Epic into Romance: *The Tempest* 4.1 and Virgil’s *Aeneid*

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At the conclusion of the betrothal masque for Ferdinand and Miranda, during the dance of the nymphs and reapers, Prospero calls out to the performing spirits, “Well done, A void. No more.” He has forgotten, as he tells us, “that foul conspiracy/ Of the beast Caliban and his confederates/ Against my life” (4.1.139–41). The entire spectacle vanishes into nothingness. Miranda and Ferdinand are taken aback. Miranda says she’s never seen her father in such a state before. Prospero pretends that Ferdinand is alarmed, not by Prospero’s own state of emotional disarray, but by the collapse of the masque. And he turns to Ferdinand and launches into what must be one of the three or four best-known speeches in Shakespeare:

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

(4.1.148–158)

Few can doubt the power of this moment in the theatre. The speech soars and expands to the very limits of our imaginations and of the dramatic illusion, Prospero addressing his audience onstage and in the theatre indiscriminately, speaking to himself, to everyone and no-one, as if the play and its plot no longer existed.

Audiences are enraptured, but some of the play’s modern editors tend to be a little more puzzled. The lack of critical consensus is striking, especially since, as Barker and Hulme rightly remark, this is “the only real moment of drama in the play” (21). In the notes to his Arden edition of 1901, Morton Luce called the speech “Perhaps the most striking rhetorical achievement in all literature” (114, note 151), but then rather spoiled the encomium by observing in his introduction that “Prospero’s parting remarks to Ferdinand . . . when, as it appeared, there was need of all haste to defeat the conspiracy of Caliban and his confederates, were rather long; perhaps also slightly away from the point” (lix). His successor, Frank Kermode in the new Arden edition (1954), went further, contending that Prospero’s “agitation” is unmotivated and attributing his “apparently unnecessary perturbation” to “an oddly pedantic concern for classical structure” (lxxv). This seems...
devastating, reducing the “cloud-capped towers” speech to some turbulence required to fulfil the Terentian formula for epitasis. It implies that the play could move quite happily to the structural climax of Act 4, where Prospero proclaims “At this hour/ Lies at my mercy all mine enemies” (263-4), without it. Anne Barton (Righter) in her Penguin edition (1968) was candid in admitting that “The text at this point is so reticent as to make critical certainty impossible” (30). She puts her weight behind the suggestion that the sudden reminder of his failure with Caliban makes Prospero doubt his prospects for success with Alonso, Antonio and Sebastian, and so poisons his joy in the betrothal masque. More recently, Stephen Orgel in his Oxford edition (1987) emphasises, as have others, the importance of Prospero’s forgetting Caliban’s impending insurrection, rather than the insurrection itself (50). This forgetting is analogous to the close absorption in his studies which allowed the original usurpation in Milan to take place. It also mirrors the magical sleep which exposes Alonso and company to the murderous intentions of Antonio and Sebastian, in a dramatic reprise that enables Prospero to perform for his guest-citizens on the island (including his inveterate enemy) the protective duties which as Duke he had failed to carry out for his citizens in Milan. This undoubtedly goes some way towards explaining Prospero’s anguish here, but it leaves untouched the central problem which Orgel sums up when he writes that “Critics have tended to underestimate the seriousness of this moment, observing that the plotters are inept and comic, and pose no real threat” (54).

This is the basic difficulty. As has often been recognised, the splendour of Prospero’s rhetoric utterly dwarfs its apparent occasion. The “cloud-capped towers” speech gathers an impressive weight and inwardness of emotion quite disproportionate to its ostensive cause. Why should the recollection of Caliban’s footling little scheme precipitate this vision of the collapsing metropolis? Surely, we feel, the appropriate response to Caliban and his cronies is the one Prospero engineers later in the same scene: pursuit by the spirit hounds and a summary dunking in the horse-pond? Even if Caliban’s incongruous insurrection reminds Prospero (or, at least, the audience) of the plot which ousted him from his dukedom many years before, the event involved no physical assault on the fabric of Milan. At this period — to be perversely literal — when the Italian city-states changed hands, as they frequently did, they preserved their own government, merely accepting the signoria or ‘overlordship’ of the conqueror until such time as an assassin’s dagger or military defeat ended the association. Neither Milan nor Naples (nor, for that matter, Tunis) is under threat of destruction. And Prospero evokes his metropolitan panorama in the pastoral setting of a “bare island” (5.1.326), the only human structure on it being his “poor cell” (5.1.301).

What is Prospero thinking of?

A sensible and obvious strategy is to interpret this moment in terms of the symbolic opposition between Prospero and Caliban. In this range of readings, very much encouraged by Kermode’s introduction to his edition, Caliban, in his cultural affinities, might be a New World Indian (a Native American), or a freak brought back from the voyages of exploration for exhibition purposes (cf. 2.2.26-30), or a literary relic from tales of escape from North African slavery, or one of the old wild men of European legend — any or all of these. But he functions principally as a grim travesty of the traditional shepherd of the green world, a troubling embodiment of nature impervious to nurture, whose mere existence constitutes a kind of ontological challenge to the vision of civility presented in the masque. The power of Prospero’s revulsion from Caliban at this particular moment is sufficient — so we must assume — to dissolve the towers, palaces and temples into airy nothingness.

It is clear that Shakespeare does everything in his power to exaggerate the contrast between Prospero and Caliban at the expense of any credible ‘real-world’ challenge the
creature may present. First, Prospero's agitation flows from a rush of memory, an incipient call to duty, rather than any fear of present physical encounter. Secondly, Shakespeare ascribes to his magician-ruler such comprehensive powers that Caliban's revolt can only appear symbolic rather than actual — a ludicrous annoyance more than a serious political challenge. Thirdly, he correspondingly minimises what one might call Caliban's sociopolitical power-base (though not necessarily his ideological attractions) in every possible way.

Lovejoy classified pastoral as a version of primitivism, typically occupying the symbolic space between the walled city of civilization and the forests, swamps and fens beyond. Caliban is clearly "beyond." He is not a pastoralist but a forager, a hunter-gatherer. Western mythographies consistently stigmatize those who get their food in ways other than by clearing the earth and planting. Literary shepherds may be rude or fluent; nomads are generally dangerous and not to be trusted (compare, for example, Spenser's classification of Irish cattleherders as barbarians in A View of the Present State of Ireland, 1596) but hunter-gatherers are the definitive embodiment of what it means to be outside the city — "beyond the pale."

Caliban's description in the cast list as a "savage and deformed slave" slams his provenance home. Savage (silvestris, Silva) is literally "of the forest," and refers equally to uncultivated land and uncultivated people. His origins are demonised by Prospero, if not by Shakespeare. As the offspring of the Patagonian god Setebos, worshipped, according to John Gillies, by "the most remote, God-forsaken and degenerate of sixteen century Amerindian types" (142) and the hoop-backed witch Sycorax, who was pregnant with Caliban when she was banished from Algiers for "mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible" (1.2.264), he is morally and physically deformed, the very antithesis of the Platonic and Spenserian doctrine that chastity, wit and a beautiful appearance are the hallmarks of good breeding. Slave, Caliban's final appellation in the cast list, may refer simply to his natural servility, but his mother's origins in Algiers, the corsair capital of the central Mag'hrreb, can scarcely be fortuitous. The port had a lurid reputation in English polemic, particularly for its treatment of Christian slaves. We might recall, for instance, Tamburlaine's words about "the cruel pirates of Argier":

That damned train, the scum of Africa,
Inhabited with straggling runagates,
That make quick havoc of the Christian blood.

(Part 1, 3.3.1153-55)

In 1619 J. B. Gramaye introduces his account of "Alger, Argel, Algiers, or Argier" — "the very name breeds confusion," he tells us — by offering to provide "some better light of this Hel-mouth [a good theatrical term], the Centre of Earthly darkness" (270). Next to the marginal heading "Epithets of Algier" the port is described as "the whip of the Barbarian, terror of Europe, the bridle of both Hesperias (Italy and Spaine) Scourge of the Ilands, Den of Pyrates, Theatre of all crueltie, and Sanctuarie of Iniquitie . . . " (278). Contemporary commentators ranging from Pory, in his essay "A summarie discourse of the manifold Religions professed in Africa" appended to his translation of Leo Africanus (1600), to Pepys recording the stories of sea commanders he heard in the Fleece tavern (see Diary for 8 Feb. 1661), contribute to this discourse. Sir George Clark in his War and Society in the Seventeenth Century (particularly chapter five) finds considerable evidence to support them. However, Leo's own description of Algiers is of a well-ordered, flourishing, even decorous society, and the matter of anti-Turkish bias in discussions of piracy in the Mediterranean must be given due weight, a question tackled
head-on by Godfrey Fisher in his book *Barbary Legend* (1957). But there can be little doubt that North Africa in general, and Algiers in particular, held a peculiar fascination for the dramatic literature of the English Renaissance as a hot-bed of piracy, 'infidelity' and barbarous practices.

It might seem attractive to import into *The Tempest* at this point the full complex of North African Moorish associations which informs such plays as Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1587?), George Peele's *The Battle of Alcazar* (1588-9), Thomas Heywood's *The Fair Maid of the West* (1603;1630), as well as *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-7) and *Othello* (1602-4): but the unique horror with which Algiers was regarded stemmed both from its status as the most powerful of the corsair ports and from the fact that piracy was virtually its sole reason for existence. Algiers' reputation was largely a function of geography. The Maghreb divides into three parts: to the east is modern Tunisia, the Africa of Roman colonization and the site of ancient Carthage. To the west is Morocco, “the stronghold of North African Berber resistance to change and to alien rule, whether of Romans, Arabs, Turks or Europeans” (Fage 12). Algiers grew up between the two, and because of the length of the shoreline and the inhospitable terrain, historically Algeria has tended to be a region in which the rulers of Tunisia have competed with those of Morocco for control, though neither has usually succeeded in dominating it for long. Fernand Braudel has a passage which is suggestive for *The Tempest* in that he makes a clear distinction between Tunis (the married home of Princess Claribel) and the uncultivated character of Algiers. He writes:

> During the [sixteenth century], the central Maghreb, ... was amazingly uncivilized. Algiers was to grow up in a country as yet without a leavening of culture, a virgin land, peopled by camel-drovers, shepherds and goatherds. The Levant by contrast had ancient traditions. The King of Tunis, Mawlay Hasan, one of the last of the Hafids, who, after being dethroned and blinded by his son, took refuge in Sicily and Naples in 1540, left everyone who met him with the impression of a prince of great distinction, a lover of beauty, a connoisseur of perfumes and philosophy ... A philosopher prince: one such would never have been found in the central Maghreb, even in Algiers, a city of upstarts and uncouth adventurers.

It would be improper to place too much emphasis on this description, but certainly it reinforces the image of Algiers as an anti-type of civilisation, as seen from the European perspective. (Whether it effectively qualifies the purely strategic impulse governing Claribel’s arranged marriage by suggesting that life with the King of Tunis might be rather pleasant, is another matter.)

Nominally under Ottoman suzerainty, but effectively controlled by the Corsairs, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Algiers was a thriving cosmopolis, populated by Berbers and Andalusians, Greeks, Turks and Italians, English and Dutch and many others. (This rich cultural mix is, incidentally, a barrier to anyone wishing to be too literal about Caliban's racial origins.) But the port’s raison d’être — to make the ideological point Shakespeare might want us to take — is that it was comprised of those who earned their way principally by preying on the civilisations of others. In terms of mythography, therefore, we can see why Caliban poses a symbolic threat to the betrothal celebrations.
Prospero’s pastoral masque commemorates the sources of civility. It presents a mythological ceremony of blessing and instruction for Miranda and Ferdinand (but also for the audience) in which the two sister goddesses, Juno and Ceres, air and earth, the wife and the mother, are brought together by Iris, the rainbow messenger, who spans heaven and earth as a symbol of divine providence. In its brief compass, the masque takes us through a full season of agricultural growth, starting in “spongy April” and finishing with the dance of the “fresh nymphs” and “sunburned sickle-men” at harvest time. Significantly, in this vision there is to be no winter. Ceres’ blessing concludes:

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.

(4.1.114-17)

The masque is a projection of Prospero’s wishes for the royal couple, a pastoral dream of perennial growth in which the cycle of spring, summer, and autumn is unmarred by the harsh disciplines of winter. Perhaps memories of the bad harvests of the mid-to-late 1590s, which had illustrated for Shakespeare the profitability of “Barns and garners never empty” (4.1.111) and the appalling hardship incurred by the vagrant poor, lent special force to this conception. In any case, it is important to recognise that the masque envisions a transcendence of the seasonal cycle, and not simple conformity to nature’s paradigm, as we see, for instance, in Perdita’s devotion to “great creating nature” (4.4.88) in The Winter’s Tale, or in the ‘harvest home’ at the centre of Thomas Heywood’s The Silver Age (1613). Jonathan Bate has recently proposed the latter as “the closest analogue in all Jacobean drama to the agricultural benison of Prospero’s masque of Ceres” (261). The two plays were in repertory at the same time and, indeed, were performed at court within weeks of each other in the winter of 1611-12. The resemblance and contiguity are striking. Prospero’s masque depicits the silver age, in deliberate contrast to Gonzalo’s utopian fancies of a social order “T’excel the golden age” (2.1.166), fancies which are so easily punctured by the cynicism of Antonio and Sebastian. As Bate points out, Gonzalo imports iron age notions of sovereignty, of his own right to colonise and legislate, into a state of nature innocent of such motivations (256). Miranda and Ferdinand willingly accept what might be termed “silver age” disciplines, namely labour in each other’s service and premarital chastity, and the end of this obedience, at least in prospect, is to be the re-assertion of innocence. Ferdinand’s response to the masque may be naive, but it is forthright:

Let me live here ever.
So rare a wondered father and a wife
Makes this place paradise.

(4.1.123-24)

The lines echo Golding’s prefatory epistle to his translation of Ovid’s Metamorphoses (1567) where, as a good moraliser, he squarely equates the Golden Age with “Adams tyme in Paradise” (1. 470). The seasons were a consequence of the fall, and Prospero’s masque looks forward to a post-lapsarian restoration of harmony through a combination of agricultural benison and good breeding.

It is worth recalling that the classical earth goddesses of vegetation, grain and agriculture generally — Phrygian Cybele, Greek Demeter and Roman Ceres — are sometimes
represented in visual art by the figure of a noble woman, her head crowned like a turreted
city — the so-called mural crown. The iconography commemorates that natural abundance,
experienced on the fertile deltas and flood-plains of rivers like the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates
and the Indus, which first allowed large communities to congregate in cities. Cities are built
on agricultural surplus, and this is where many of civilisation’s troubles and triumphs
originate. Settled cultivators built cities to defend themselves against the hungry nomads.
Jacob Bronowski tells us that:

... war, organised war, is not a human instinct. It is a highly planned and
cooperative form of theft. And that form of theft began ten thousand years ago
when the harvesters of wheat accumulated a surplus, and the nomads rose out
of the desert to rob them of what they themselves could not provide.

(88)

Critics routinely assert that Prospero’s masque is incomplete, because they expect the
masque to expire in concert with the seasons. Interrupted it may be, but is it incomplete?
Where, for instance, Heywood’s rustic festival ends with the rape of Proserpina at the onset
of winter, in The Tempest Ceres has forsworn the “scandalled company” (4.1.90) of Venus
and her blind boy. Hence “dusky Dis” (4.1.89) will not appear and the rape of Proserpina
(like Caliban’s attack on Miranda) has been averted. With “Barns and garnerers never empty,”
freed from the blight of Winter, the dance of the nymphs and reapers could go on forever.
The masque of Juno and Ceres celebrates the capacity of nature to support in perpetuity the
world of civility, exemplified in the principled union of Miranda and Ferdinand. This is the
vision which is absorbing Prospero’s attention when the memory of Caliban strikes.

To audiences in the theatre, the interruption probably appears as casual happenstance, a
sudden demand for action breaking in upon the atmosphere of revelatory vision and
contemplation which takes over when Prospero commands “No tongue! All eyes! Be
silent!” (4.1.9). Several critics have tried to see the pursuit of the spirit hounds, which
follows closely on the “cloud-capped towers” speech, as a putative anti-masque, a tendency
encouraged by Enid Welsford’s The Court Masque (1927). To me it seems simpler to
recognise that the “cloud-capped towers” speech is itself formally linked to the dramatic
evocation of masque which precedes it by its structural inversion of the usual relation of
masque and anti-masque. Instead of the entry of the presiding royal figure serving to contain
the forces of anarchy and disorder which typically appear in an anti-masque, here Prospero
himself is made to disrupt the celebration of his triumphant magical authority, and the
“cloud-capped towers” speech follows as a kind of soliloquised anti-masque, overheard by
audiences both on and off the stage, with differing degrees of surprise and bewilderment.

It may also be that Prospero’s sudden “start” is not the random or fortuitous event it
seems. Perhaps his masque does not entirely escape the challenge of the seasons. Caliban,
as a remote forbear (ethnographically speaking) of the rootless nomads, makes his
immemorial challenge to the guardians of civility — and full barns — when summer’s
bounty fails. The first recorded performance of The Tempest was at court for the Feast of
All Souls in 1611. Whether this was in fact its premiere is unknown. But All Souls or
Hallowmass signals the end of autumn, the beginning of winter, and is marked by the arrival
of the Lord of Misrule, whose festive rebellion alleviates, but cannot thwart, the death of the
old year. Caliban makes a very credible parody of the Lord of Misrule.

This possibility, however, only serves to confirm the oddity of Prospero’s response,
because it encodes Caliban’s symbolic status and actual powerlessness even more firmly.
The memory of Caliban’s plot nevertheless causes Prospero temporarily to lose his grip on
the play. For the first time, a gap opens up between the character Prospero, and the force controlling the dramatic illusion. Prospero didn’t plan the anti-masque which follows. Across the huge social, political, mental and spiritual distance Shakespeare has deliberately created between these two characters, there leaps a spark of energy which so disturbs Prospero that he breaks up the spirit-dance which collapses, not to the rhythm of the seasons, but to a “strange hollow and confused noise” (Stage direction 4.1.138). The noise perhaps covers the retrieval of machinery employed in the masque: equally, it could represent the descent into chaos, thereby emphasising the exquisite artificiality of Prospero’s vision of silver age harmony.

Here one of two interpretative strategies is likely to be followed. Either the “cloud-capped towers” speech is read as an immediate response to Caliban, in which all Prospero’s ideals and aspirations undergo a kind of metaphysical demolition in some sudden access of despair — a strategy which produces bleak and nihilistic readings of Prospero’s crisis. Or it could be conjectured — and this is the possibility I want to explore — that the remembrance of Caliban’s plot precipitates in Prospero the echo of some area of experience, some historical donneé, which he deploys rhetorically to mediate his anger and emotion, interpreting it to himself (and to his audience) as he gradually brings his turmoil under control. In both cases we are dealing with a literary construct, not an item of organic psychology, but the difference of emphasis bears on our sense of the play as a whole, and on the difficulties of the editors, with which we started.

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As long ago as 1948, J. M. Nosworthy wrote that “Prospero’s famous lines on dissolution... may owe something to Carthage which, in Virgil’s account, has its towers (i. 420), its temples (i.446 ff.), and its palace (i.631). It is in the temple of Juno that Aeneas sees depicted the tale of Troy, an ‘insubstantial pageant’ [pictura inanis], as Virgil tells us...” (293). This idea has been sympathetically developed by John Pitcher, but so far no-one has called attention to the remarkable manner in which Aeneas’ reverie in the temple of Juno is interrupted, and its relevance to the “cloud-capped towers” speech.

The basic elements of Virgil’s story of the fall of Troy — the sleeping city, the army outside, the ambiguous interloper who opens the city gates, the night attack — these elements are repeated in the analogical conspiracies which animate The Tempest: Prospero’s usurpation in Milan, the plot of Antonio and Sebastian to overthrow Alonso, and Caliban’s plan to kill Prospero and take over the island. Prospero is obsessed with this formative story from “the dark backward and abyss of time” (1.2.50), as we see from the intensity with which he conveys it to Miranda in Act I scene 2. In each case, a sleeping victim is laid open to attack through the persuasions of an ambiguous outsider, whose original in the Aeneid is Sinon, the stranger who lets the hidden army out of the Trojan horse. Antonio performed the part of Sinon when he let Alonso’s army into sleeping Milan. He repeats the role when he tries to persuade Sebastian to murder the sleeping Alonso. Caliban fills a similar function with Stephano and Trinculo in their abortive attempt on Prospero’s life.

At a deeper level, the attack on Troy has archetypal resonances for The Tempest as a whole. In his opening words to Act 3 scene 3, the old courtier Gonzalo turns to King Alonso and says:

By'r lakin, I can go no further, sir,
My old bones aches. There's a maze trod indeed
Through forth-rights and meanders.

(3.3.1-3)
The words ‘maze,’ ‘meander,’ and also ‘labyrinth,’ refer to much the same thing: the physical and magical defences of the ancient cities of the middle east. They were designed to let initiates in and keep the stranger, the enemy, out. Gradually the maze or meander lost its physical significance, while its symbolic or magical properties became an important feature of patterns of mystical initiation. Cities are generally female. As walled enclaves subject to siege, assault and occupation, the city is often identified with sexual possession. A comic inversion of the idea occurs in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, where to stop a war, the Athenian women deny their husbands sexual privileges and barricade themselves in the city treasury on the Acropolis. In one of his anthropological studies of the *Aeneid*, Jackson Knight notes:

> ... there is not much risk in saying that defensive cult at Troy, Rome and elsewhere, and myth derived from it, were strongly affected by habits of thinking applicable primarily to a human maiden, in whose form, with greater or less clarity, the city goddess, and then the city, were seen.

(240)

Earlier in his career, in *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594), Shakespeare had clearly conceived of Troy in this way. After Tarquin the rapist has left her, Lucrece spends some time looking at a large picture showing the destruction of Troy, a picture based on the *Aeneid* which becomes an image of the experience she has been through:

> For even as subtle Sinon here is painted,  
> So sober-sad, so weary, and so mild,  
> As if with grief or travail he fainted,  
> To me came Tarquin armed, too beguiled  
> With outward honesty, but yet defiled  
> With inward vice. As Priam him did cherish,  
> So did I Tarquin, so my Troy did perish.

(1541-47)

In Virgil’s set-piece from the first book of the *Aeneid*, Aeneas is shown feeding emotionally on visual images of the failed defence of Troy. With his servant Achates, he has separated himself from the rest of the Trojan party, and is walking, veiled from sight (thanks to his mother, Venus) among the building-works at Carthage. All the business of civilisation, the planning, the clearing, the construction, the legislation, is going on round him. The energy of the Phoenicians warms and inspires him. At the heart of the city he comes across a magnificent half-built shrine to its tutelary deity, Juno, who, we remember, has been the implacable enemy of Troy and all Trojans ever since the judgment of Paris. Appropriately, therefore, Juno’s temple is decorated with frescoes portraying scenes from the destruction of Troy, in order, just as they happened. Aeneas is entranced. This is his own story, an objectification of his own heart’s sorrow.

The episode contrasts strikingly with Prospero’s absorbed attention during the visual spectacle of the masque, which bodies forth, in high artifice, the beneficent social consequences of Miranda’s and Ferdinand’s chaste courtship. Prospero’s obsession with preserving Miranda’s virginity until marriage (with all its dynastic and political implications) — as opposed to Caliban’s attempt to rape her and people the isle with Calibans — reflects the play’s concern with defending the magical wall of western civilisation. Miranda becomes the maiden goddess of the city.
Hence Prospero’s intense anger when he has to disrupt the masque. He has been cast in the role of Sinon (perhaps, worse still, the role of bad brother Antonio), and has mentally admitted a Trojan horse to the betrothal masque, in the form of Caliban. The city wall has been breeched inadvertently, almost farcically. Powerful energies hidden in Prospero’s Trojan horse are released into the “cloud-capped towers” speech, and we can trace their source in the Virgilian subtext. The passage (in Jackson Knight’s prose translation) reads as follows:

As Aeneas the Dardan looked in wonder at these pictures, rapt and intent in concentration, for he had eyes only for them, the queen herself, Dido, in all her beauty, walked to the temple in state, closely attended by a numerous, youthful retinue.

(42–43)

Prospero’s pageant is interrupted by his memory of Caliban; the reverie of Aeneas is broken by the entrance of Dido. Now the poetic energies behind the ‘cloud-capped towers’ speech begin to resonate more surely. Caliban becomes the catalyst of an essentially private moment of crisis in which the ancient city tragedies of Troy, Carthage and Rome pass through Prospero’s speech in epic reprise. For, in Virgil’s mythology, the source of the terrible conflict between Carthage and Rome, which continued, on and off, for a hundred years, was the curse which Dido aimed at Aeneas for betraying their love. Where Caliban’s cursing is utterly ineffectual, Dido’s curse gives rise to the Punic wars which end in the annihilation of her own city of Carthage.

The precipitation of Dido into the “cloud-capped towers” speech inevitably casts Prospero in the role of a spectral Aeneas-figure who responds to her unwelcome memory by disrupting the masque — his own image of civility, his own city. Again, there is an interesting comparison with The Rape of Lucrece because at one point Tarquin’s soul is figured as a female city, destroyed not by outside invasion, but by rebellion from within:

She says her subjects with foul insurrection
Have battered down her consecrated wall,
And by their mortal fault brought in subjection
Her immortality, and made her thrall
To living death and pain perpetuall.

(722–26)

Such tropes are variations on the Renaissance macrocosm-microcosm, where the city’s travail is mirrored in the travail of the hero, and vice versa, a notion which goes back to the Platonic correspondence between the state and man. Perhaps we are to imagine the decline and fall of Rome, the Imperial City symbolically founded by Aeneas at the expense of Dido, a source of wonder and the principal exemplum in the ponderings of writers and artists on mutability and the impermanence of life, art and civilisation.

This Virgilian undercurrent, which slides the shade of the tragic warrior-queen under (or over) the grotesque skin of Caliban, opens a fresh world of significance for Prospero’s speech. In particular, all the psychosexual drama which critics, sensing his semiotic potency, have thrust upon Caliban, is here present at a stroke. Aeneas’ encounter with Dido represents his real erotic initiation. Her entry is carefully prepared by Virgil. Aeneas follows the story of the Trojan conflict in the frescoes until he comes to his own part in it. Between this almost post-modern evocation of self-reflexivity and the entry of Dido, we meet “the fighting ranks
of the Orient, led by black Memnon” and then “battle-mad Penthesilia” (*Penthisilia furens*) leading the charge of the Amazons:

... in the midst of thousands she blazed, showing her breast uncovered with a gold circle clasped below, a warrior maid daring the shock of combat against men.

(42)

Enter Dido. There could be no clearer signal that she represents the fierce amorous distractions of the East which Aeneas must abjure if he is to fulfil his destiny as the founder of Rome. By obediently weaning himself from oriental luxury, Aeneas sets his face towards the disciplined simplicity, gravity and piety of the ideal Roman character. This suggests a more intimate sub-text for Prospero’s speech, including a potential vein of transgressive sexuality both in terms of latent incest and the politics of Empire. The potential for father/daughter incest is made fairly explicit in *Pericles* (where the king visits a brothel in which his daughter Marina is housed) and only slightly less so in *The Winter’s Tale* (where Leontes’ remarks concerning the restored Perdita are highly ambivalent). Here only the exaggerated response to the memory of Caliban remains to qualify Prospero’s feelings at having to surrender his daughter to her lover. In relation to Empire, we remember that Jupiter does not approve of ‘the blending of populations’ at Carthage. Perhaps we can register Dido and her North African literary sisters, Cleopatra (Dido’s original) and Sophonisba (another fatal distraction) linked with Caliban in psycho-geographic protest against the totalising power of Aeneas’ Rome.

In this sense, Prospero’s masque could be construed as a belated apology to Dido. In all respects, it sets out to erase the memory of the sensual liaison which threatened Rome and destroyed Carthage. Juno presides over the masque as the patroness of marriage, the protectress of women, but also the friend of Dido and Carthage. She is called on to celebrate “a contract of true love” which, in its highly principled courtship, stands in deliberate contrast to the unsanctified passion of Dido and Aeneas. Ceres is careful to ascertain that Venus and Cupid are safely *en route* to Paphos, before consenting to respond to Juno’s summons. In separating Juno from Venus, Prospero indicates that Miranda and Ferdinand have escaped the powerful alliance of goddesses which conspired to organise the passionate encounter of Dido and Aeneas in the cave. Shortly before the masque, Ferdinand tells us (4.1.26) that not even “the murkiest den! The most opportune place” will ever melt his honour into lust. “Den” is Virgil’s “*speluncam*” (4.165), used by Stanyhurst in his translation of the cave episode, (although, Douglas and Phaer use “cave”). Thomas Cooper gives both “cave” and “den” as the English equivalents (Hamilton 80).

* * *

In 1975, Glynne Wickham attempted an identification of contemporary referents in the masque, arguing that Prospero should be seen as James I, author of the *Daemonologie*, whose diplomatic skills and dynastic aspirations were being put to the test at this time in his role as marriage-broker for his daughter Elizabeth, the Princess Royal, here represented as Miranda. Great Juno, royal consort, wife and mother, here called “Highest Queen of State” he identified, appropriately enough, as Queen Anne, whose appearance as Tethys in Samuel Daniel’s masque, “Tethys Festival” the previous year (June 1610) made her retinue of nymphs and naiads in *The Tempest* a fashionable and topical reference. The suitor designate, in November 1611, was obviously a moot point. Three candidates, the King of Sweden, the Duke of Brunswick and the Prince of Nassau, had been discarded. Two others were still in
contention: the Protestant Elector Palatine, supported by James, and the Catholic Prince of Piedmont, heir to the Duke of Savoy, favoured by Anne. In the background, rumours were circulating in Court circles of a powerful dark horse, also in the running, the recently widowed King Philip of Spain. Clearly it would be both impossible and tactless for Shakespeare to attempt to prejudge a delicate diplomatic situation of this nature: the emphasis must fall on the anticipation of a brilliant outcome thanks to the King’s skill and wisdom as diplomat, peacemaker and dynastic architect.

If we accept the presiding royal figure in the masque, Prospero, as a gesture towards James I in the matchmaking role, as seems reasonable, it becomes crucial to interpret his abrupt dispersal of the celebrations compatibly. Wickham suggests briefly that Caliban’s insurrection refers to the Gunpowder treason (1603) (12), though he provides no corroborative detail. This could be so, but a more intriguing possibility is that Prospero’s disruption of the masque may constitute a covert critique of James — hence the care with which the critique is concealed beneath the rude obviousness of the comic sub-plot, whether or not a gesture towards the Gunpowder treason is intended.

All the elements of the masque, as we have seen, anticipate a return to the golden age. Prospero’s project has, in part, been dedicated to the restoration of justice, but also to the furthering of dynastic ties for the future. Similarly, the return to the golden age anticipated in the Aeneid is closely bound up with the glorification of Augustus and the imperial idea, the pax Romana. In the Fourth Eclogue, the return to the golden age is symbolised by the restoration of the reign of the virgin Astraea, or Justice, the last of the immortals, who had fled the earth at the onset of the age of iron, and took refuge in the heavens as the constellation Virgo. This strain of imagery had been deployed inventively and widely during the reign of Elizabeth as a key element in her imperial iconography (Yates, 29–87).

Glynne Wickham wants to identify the figure of Iris in Prospero’s masque with Elizabeth, largely on the basis of the congruence between Iris’s traditional emblem, the rainbow, and the double rainbow (one in her headdress, the other supporting her right hand) in the famous Rainbow portrait of Elizabeth at Hatfield house (4). The difficulty is that Ceres, too, despite the obvious incongruity in identifying a fertility goddess with the childless Virgin Queen, could also, on occasion, form part of Elizabeth’s iconography. The suggestion which occurs is that perhaps the memory of Elizabeth is present in the masque, but in a more subtle and subversive way. If we set aside the Rainbow portrait of Elizabeth, and look instead to the most famous of the ‘Sieve’ portraits, the one in Siena (cf. Yates, 114–118), we see behind the monarch’s shoulder a column decorated with a series of ten medallions portraying the story of Dido and Aeneas, starting with Aeneas’ flight from Troy and ending with Dido’s death on the funeral pyre and the departure of the Trojans. The descent from Troy was part of both Elizabethan and Jacobean royal mythology. Elizabeth holds a sieve in her hand, a reference to the Vestal virgin Tuccia, who demonstrates her chastity by carrying water in a sieve. The portrait, which alludes directly to Petrarch’s Trionfi (an inscription at the base of the column reads: ‘Stanco riposo e riposato affano,’ ‘Weary I rest and having rested I am still weary’ from Trionfo d’Amore III, 145), suggests the notion of Elizabeth as a Dido who has transcended the Triumph of Love (to which her Phoenician forbear yielded with such disastrous consequences) to enact instead the Triumph of Chastity — the second triumph in Petrarch’s Trionfi — with such conspicuous diplomatic and military success as to ensure the spread of a reformed empire. Elizabeth has triumphed, where Elissa — to give Dido her Phoenician name — failed. The warrior-Queen of the Carthaginians was often identified with Elizabeth. Stephen Orgel notes (41) that in the Dictionarium historicum (1595) of Charles Stephanus, the name appears as Eliza.
To have Prospero disrupt the vision of his anticipated dynastic triumph at the memory of Caliban who is also Dido (and therefore the submerged figure of Elizabeth) could be construed as pointed — but decently veiled — comment on some of James's more obvious follies. If Caliban's origins, as the offspring of a witch expelled from Algiers, make him, symbolically, worse than a pirate, it is utterly appropriate that his memory should disrupt Prospero's vision of golden age justice since, in Evelyn Berckman's words:

For the sudden and enormous increase of pirate cases in the Admiralty Court from 1602, there is one good and famous reason: the early action of King James I, characteristically half-witted, in cancelling all further protective action by naval patrols, and in recalling all such ships to port . . . in no time at all after the edict the ocean was alive with pirate craft, seeking whom they might devour.

And if, beneath the remembrance of Caliban, lies the figure of Dido, perhaps we might be justified in registering a reproach — not merely over James's folly in aborting her tight policies constraining piracy — but a more general contrast between James's somewhat insalubrious reputation and Elizabeth's success in maintaining and enhancing both her public and private personae as the Virgin Queen, or, in Spenser's figures, both Gloriana and Belphoebe. The future of the empire lives in his descendants (however the marriage alliances may eventually fall) and not in the character of the King.

Ferdinand, the unknown suitor, of course keeps his promise. Everything in the play moves towards the moment in Act 5 when Prospero draws aside the curtain across the entrance to his cell (probably represented by the tiring house at the back of the stage) to reveal the decorous little tableau of Miranda and Ferdinand playing a game of chess. An aristocratic pastime traditionally associated with courtship, the game mimics the greater contests Ferdinand and Miranda will face as the future rulers of Naples and Milan, and as husband and wife. An influential stream of writing on the topic presents chess as a moral exercise which rehearses the war between the virtues and vices as, for instance, in More's *Utopia* or Elyot's *Governour*. Other writers, such as Robert Burton, Montaigne and, interestingly, James I, are less enthusiastic. As far as *The Tempest* is concerned, the point seems to be that chess is a game of territory, its rules are symmetrical and, above all, it is a game in which reason must dominate the will and the passions.

Epic has here been domesticated by romance. For beneath the quiet felicity of the scene we can sense the harsh counterpoint of the equivalent episode in the *Aeneid*: the passionate, unhallowed lovemaking of Dido and Aeneas, as they shelter from the raging thunderstorm in the cave, with nymphs wailing and cavorting on the hillsides above them. This is the tempest in *The Tempest*, the mindless yet deceptive Virgillian furor against which Prospero ranges his masque of civility. Such is the power of Prospero's magic, that all that is left for Ferdinand and Miranda is a mild echo of the ancient misalliance, which we hear in their conversation at chess:

Miranda:  
Sweet lord, you play me false.

Ferdinand:  
No, my dearest love,  
I would not for the world.

Miranda:  
Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle  
And I would call it fair play.

(5.1.172-175)
Ferdinand is cheating already. Miranda accepts it flirtatiously. The old energies of Juno and Jupiter are in play again.

To conclude: What makes the "cloud-capped towers" speech special is the way in which Prospero responds to the memory of Caliban in language which issues directly from a textual reservoir consciously beyond the imagined world of the play. Throughout its course, The Tempest is in touch with the Aeneid as a determinative sub-text which helps to define its emerging present, moment by moment. The play creates itself through its rewriting, modernising and countering of Virgil's poem. But nowhere does this deliberate intertextuality enter the consciousness of a character in the play as a living, imagined reality, except at this point. Gonzalo, it is true, makes a valiant attempt to identify Tunis with ancient Carthage, but his efforts are mocked by Antonio and Sebastian as if his allusion were a specimen of rhetorical contaminatio — an eclectic allusion at odds with the text in which it surfaces. The language of Prospero's speech, on the other hand, rises into the play directly from the subtext, as if it represented privileged access to Prospero's interior being (lending this moment a curiously modern feel). This, I believe, is the reason the play's recent editors have responded so awkwardly to the speech.

The stimulus of Caliban remains comic and paltry. But it triggers in Prospero this extraordinary epic after-image — or condensed simile — in which, like the vanished masque, the towers, palaces and temples of Virgil's story appear as fleeting cloud-shapes dissolving into an empty sky. Delivered from the stage of the Globe, surrounded by the towers, palaces and temples of a rumbustious London caught in the birth-pangs of what was to become another great and doomed empire, its impact can only be imagined. This dream-like eruption of epic into the world of pastoral romance is one of the most powerful poetic effects Shakespeare ever achieved. We feel it even when we do not understand it.

NOTES

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1. Robert Brown, editor of John Pory's translation of Leo Africanus for the Hakluyt Society, writes in his notes to Book I:

   ... it is quite certain that Africa was used by the Romans in the restricted sense of being applied to the territory of Carthage, the part of Tunisia comprised in that area being still called Frikia or Ifrikia.

   (Book 1, 193)

2. Here are two random instances. Harry J. Berger, Jr. writes:

   What he [Prospero] feels this time, and for the first time, is that everything golden, noble, beautiful and good — the works of man, the liberal arts, the aspirations variously incarnated in towers, palaces, temples and theatres — that all these are insubstantial and unreal compared to the baseness of man's old stock. And not merely as vanities; but as deceptions, fantasies which lure the mind to escape from its true knowledge of darkness and which, dissolving, leave it more exposed, more susceptible, more disenchanted than before.

   (270–71)
Similarly, but more exaggeratedly, Jack D’Amico observes that:

> If we read “Our revels now are ended” as the troubled magician’s dark vision of a world where consciousness dissolves in sleep or death, no distinction finally remains between what is gorgeous and what is cankered, the beautiful and the ugly, the human and monstrous, or between the self-interest that melts conscience and the philosophy that dissolves all forms.

(207)

Such readings seem to me fundamentally mistaken. The “cloud-capped towers” speech shows Prospero struggling to ‘place’ his achievements — magical, political and dynastic — in the context of philosophy (in the classical sense), historical mutability, and human mortality. This sudden rush of insight is precipitated by the distraction of Caliban intruding upon a moment of high emotion, even of ecstasy. He attains perhaps a new degree of self-knowledge, a sense of the vastness of human possibility and his own limitation, what we might call ‘wisdom.’ This is at the the furthest remove from nihilism or primitive chaos.

3. In his *Utopia*, Thomas More writes of an imaginary chess-like game as follows:

> Dice and that kind of foolish and ruinous game they are not acquainted with. They do play two games not unlike chess. The first is a battle of numbers in which one number plunders another. The second is a game in which the vices fight a pitched battle with the virtues. In the latter is exhibited very cleverly, to begin with, both the strife of the vices with one another and their concerted opposition to the virtues; then, what vices are opposed to what virtues, by what forces they assail them openly, by what stratagems they attack them indirectly, by what safeguards the virtues check the power of the vices, by what arts they frustrate their designs; and finally, by what means the one side gains the victory.

(129)

Elyot, in the *Governour*, is similarly approving:

> The chesse, of all games wherin is no bodily exercise, is maaste to be commended; for therin is right subtile engine, wherby the wytte is mad more sharpe and remembrance quickened. And it is the more commendable and also commodiouse if the players have radde the moralization of the chesse, and whan they playe do thinke upon hit —.

(Book 1, 284–285)

Furness, in his note to the stage direction following line 171 (Here Prospera discovers Ferdinand and Miranda playing at chess) holds that Shakespeare must have been aware that:

> Naples was the source and centre of the Chess-furore, which was still at its height while his mind was teeming with the wonders of *The Tempest*.

(251)

4. Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, doubts its therapeutic value:

> Cheese-play is a good and witty exercise of the mind, for some kind of men, and fit for such melancholy (Rhasis holds) as are idle, and have extravagant impertinent thoughts or troubled with cares; nothing better to distract their mind, and alter their meditations; invented (some say) by the generall of an
army in a famine, to keep the soldiers from mutiny: but if it proceed from over much study, in such a case it may do more harm than good; it is a game too troublesome for some mens braines, too full of anxiety, all out as bad as study; besides, it is a testy cholerick game, and very offensive to him that loseth the mate.

(Part 2. Sec. 2 Mem. 4: 349)

Montaigne, though he acknowledges the game’s moral power, is positively scathing:

Why should I not judge of Alexander, as I am sitting and drinking at Table, and talking in good company? Or if hee were playing at Chesse, what string of wit doth not touch or harpe on this fond-childish, and time-consuming play? I lothe and shun it, only because there is not sport enough in it, and that in his recreation, he is over serious with us, being ashamed I must apply that attention therunto, as might be employed on some good subject. He was no more busied in levying his forces and preparing for his glorious passage into India; nor this other in disentangling and discovering of a passage, whence dependeth the well-fare and safety of mankind. See how much our mind troubleth this ridiculous amuzing, if all her sinnewes bandy not. How amply she giveth every one Law in that, to know and directly to judge of himselfe.

(Book 1, 228-29)

King James was apparently of similar opinion for, in his advice to his son in the Basilikon Doron, he urges:

As for the chesse, I think it over fonde, because it is over wise and philosophicke a follie. For where all such light plaies are ordained to free men’s heads for a term from the fashious thoughts on their affairs, it by the contrarie filleth and troubleth men’s heads with as many fashions toyes of the playe, as before it was filled with thoughts on his affaires.

(125)

5. Interestingly, Bronowski mentions chess (along with polo) as incorporating some of the tactical skills of Asian horse-riding nomads (especially the Mongols) in their assaults on fixed settlements (82).

WORKS CITED


Douglas, see Coldwell, ed.


Phaer, see Lally, ed.


