



PROSPERO'S PENITENTIARY: The Theater of Rehabilitation in *The Tempest*

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In perhaps the most resonant of Shakespeare's epilogues, the closing couplet of *The Tempest* conflates the realms of theater and prison: "As you from crimes would pardoned be, / Let your indulgence set me free" (19–20). Prospero's entreaty is directed toward the audience in a meta-theatrical moment of self-awareness, and his freedom is dependent upon our ability to liberate his character (and his "strange story") from the imagination; like all the characters in *The Tempest*, we too must "suffer a sea change" and transform his fiction through the incorporation of its sentiments into our collective reality. The central conflict of Prospero's analogy is a reciprocity mirrored in grammatical structure, wherein a double "you" (the other characters in the play/the audience) serves as both subject and object in an intermingling of passive and active verbs (Beckwith 149), but it is the multivalent word "indulgence" that really begs explication. Is forgiveness being compared to the "gratification of another's desire or humour," a metaphorical "relaxation of restraint," a reflexive "self-gratification," or all of these (*OED*)? If Prospero conceives of "indulgence" as a simultaneously external and internal endeavor, then his notion of forgiveness can be seen as equally reciprocal. A dynamic duality involving the exchanges of forgiveness thus reveals itself as the valedictory theme of the play: in order to be forgiven, one

must also forgive others. Imprisoned on an island where every character is an inmate, Prospero utilizes magical theatricality to stage revenge, but the very magic which traps his enemies ironically inspires him to forgive, thereby presenting theater as a vehicle for ethical rehabilitation.

Although Shakespeare never explicitly describes the “un-inhabited” Mediterranean island in *The Tempest* as a penitentiary, it is unquestionably a place of exile and forced residency which no one calls home, a place where people are incarcerated and forced to contemplate the gravity of the circumstances which led to their isolation from society. Prospero has lived on the island for twelve years as “master of a full poor cell” (1.2.20), trapped in “the dark backward and abysm of time” (1.2.50). The carceral connotations of “cell” and infernal associations of “abysm” suggest that Prospero conceives of himself as a prisoner confined to both the finite space of the island and the infinite chasm of his mind. Prospero’s notions of home and memory are deeply troubled by contradiction (“full poor cell”) and regress (“backward”), so it comes as no surprise that he has hidden the betrayals of his past—Antonio’s usurpation and attempted fratricide—and that he only reveals them to his beloved daughter Miranda as he attempts to escape from his mental and physical imprisonment. However, the true source of Prospero’s incarceration is himself; while he was Duke of Milan, Prospero was “neglecting worldly ends, all dedicated / To closeness and the bettering of my mind” (1.2.89–90), and this self-centeredness isolated him in a prison of selfish obsession. Stephen Greenblatt recognizes that in Shakespeare “the desire to escape from the burden of governance . . . leads to disaster” (81), and here that disaster is both Prospero’s expulsion from Milan and the rebuilding of his self-centered penitentiary in a new location. Interestingly, the same preoccupation with “the liberal arts” which imprisons Prospero allows him to enact a theater of magic whose sole performance will be “an elaborate inward restaging of loss, misery, and anxiety” (Greenblatt 158). But before Prospero can direct his performance, he must first incarcerate friends

and enemies alike and transform them into players on his stage.

As *The Tempest* progresses, it becomes evident that Prospero is not only a prisoner, but also a jailor; the actions of everything on the island are essentially dictated by Prospero, so his formerly exclusive prison of self expands and reveals every character as a prisoner. Ariel was “imprisoned” for “a dozen years” by Sycorax (1.2.278–9), and he has served Prospero for another twelve. Caliban, the “Abhorred slave,” is so accustomed to imprisonment that he considers the substituting of his servitude from Prospero to Stephano a type of freedom. Under Prospero’s spell, Ferdinand’s subdued state becomes a “prison” (2.1.491), and the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda is understood by them in terms of mutual servitude (3.1.60–88). The “Spirits” which Prospero employs for his masque are also “confined” before his “present fancies” free them. Furthermore, “the King and ’s followers” are captured by Prospero’s tempest and “confined together . . . all prisoners” (5.1.7–9). Because Prospero serves as both warden and inmate in his prison, he is the only one with the key to freedom. But before he can release himself and his captives, he must seek revenge for the treachery which established his penitentiary.

Prospero desires vengeance primarily for treason—Antonio’s commandeering of the Milanese dukedom and King Alonso’s collusion—and using the “art” of magical theatricality, Prospero successfully stages a version of revenge which appears so authentic that none of his enemies actually have to lose their lives; indeed, the illusion of revenge is all that is necessary for Prospero to regain his title. In the first scene Prospero conjures a tempest “performed, to point” by Ariel, which brings his adversaries into his magical dominion and “infect[s]” their “reason.” Prospero could have easily destroyed all of his enemies in Ariel’s storm but, via the classic revenge-tragedy trope of retributive justice, he delays retaliation so as to exact the most proportional penalty. Antonio and Alonso use a “treacherous army” to force Prospero from Milan, so

within Prospero's theatrical tempest, the mariners play out a pseudo-coup on the foundering ship (ironically inverting Alonso's initial order to "play the men" (1.1.10)), wherein they assume control of the vessel, direct the actions of its royal passengers, subvert the hierarchy of power, and thereby avenge the mutiny suffered by Prospero. In fact, by ensuring that "Not a soul / But felt a fever of the mad and played / Some tricks of desperation" (1.2.208–10), Prospero also creates a theatrical prison of the mind so that his enemies might suffer like he has for the last twelve years. Moreover, Antonio's perfidy is described in specifically dramatic terms—he had "no screen between this part he / played / And him he played it for" (1.2.107–8)—so it only makes sense that Prospero's dramatic revenge perfectly re-appropriates Antonio's former histrionics; now that Prospero is directing his own paranormal play on the island, Antonio's confusion of role for reality allows Prospero to retake his dukedom without the slightest resistance.

The opening act establishes Prospero's directorial dominance, but the motif of revenge through magical theatricality reaches a zenith in the illusory death of Ferdinand. Although Alonso's train attempts to search the island in the hope that Ferdinand is alive, Alonso's son separates from his entourage during the gale, and so the King believes his prince has perished. For nearly the entire play Prospero keeps Ferdinand isolated from his aristocratic companions through an undisclosed spell whispered into Ariel's ear (1.2.317), and this deceptive disappearing act imprisons Alonso in a state of mourning, regret, and dramatic irony, exacting what is surely the severest revenge in *The Tempest*. Addressing a nonexistent son, Alonso wonders aloud, "O thou mine heir . . . what strange fish / Hath made his meal on thee" (2.1.116–18). Alonso's befuddled mind ironically anticipates exactly what will happen to his son under the "observation strange" of Ariel; what seems at first hyperbolic is actually a foreshadowing of Ferdinand's future fate as one who "strangely stood the test" of Prospero. When Sebastian sadistically assures Alonso that "the fault's your own" (2.1.139), the sorrowful king complies, lamenting, "So is the

dear'st o' th' loss" (2.1.140). Alonso suffers a moral defeat at the hands of his soon-to-be treasonous brother, and the series of contractions in his reply accentuates his stifling grief as he regretfully accepts his role in his son's demise.

While Ferdinand is presumed dead by Alonso and his attendants, Prospero uses his magical prowess to direct the young prince and arrange a marriage to Miranda, ensuring that his theatrical "project" will prosper, and that he will have his revenge by successfully rearranging the kingdom of Italy to his greatest advantage upon return. The couple plays a crucial role in the comedic turn of Shakespeare's meta-theatrical romance, and they are the first characters to exhibit and experience some of the complex dichotomies at the heart of *The Tempest*: acting/spectating, imprisonment/freedom, punishment/pardon. Prospero's presentation of Ferdinand to Miranda establishes a fundamental theatricality to their relationship: "The fringed curtains of thine eye advance / And say what thou seest yond" (1.2.409–10). The imaginative imagery of Miranda's velvet eyelids opening to gaze at her father's latest catch reveals a dualism which pervades the play: Ferdinand and Miranda are at once viewers and actors, enjoying the performance while unwittingly participating in it. Ferdinand also becomes quite a paradoxical prisoner in Prospero's penitentiary; whereas most inmates are metaphorically incarcerated as punishment for crimes committed, Ferdinand, placed in chains and forced to do hard labor, is an innocent convict, accused of treason and espionage even though he is ultimately a guiltless pawn in Prospero's plan. Perhaps his underlying innocence is what allows him to subvert his role as prisoner when, ensnared by Miranda's beauty, Ferdinand begins to court her in an ironic discourse which presents captivity as a source of contentment:

My spirits, as in a dream, are all bound up.
My father's loss, the weakness which I feel,
The wrack of all my friends, nor this man's threats
To whom I am subdued, are but light to me,

Might I but through my prison once a day
Behold this maid. (1.2.487–92)

In an outpouring of awareness, Ferdinand unconsciously alludes to the illusion of his incarceration, recognizes that he is a mental and physical prisoner, and accepts the terms of his sentence. Even though his father and friends are believed dead and he is powerless to overcome the false accusations of his ambiguous jailor, he expresses the will to persist if he can just “admire” Miranda (in a wonderful play on Prospero’s warning).¹ “Behold” here complicates the theme of carcerality; it indicates both voyeuristic observation and visual capture, as if Miranda is enclosed in Ferdinand’s vision and he can reflect the panoptic surveillance to which he is subjected. The opening simile even foreshadows Prospero’s existential/theatrical declaration during the wedding masque,² proving that Ferdinand is perfectly cast in his role. The first prisoners to receive punishment as well as pardon/reward, Ferdinand and Miranda are Prospero’s test subjects, and their love is an experiment through which Prospero can evaluate his subversion of the tragic plot trajectory in favor of romance, the masterful dramatic mixture of tragedy, comedy, and history which was growing in popularity during Shakespeare’s time (Bevington 817–18).

Ferdinand plays a crucial role in Prospero’s production, but the play would not exist without its stage director Ariel, a character who follows Prospero’s script of vengeance “to th’ syllable.” For a majority of the play, this “airy spirit” acts as Prospero’s agent of revenge, a prison guard monitoring and maintaining the ordered chaos of incarceration; he orchestrates the opening tempest, serenades Ferdinand into submission, sets the stage for Antonio and Sebastian’s treachery (only to thwart it), facilitates Caliban’s conspiracy (only to prevent

¹ “But this / swift business / I must uneasy make, lest too light winning / Make the prize light.” (1.2.452-3)

² “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on . . .” (4.1.156–7)

it), and revokes Prospero's imaginary banquet, chiding his enemies for their chicanery. Ariel's purpose as revenge catalyst is to remind Prospero's prisoners of their wrongdoings, so that each man's guilt becomes his prison cell:

Ling'ring perdition (worse than any death
Can be at once) shall step by step attend
You and your ways; whose wraths to guard you
From
Which here, in this most desolate isle, else falls
Upon your heads, is nothing but heart's sorrow
And a clear life ensuing. (3.3.77–82)

The "perdition" Ariel describes indicates a "state of final spiritual ruin or damnation; the consignment of the unredeemed or wicked and impenitent soul to hell" (*OED*), and this reading confirms Ariel's account of Ferdinand's first exclamation, "Hell is empty / And all the devils are here!" (1.2.214–15). This "Ling'ring" revenge exacted by Ariel is made all the worse by its seeming endlessness, and it will follow Prospero's enemies "step by step" throughout their ostensible life sentence in Prospero's prison. The confusing construction of Ariel's final sentence as a harpy³ also mirrors the prisoners' difficult journey to "heart's sorrow"—a potentially liberating penitence—and the sterility of its prose form (as opposed to the flowery, melodious verse of Ariel's songs) is exaggerated by the deceptive description of the island as "desolate." Indeed with "wraths to guard" Prospero's enemies from "a clear life" of guilt-free conscience, Ariel and his "ministers of Fate" seem to prevent escape from Prospero's prison, a notion visually reinforced by the entrapment of "from" in the middle of this all-important passage.

As the executor of revenge in *The Tempest*, Ariel is surely the most powerful prisoner on Prospero's penitential island,

³ "A fabulous monster, rapacious and filthy, having a woman's face and body and a bird's wings and claws, and supposed to act as a minister of divine vengeance" (*OED*).

but Ariel reaches the pinnacle of his potency when he inspires Prospero to unlock his prison through the rehabilitative power of forgiveness. Ariel ensures that Prospero's enemies "cannot budge until your release," but the reciprocal "your" here indicates that "[t]he release of Prospero works as an objective and subjective genitive" (Beckwith 149); Ariel thus anticipates his master's mutual granting and seeking of forgiveness. Because Antonio, Alonso, and Sebastian "[b]rimful of sorrow and dismay," Ariel imagines that his master may find it in his heart to release his prisoners: "Your charm so strongly / works 'em, / That if you now beheld them, your affections / Would become tender" (5.1.16–18). Ariel appeals to Prospero's "affections," a word signifying not just emotion or feeling, but also love, the kind which springs forth from familial ties and lifelong relationships. Ariel's proposal involves a "sea-change" from callous indifference at the suffering of others to "tender" empathy; if Prospero could just "behold" his former friends and family in this state of visible penitence, perhaps he (like Ferdinand) could find freedom from the prison he has so firmly established. The word "tender" is also indicative of an innocent age unmolested by betrayal, obsession, and corruption, as if Prospero could reach far into the past recesses of his "dark backward and abysm of time" and recover his lost innocence. The subjunctive "would" expresses uncertainty at Prospero's potential for change because Ariel is an immortal "spirit" who, albeit attentive, sympathetic and desirous of affection,⁴ cannot truly experience human emotion. Surpassing the implausibility of a revenge enforcer's forgiveness, the appeal to humanity from a non-human is a paradox which here expresses a profound truth: forgiveness is the very essence of humanity. Ironically, Ariel's most supernatural ability is his realistic rendering of forgiveness, his unification of theatricality and magic. Beckwith informs that "Ariel tutors Prospero in how to be human, how to be kind" (149), and his transformative example brings

⁴ "Do you love me master? No?" (4.1.48)

about the end of pernicious revenge and the destruction of the penitentiary which has housed every character in *The Tempest*.

Through Ariel's transcendent performance of "a touch, a feeling of their afflictions," Prospero recognizes himself as "one of their kind"—an afflicted man—and understands that to free himself from his prison of regret and revenge, he must first liberate his prisoners through forgiveness. As Beckwith describes Prospero's problem: "The possibilities and resources of forgiveness can, after all, be fully grasped only if the mutuality of harmer and harmed . . . can be mutually recognized" (148). In an outpouring of humanity, Prospero pronounces, "Though with their high wrongs I am stuck to th' / quick, / Yet with my nobler reason 'gainst my fury / Do I take part. The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (5.1.25–28). Acknowledging the harm which has immobilized him, Prospero proclaims the power of his "nobler reason" to conquer his emotions; if the source of Prospero's exile from Milan is his obsession with mental development, then his mind must also be the source of his return. Prospero sees that in order to defeat his enemies truly, he must prove himself a worthier man by choosing the "rarer action" of forgiveness over revenge. The "virtue" Prospero mentions goes beyond forgiveness though. The strength of Prospero's "charms" has dehumanized his prisoners—taken away their freedom to think, act, and live independently—and so he must abandon the "rough magic" which has estranged him from his own humanity: "My charms I'll break, their senses I'll restore, / And they shall be themselves again" (5.1.31–2). Remembering that forgiveness is a reciprocal action, Prospero realizes that he must return the humanity of his enemies and liberate them from their prison of penitence before he too can be free. This is why the only fitting punishment for a brother who "entertained ambition, / Expelled remorse and nature" is to inculcate a sense of compassion and return the sympathetic emotions exiled by pitiless, vengeful ambition. Therefore during the Epilogue, when Prospero places the keys to his prison in the hands of his former prisoners, when he changes places on stage with the actors in

his play, he sacrifices the certainty of his revenge for the uncertainty of forgiveness and acknowledges that his prosperity is dependent on the humanity of humanity.

Although there were no such things as rehabilitation and therapy during Shakespeare's time, Prospero's use of forgiveness to escape from a prison of revenge proves that the playwright's wisdom was steeped in the concept of metamorphosis. If we consider that, in a carceral context, rehabilitation is the "improvement of the character, skills, and behavior of an offender through training, counseling, education, etc., in order to aid reintegration into society" (*OED*), then no other word more compellingly conveys the experience which Prospero and his prisoners undergo during their collective sentence. In fact Shakespeare's rehabilitative power is so transcendent that for nearly two decades Curt Tofteland and his "Shakespeare Behind Bars" program have used the poet's works to transform the lives of inmates trapped in a "world of alienation, a place where a humane, supportive and loving community is a foreign idea" (Cobb and Tofteland 430). Tofteland has built a theatrical sanctuary where, after admitting their guilt, inmates can experience the wonders of introspection and vicarious existence as they assume the daunting task of performing an entire Shakespearean play. Each inmate finds a role which speaks to him and learns that, in spite of physical incarceration, "Thought is free" (3.2.128). Tofteland describes an inmate's voyage to self-discovery in ways strikingly similar to Prospero's struggle: "He comes to understand that if it is redemption and forgiveness he seeks, then he must himself forgive those who perpetrated injustices upon him (431). Hamlet advises, "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so," and so the only way to cure a convicted criminal is to make his "affections . . . grow tender," to instill deep within his heart and mind the virtues of humanity which he has lost somewhere in the tempest of existence.

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