually supplants his brother as the subject of the sentence, becoming the agent: “The government ... I cast on my brother.” This anacoluthon is enhanced by Prospero’s self-interruption: “Dost thou attend me?” As if there were indeed the slightest reason for Miranda not to listen to her father telling her the story of “who she is”! What follows even deepens the already palpable ambiguity:

PROSPERO I, thus neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated
To closeness and the bettering of my mind
With that which, but by being so retired,
O'er-prized all popular rate, in my false brother

Awaked an evil nature; and my trust,
Like a good parent, did beget of him
A falsehood in its contrary as great
As my trust was, which had indeed no limit,
A confidence sans bound. He being thus lorded,
Not only with what my revenue yielded,
But what my power might else exact, like one
Who having into truth, by telling of it,
Made such a sinner of his memory,
To credit his own lie, he did believe
He was indeed the duke; out o' the substitution
And executing the outward face of royalty,
With all prerogative: hence his ambition growing—
Dost thou hear?

[I.ii.88-106]

The sentence construction is based on participial subordination – from “neglecting,” “bettering,” “being retired,” to “telling,” “executing,” “growing,” the argument unfolds in a simple juxtaposition of participial clauses. What is ambivalent about the use of this construction is that it obscures causative sequence – no “because,” no “therefore” or “hence” appear in Prospero’s account. What it does not manage to obscure, however, is the fact that “I ... in my false brother awaked an evil nature,” inadvertently pointing to Prospero’s complicity in his own downfall. And, once again, feeling he might be losing the attention of his audience, he interrupts himself, having to reassure himself that he is listened to.

PROSPERO Mark his condition and the event; then tell me
If this might be a brother.

MIRANDA I should sin
To think but nobly of my grandmother:
Good wombs have borne bad sons.

[I.ii.117-120]

In the strangely irreverent conception both Prospero and his daughter have of familial relations, Miranda translates Prospero’s denunciation of his brother into an attack on his mother – again, same as her father’s art, she veils it under the potentiality of the conditional mood; to defend his mother’s reputation is not worth Prospero’s single word. Indeed, in the vivid imagery by means of which he narrates the ur-his-story of the play, he seeks to supplant his wife and mothers Miranda:

PROSPERO I have deck'd the sea with drops full salt,
Under my burthen groan'd; which raised in me

An undergoing stomach, to bear up
Against what should ensue.
[I.ii.155-158]

Then, at last, the point of the present business emerges:
PROSPERO Know thus far forth.
By accident most strange, bountiful Fortune,
Now my dear lady, hath mine enemies
Brought to this shore;
[I.ii.177-180]

Not the tempest he has so pompously raised, not divine providence or higher sense of justice, but “accident most strange,” an unaccountable, purely accidental stroke of luck has taken the ship with the two Dukes off its course from Tunis to Naples and made the whole of *The Tempest* possible. The interference of the merely fortuitous with Prospero’s present business undermines his superhuman, or indeed human, agency.

Another “strange” inversion comes in his exchange with Ariel – having repeatedly reassured Miranda that “there’s no harm done” [I.ii.15], it is only now that Prospero inquires whether Ariel has “performed to point” [I.ii.194] the tempest and whether “they are safe.” [I.ii.217] Prospero’s utter dependence on Ariel, one based on past favor and present serfdom, is revealed in what is one of his first bouts of anger:

PROSPERO Thou liest, malignant thing! Hast thou forgot
The foul witch Sycorax, who with age and envy
Was grown into a hoop? hast thou forgot her?
[...] Thou, my slave,
As thou report’st thyself, wast then her servant;
[I.ii.257-9, 270-1]

This violent outburst comes after Ariel’s matter-of-fact objection to “more toil” in the sense that the time (with which Prospero is tragically obsessed) agreed on as the time of his service is simply up – what Prospero does is throw his past in Ariel’s face (again, his “what-thou-art” rhetoric) and resort to emotional exploitation:

PROSPERO I must
Once in a month recount what thou hast been,
Which thou forget’st.
[...] It was mine art,
When I arrived and heard thee, that made gape
The pine and let thee out.

[...] If thou more murmur'st, I will rend an oak
And peg thee in his knotty entrails till
Thou hast howl'd away twelve winters.
[I.ii.261-3, 291-3, 294-6]

In addition to the spitefulness and sadistic traits of his character Prospero unconsciously provides a nice illustration of the “roughness” of his art, consisting in his capability of cleaving a pine and rending an oak. With Sycorax, whose servant (now Prospero’s slave – note the difference!) Ariel was, the only maternal character “enters” the stage – again, as absent, present only through her offspring Caliban, the other slave Prospero is dependent on – for, he “cannot miss him: he does make our fire.” [I.ii.311].

An utterly pointless rancorous skirmish (only corroborating the somewhat unsavory sadistic trait in Prospero’s character) though it seems, the exchange with Caliban points to the cornerstone theme of the play, usurpation, and in an indirect, yet conspicuous way, to some of the play’s contemporary concerns. Caliban asserts: “This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother, / Which thou takest from me.” [I.ii.331-2]. The usurped becomes the usurper, treading upon laws of inheritance.

What I mean by “contemporary concerns” is not the conquest of the New World or Montaignesque confrontation with “the other,” but something far more imminent – the historical awareness of the not-too-distant past of England. Both of the reign of Elizabeth I., whose hereditary claim to the English throne, at least for Roman Catholics, was invalid because of her father’s divorce from Katherine of Aragon and whose illegitimacy was legally declared after her mother had been executed on charge of adultery and incest;² and of James I., for whom to derive authority, or indeed any claim for the English throne, from either of his parents (his disreputable father, the Earl of Darnley, or his mother, the beheaded and “treacherous” Mary, Queen of Scots) was highly problematic – hence his rather cagey definition of himself as “the husband to the island” in the motto of this essay. I am not suggesting a reading of *The Tempest* as an allegory of English history; I am merely trying to show that the archetypal vision Shakespeare presents us with here contains a high-voltage power-struggle interpretable on a highly contemporary level. The last encounter with Ferdinand multiplies the central theme of usurpation:

PROSPERO One word more; I charge thee
That thou attend me: thou dost here usurp
The name thou owest not; and hast put thyself
Upon this island as a spy, to win it
From me, the lord on't.
[I.ii.450-4]

For, as a consequence of the somewhat too easily accepted death of his father, Ferdinand has just proclaimed himself the King of Naples, making “not what he is” out of himself. Moreover, in his account of the tempest, another character enters the stage, again, in absentia:

FERDINAND Yes, faith, and all his lords; the Duke of Milan
And his brave son being twain.

PROSPERO [Aside] The Duke of Milan
And his more braver daughter could control thee,
If now 'twere fit to do't.
[I.ii. 435–8]

In yet another bizarre omission, this is the only mention in the play of Antonio’s son – never missed, never sought after, never grieved for. One would almost feel prone to consider this a blunder on Shakespeare’s part, were it not for an interesting hypothesis it lays bare. For it to surface, we now need to take a look at act five, scene one, where Prospero’s “project gathers to a head.” [V.i.1]

The scene opens with Prospero’s renouncing his “magic” (“Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves...” [V.i.33]) – in a meta-textual twist, Shakespeare, at this point (and only this) becomes Prospero, renouncing his art in what is a mere paraphrase of Ovid’s Medea, the infamous filicide, incorporating her strange reincarnation Sycorax, obliterating the division line between her black and his white “magic.” If we demand, in a somewhat more legitimate way than Othello, “an ocular proof thereof” and ask what his magic be, the answer is not so easy to provide – it is Ariel who orchestrates the tempest in I.i. and carefully disperses the King’s troupe all over the island, it is he who is given credit for Ferdinand and Miranda becoming “infected,” enamored of each other at the end of I.ii., he who puts everyone except Sebastian and Antonio to sleep and wakes up Gonzalo just in time to save Alonso from assassination in II.i., he who tells Prospero of the scheme plotted against him by Caliban, Stephano and Trinculo in III.ii., and who directs the fairy masque in IV.i. (featuring, quite tellingly for the play’s misogynistic overtone, the bereft Ceres, the cheated-on Juno, and mother Venus only in absentia).

What is it, then, that Prospero renounces? The power to manipulate, to orchestrate? And, furthermore, why should he do so? Because, as most commentators say, he no longer “needs” it? What did he need it for, then? For his dukedom to be restored? Can one use the same means to restore by which one had lost? How come he no longer needs it? Has he achieved what he has set out to?

He himself tells Ariel the following: “They being penitent, / The sole drift of my purpose doth extend / Not a frown further.” [V.i.28-30] Another conditional clause,

another participial construction, another failure: Prospero's desired conditions are far from met. Alonso may be described as reverent and awe-struck, however, there is not a vestige of penitence from Antonio, who remains obdurately silent almost throughout the whole of act five. Prospero's interaction with Antonio is, not surprisingly, very harsh. He does seem to forgive him: "You, brother mine, that entertain ambition...I do forgive thee," [V.i.75-8] only to blackmail him and Sebastian with the threat that "I here could pluck his highness' frown upon you / And justify you traitors," [V.i.127-8] and effectively renounce him as a brother: "most wicked sir, whom to call brother / Would even infect my mouth." [V.i.130-1] Antonio's relinquishment of the dukedom is then taken for granted: "I do...require / My dukedom of thee, which perforce, I know / Thou must restore." [V.i.131-4] The striking point is not that Antonio does not repent, but that he is not even allowed to – there is no room, in the dramatic "project" Prospero has so carefully and self-consciously directed, for Antonio's free will.

His "project," as we have seen, has also involved Ferdinand falling in love with Miranda, as well as Antonio and Sebastian being abetted to murder Alonso – schemes utterly inconsequential were his sole motivation the restoration of his dukedom. However, his motivation stretches "farther." For, what he essentially does once having regained his dukedom is he renounces it by marrying his daughter to the son of his chief enemy. Here I am getting to my foreshadowed hypothesis: Prospero's "project" involves restoration of power, and thus is aimed against the younger brother Antonio, just as establishment of succession, thus aimed against the absent son of Antonio, the absent son Prospero has never had. One of the main charges against Antonio, in the political sense, was that he

PROSPERO confederates
[...] with the King of Naples
To give him annual tribute, do him homage,
Subject his coronet to his crown, and bend
The dukedom yet unbowed (alas, poor Milan)
To most ignoble stooping.
[I.ii.111-116]

In one respect, Antonio's treacherous plotting with Sebastian, villainous and deplorable though it might be on the moral level, seems substantiated as a political decision of ridding Milan of its unwelcome supervisor. The usurping blood-thirsty Antonio stands condemned and discredited (together with whatever posterity he may have), but the effects of his usurpation, the subjection to Naples, are given full credit and legitimized; moreover, by the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand, this fiefdom shall be given over to posterity. In the light of the above, Prospero's bewildering remark that in his dear Milan, "every third thought shall be my grave"

[V.i.311], appears not a humble acknowledgement of his own mortality, but, given that he has called Miranda "a third of my life" [IV.i.3], a statement of his power over his brother which lies exactly in his "grave:" in his succeeding posterity.

And then, at the end, there he stands, a talking epilogue, "his charms all o'erthrown," asking the audience for pardon, waiting for the tempest raised by their hands to send him to – Naples, not Milan. Business most strange.

ENDNOTES

1 The play's narrated time spans some fifteen years and narrated space contains places as remote from each other as Milan from Tunis, Naples from Bermudas.

2 Here, the absence of the mother in the relationship between Prospero and Miranda gains ominous momentum.