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Prospero's Magic and the Role of the Four Elements. A Reading of *The Tempest*

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Abstract
This study aims at analyzing the presence of the four elements in connection with events and characters in the play *The Tempest* from William Shakespeare, in particular in which way these fundamental principles are described, if they are part of positive harmony or if they are devious. It will be analyzed whether the characters can identify with one element or whether they may ambiguously contain the co-existence of them. Situations and dialogues are observed in order to find typical representations of the basic elements – as values of an established and divine order- juxtaposed to possible potentially dangerous shifts amongst them– as symptoms of a disruptive latent change which is lurking on society, in parallel with the strange and inexplicable change in the character of Prospero in the conclusive part of the play.

Key words: English theater, William Shakespeare's plays, dramatic characters, Prospero, Ariel, Caliban

Resumen
Este estudio analiza la presencia de los cuatro elementos en relación con los hechos y los personajes en la obra *La Tempestad* de William Shakespeare, en particular de qué manera son descritos estos principios fundamentales, si forman parte de la armonía positiva o si son tortuosos. Se analizará si los personajes pueden identificarse con un elemento o si se da ambiguamente la coexistencia de estos elementos. Situaciones y diálogos son observados para encontrar representaciones típicas de los elementos básicos –como valores de un orden establecido o divino-, a la par de posibles cambios potencialmente peligrosos –como síntomas de un cambio o ruptura latente que acecha a la sociedad en simultaneidad con el extraño e inexplicable cambio en el personaje de Próspero en la parte conclusiva de la obra.

Palabras claves: teatro inglés, obras de William Shakespeare, personajes dramáticos, Próspero, Ariel, Calibán

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"…. If you can command these elements….." (The Tempest I, i, 21)

Introduction

"The Tempest is a text that looks different in different contexts, and it has been used to support radically differing claims about Shakespeare's allegiances." (Orgel, 1987: 11). Orgel's statement conveys a basic idea of essential ambiguity, which is important to keep in mind whenever approaching this multifaceted text for criticism. Henry James had said in an introduction to the play that even though "Everything has thus been attributed to the piece before us, and every attribution so made has been in turn brushed away" the work is as "inscrutable as a divinity in a temple" (H. James: ix-xxxii). Many themes have been detected by various critics in different historical periods and they have been later negated or discarded as irrelevant. Interpretations of the play for the stage have been even more varied and controversial during the centuries. According to Harold Bloom's relatively recent reading of Shakespeare's works, *The Tempest* is "plotless" and the multiple readings provided for it do not and cannot really represent the intrinsic value of the play but simply embody the opinions of different critics whose literary theories are artificially imposed on or adapted to it (Bloom: 662). It may seem that the variables potentially contained in the play are connected to Umberto Eco's' ideas on text analysis. As he explains in his essay *Lector in Fabula*, every reader can provide a different interpretation, which can be a valid and original perspective on a work of art, a fact which seems to suit *The Tempest*. In particular, the story of the play is apt to be interpreted in different directions, even though there might be a constant risk of "superficial plausibility" as Anna Barton interestingly claims in her analysis of the Shakespearean play (Barton:22).

Thanks to his magic knowledge, Prospero unchains a terrible storm and forces the ship of a group of people, his enemies, to be stranded ashore on the little island where he has been living. This is when the narration of facts actually begins. However, later on we discover Prospero's real story by means of a long analepsis, a very detailed flashback, when he narrates past events to his daughter Miranda. A man of power, Prospero had progressively neglected his political duties and dedicated himself fully to the arts of magic, forgetting his dukedom in Milan which was for this reason usurped by his brother Antonio and his accomplice Alonso, King of Naples. Narrowly escaping death, he was helped by the trustworthy courtier Gonzalo. He had then sailed with his little daughter to a distant mysterious island where he had settled down, taking control of the territory. Meanwhile he continued developing and using the magic powers that had kept him away from his political duties. Now the time for revenge has come.

There are apparently only two creatures on the island and they are at Prospero's service: the strange wild Caliban and the ethereal spirit Ariel. His machinations seem to tend towards a terrible epilogue until Miranda, his daughter, falls in love with Ferdinand, the son of the King of Naples. A love

that is maneuvered by Prospero himself. Other plots are discovered and foiled, all intentions towards further regicide are apparently suffocated even though no clear solutions are given, thus stressing the elliptical aspect of the story. In the end, Prospero gets ready to go back to his land with all the group and, using again Genette's definitions, we are provided with a prolepsis, an image of the future which is partly described and partly left to the imagination of the reader/audience. However, the actual results are purely speculative as Prospero mysteriously and inexplicably gives up his magic just before starting the voyage back.

The themes are multiple, all plausible but all equally complex: the play may unveil ideas about political strategy, Machiavellian plots, exploiting colonialism, patriarchal ideals, magic and Faustian contexts, pastoral atmospheres and philosophical meditations. Even a metatheatrical cogitation can be traced in the setting up of the storm, the masque and the banquet which all turn out to be pure illusions. It is no wonder that the play has generated a plethora of interpretations, not to mention Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytical and post-modern readings. As appealing as they may be, all different interpretations can also prove to be easily disorienting.

Even though we accept Bloom's definition of the play as a puzzle, it is possible to detect some particular aspects in it that need careful examination for deeper insights about their meanings. One such interesting aspect is the redundant presence of the four elements (fire, air, water and earth), within the dialogues and in the context of the story, whose continuous presence and constant interactions in characters and situations require an in-depth analysis. Their recurrence in the text is significantly high and may provide several interpretative facets that could cast a different light on the story and on the protagonists. It may also suggest that the four elements are vehicular for some more important hidden meanings. Another aspect which needs careful examination is the final part of the play whose positive atmosphere is generally taken for granted by many critics, in that the end of the play is commonly seen as the solution to contrasts and conflicts and it is often considered to be the preparation of the return voyage to Milan. However, the *finale* contains some dark aspects that have to be investigated. This study aims at analyzing the presence of the four elements in the text in their denotative as well as their connotative aspects. It also intends to identify possible new hypotheses behind the ambiguous conclusion of the play.

History of Ideas and Criticism: Some Critical interpretations of the Play

According to the traditional theory on the Medieval and Renaissance world vision, inherited from Plato and Aristotle, the four elements were among the basic principles constituting the universe and were inherent in all creatures. Human beings underwent the laws of the elements which were the building blocks of existence and determined balanced links connecting all living entities. The nature and the consequent balance of every creature was the result of the

predominance of one element over the other ones: they could be either harmonious or disharmonious with relative positive or negative or even devastating consequences. The elements were part of a general equilibrium where invisible links united all creatures and where all the elements of creation were in connection. Arthur Lovejoy, who introduced the History of Ideas in the study of philosophy in the 1930s, claimed that all forms of existence were seen as part of the great chain of being, i.e. a harmonious system of symmetries ordering the world, which extended from the earth to rest of the universe. A philosopher and a promoter of critical realism, he systematically defined this particular aspect of the Christian thought which had its genesis in the principles of Greek philosophy. He claimed that Renaissance thought was inevitably imbued with structured images of the universe and "the conception of man's place in the universe" (Lovejoy: 101). In the part of his essay dedicated to the Principle of Plenitude and the new Cosmography, Lovejoy stresses in particular the role that Plato's theories had in connection to the discoveries of Copernicus and how thought was more affected by the Greek philosopher's general ideas on the world rather than on the actual scientific discoveries. Scholars of the so-called essentialist humanism, like James E. Phillips, Theodore Spencer and in particular E.M.W. Tillyard thought that the Renaissance world view coincided with an orderly cosmology and that in Shakespeare's times there was general awareness about the different elements:

> Whether or not every educated Elizabethan had it well in his mind that the ether, according to Aristotle, had its native and eternal motion, which was circular, he took the motions and the properties of the four elements for granted. The elements therefore as well as being effects were at least aspects of the common substance, and as such they had their almost ceremonial places in the great world order. (Tillyard: 68-69)

Traditionally, researchers who have concentrated on the idea of the chain of being and on the hypothesis of a global vision which was consciously or unconsciously shared by all the people belonging to the same period, have highlighted the political message and the implications of such doctrines in the works of Shakespeare. Scholars and critics have stressed how disruptive plots, both in Shakespeare and other authors, denoted an unfortunate lack of balance and represented a dangerous threat to the cosmic order of the Universe, an order which, in the case of tragedies, could not be restored. However, it has been frequently remarked that the comedies may not always have a comic or beneficial conclusion. In effect, a good number of them often include problematic situations that introduce forms of disturbing disorder into their plots. Edward Dowden had the merit of identifying problematic features in Shakespearean comedies and to coin the special terminology of Shakespeare's Problem Plays or Dark Comedies at the end of the 19th Century. They generally include *Measure for Measure, All's Well That Ends Well, Troilus and Cressida* but the variety of disturbing or dangerous plots within comedies and romances is wider as it has

been specified by a large number of studies (Dowden; Leggat; Russel Brown; Foakes; Clark). Essentialist Humanism critics as well as New Criticism theorists had emphasized the importance of the Renaissance thought and had given it values of unity and order. Robert Penn Warren and Thomas Stearns Eliot were the most important representatives of New Criticism. Their focus was mainly on the single text rather than on the historical period during which a work of art was created, but they accepted the idea of a cultural common frame. (Lentricchia:1-4). However, starting from the 1980s the critics belonging to the so-called New Historicism rejected the general cultural implications of Essential Humanism and New Criticism. They adopted the teachings of Foucault and his ideas about the 'dividing practices' that transformed people into modern subjects. Richard Wilson, for instance, demonstrates that critics have had the tendency to mystify Shakespeare, without really understanding the complex embedding of his texts in other written texts (Wilson: 8). It must be noted that the theories on New Historicism, introduced in particular by Stephen Greenblatt, Jonathan Dollimore and Stephen Orgel among others, have criticized the construction of a Renaissance myth and of generalized Renaissance ideals as they were presented by Jacob Burckhardt and later globally absorbed as a definite and unchangeable truth during the largest part of the Twentieth Century. Jean Howard underlines how new historicist theories basically denied traditional Essentialist Humanism, on the basis that:

> Man is not so much possessed of an essential nature as constructed by social and historical forces(…) For Dollimore, the late Renaissance was the age of skepticism in which in the drama in particular one finds recorded a recognition of the discontinuous nature of human identity and its social construction. (Howard: 21)

And in Dollimore's own words, "The error, from a materialist perspective, is falsely to unify history and social process in the name of 'the collective mind of people'(…) Tillyard's world picture, to the extent that it still did exist, was not shared by all" (Dollimore: 48). Debora Kuller Shuger interestingly defines the basic objections to the Elizabethan world picture by analyzing Dollimore and Greenblatt's theories:

> The new historicist critique of traditional formulation of English Renaissance thought rests on two principal objections. First, such formulations are oversimplified (…) Second, this assumption of shared belief conceals the role of 'orthodoxy' in the process of social repression and control (…). The critics of traditional historicism thus distinguish a dominant ideology or orthodoxy from a host of subversive, marginalized voices, whether those of the oppressed or of the skeptical (…)The notion of a *dominant* culture does, however, relate conceptual structures to their social matrix, since a culture is dominant in relation to a society's centre of power. (Kuller Shuger: 5)

Although he is not supporting the ideas by Tillyard on the coincidence of Shakespeare's world view with the Elizabethan world picture, in his study on Shakespeare's tragic cosmos Tom McAlindon finds contradictions in the theories of new historicism and reaffirms the importance of hierarchy and of shared images:

> The cardinal principle of pre-modern cosmology as understood by the Elizabethans was that of hierarchy or degree, they saw the world as a stratified order where everything has its appointed place and identity. Thus Shakespeare always traces the cause of chaos to the disruption of hierarchy or violation of degree in the socio-political and the psychic spheres. (McAlindon: 5)

Even if the theories of new historicism produce plausible doubts on generalized ideas shared by all contemporaries in a particular age, it is also inevitable to ascribe a common denominator of communalized ideas that Shakespeare probably absorbed from the socio-historical context of his time. As McAlindon clearly explains, mentioning an important tragedy, i.e. a famous passage in *Othello*: "The intensity with which Shakespeare imagined 'Chaos… come again'(*Othello,* III,ii, 93) is inseparable from his profound awareness of cosmos, an awareness shared by his audience" (McAlindon: 2-3). Order and Chaos are essential concepts in Shakespeare's plays. They become more relevant when the play has a 'magus' as his protagonist. Chaos could be included among the latent signs in *The Tempest,* even though *t*his idea is negated by some critics. In particular, John Mebane sees a positive vision at the heart of the play:

> One of Shakespeare' central purposes in *The Tempest* is to reflect upon the vision of humankind initiated by Renaissance humanists and carried out to its logical extreme in the occult tradition. While (…) Prospero's art is a multifaceted symbol which must be interpreted on several parallel levels, an awareness of the influence of Renaissance occult philosophy upon *The Tempest* helps to confirm that on all these levels Prospero's art is benevolent (…) Prospero's magus functions on several harmonious levels simultaneously. (Mebane: 179)

In spite of Mebane's "harmonious levels", chaos can be found in *The Tempest*, as other critics would insist. For instance, Stephen Orgel clearly summarizes in his conclusion that: "Obviously there is more to Prospero's plans than reconciliation and harmony" (Orgel, 2002: 185). Chaos is lurking because the order of the elements is artificially changed by Prospero himself who, thanks to his magic, unchains such a terrible storm that all the elements act furiously together, apparently towards destruction. The elements become devastating from the very beginning of the play and threaten to take over the world. They continue to have a constant importance during the entire development of the play. Their presence is so important that it may be supposed that Prospero's real essence is likely to

be conditioned by the majestic way he interferes with the forces of nature and how he creates disorder and unrest.

The four Elements in the Play: An Analysis of the text

The generally accepted idea of harmony in the play is epitomized by Stanley Wells' claim in his essay *Shakespeare and Romance* where he explains that "an air of deliberate unreality pervades the play; the story works towards reunion, reconciliation, and the happy conclusion of the love affair." (Wells: 70). Many critical opinions see the play as a Pythagorean example of harmoniousness interspersed with celestial music, without taking into consideration the multiple problematic situations that the story presents. According to Northrop Frye all destructive elements are erased by music: "T*he Tempest* symbolizes the destructive elements in the order of nature, and music the permanent constructive elements in it." (Frye: 117). In his analysis of Shakespeare's works, Harold Goddard considers *The Tempest* as a "more mature" play in the treatment of "fairyland", compared to *Midsummer Night's Dream*, stating that it reveals a "relation of human life to the brighter part of the spiritual world, in contrast with *Macbeth* which is connected with its darker side" (Goddard: 277). Extensive analyses of the apparent positive aspects of *The Tempest* do not take into consideration the multiple problematic nuances and various ambiguities that the story presents: "Besides containing a very unusual number of ideas adumbrated in other plays, its structure shows more plainly than any other of Shakespeare's dramas, the storm or tempest as a symbol of turmoil." (Dobrée: 165). "Turmoil" is present and it is lingering even if the setting of island has some resemblance to "paradise" (IV, i, 125). If we are to sustain the idea of the dominant thought coming from the centres of power as specified by Debora Kuller Shuger, we can infer that *The Tempest* contains a threat to the symmetrical pyramidal order of the universe and of the *status quo*, the clearest example being the theme of usurpation. Actually, the brothers (Antonio and Sebastian), who plot against their respective rulers/relatives (Prospero and Alonso), embody the menace against authority, past and present. They threaten to destroy the existing global order which is mirrored at every level of the social pyramid during and after the tempest. The general state of things was endangered by Antonio thanks to Alonso's help on the mainland but it is equally endangered now, on the mysterious island, by the lack of equilibrium in their relationships. Antonio himself is even ready to order the murder of Alonso, his most important accomplice in the past. He managed to alter the order of things when he and Prospero were both in Milan He is willing to alter them on the island by instilling the idea fratricide/regicide into Sebastian's mind. It is true that in *The Tempest* we may observe multiple forms of usurpations (either real or *in nuce*) which constitute both a threat to the order in society and to the balance of the story. As we have seen, Prospero's throne was usurped by his brother Antonio with his accomplice Alonso, king of Naples; Antonio, once more, and Sebastian, Alonso's brother, plot to usurp Alonso's throne

in a most violent way when they are on the island. Caliban, who holds a grudge against Prospero's supposed usurpation of his own soil, would like to take control of the island again, like he used to before the duke' s arrival. Even the sottish Stephano and Trinculo are eager to become Caliban's henchmen to rule over the place. Although he has the best intentions, Gonzalo would like to take possession of the island. A metaphorical usurpation is carried out by Ferdinand who replaces her father in Miranda's affection. All the various examples we have mentioned confirm the fact that usurpation is certainly an important factor in the story. However, this theme alone is not enough to explain the multiplicity of possible contexts and different explanations.

Putting apart the theme of usurpation, we still face the elements which dominate many scenes of the play. It is peculiar how the four elements *per se* have been only partially analyzed. Moreover, the attention has been focused mainly on air and earth. Ariel has been seen as a representation of the air principle whereas Caliban has been connected to earth. Kermode reports that "the observations of Schlegel, who first identified Ariel and Caliban with the elements Air and Earth, seem to have been influential" (Kermode, 1983: LXXXI). Thus Caliban, being earth should represent the lowest in the group whereas Ariel, being airy, should be a superior creature:

> Heaviest and lowest was the cold and dry element, the earth. Its natural place was the centre of the universe, of which it was the dregs. Outside earth was the region of cold and moist, the water. That solid earth should thrust itself above the waters was merely one of the many instances of an extrinsic cause making a thing depart from its own intrinsic nature. Outside water was the region of hot and moist, the air. Air though nobler than water was not to be compared with the ether for purity. Just as angels took their shapes form the ether, so the devils took theirs from the air, their peculiar region. Noblest of all is fire, which next below the sphere of the moon enclosed the globe of air that girded water and earth, it was hot and dry invisible to human sight, and was the fitting transition to the eternal realms of the planets. (Tillyard: 69)

The elements become even more important because of their extensive presence in the play which cannot be generally retrieved with such an intensity in other plays by Shakespeare[1]. Considering how important they are, also in the formation of human beings, it seems necessary to better define the representation of earth and air together with the presence of the other elements in the story, water and fire, that undoubtedly play a very important role. Besides universal orderliness, there was universal interdependence. This was implicit in the doctrine of correspondences, in the Pythagorean sense, which stated that different parts of the chain reflected other parts. When disorder was present in one realm, it was correspondingly reflected in other realms. This is particularly evident in Shakespeare's tragedies. A clear example is represented by *King Lear*, where the simultaneous disorder in family relationships and in the old ruler's state is

reflected in children who rule over their parent and the subjects who become the rulers of their king. The unstable situation is also in the confusion inside Lear's mind, who loses his reason. It can be equally found in the commotion of nature where a terrible storm is dangerously destructive. Goddard paradoxically states that "a still more interesting, if more unusual, way of taking *The Tempest* is as a sequel to *King Lear*". The two protagonists don't bear "resemblance to Lear and Cordelia. But there they are – they two alone - father and daughter, transmigrated and altered as they might be in a dream" (Goddard: 277). The basic difference is that the tragic storm is developed naturally both inside and outside Lear, whereas Prospero is the mastermind behind it. Lear even equates his loss of reason to "a tempest" in his mind. (*King Lear*, III, iv, 13):

> Lear: Thou think'st 'tis much that this contentious storm
> Invades us to the skin. So 'tis to thee;
> But where the greater malady is fix'd,
> The lesser is scarce felt. Thou'dst shun a bear;
> But if thy flight lay toward the raging sea,
> Thou'dst meet the bear i' th' mouth. When the mind's free,
> The body's delicate. The tempest in my mind
> Doth from my senses take all feeling else
> Save what beats there. Filial ingratitude!
> Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand
> For lifting food to't? But I will punish home!
> No, I will weep no more. In such a night
> 'To shut me out! Pour on; I will endure.
> In such a night as this! O Regan, Goneril!
> Your old kind father, whose frank heart gave all!
> O, that way madness lies; let me shun that!
> No more of that. (*King Lear*, III, iv, 7-23)

The tempest is even more dramatic for Lear as it is indirectly caused by the lack of love from his daughters and the misunderstanding with the only loving one, an ordeal which is not to be found in Prospero' s story. Moreover, as in the sonnets mentioned before, Lear's experience of the storm is subjective and it is not shared by many other characters, as it happens in *The Tempest*.

In spite of their claims, even new historicists may not deny that Renaissance thinkers viewed a human being as containing a microcosm that reflected the structure of the world as a whole, the macrocosm, the Earth and the Universe. The physician and alchemist Paracelsus affirmed that: "The first separation wee speake must begin from man, because hee is the Microcosme or little world, for whose sake the Macrocosme was made". (Linden: 160). Just as the world was thought to be composed of four "elements" (earth, water, air, fire), so was the human body composed of four substances called "humours," with characteristics corresponding to the four elements. Illness occurred when there was an imbalance or disorder among the humours, namely, when they did not exist in

proper proportion, or when there was excess of one of the elements. Though the Elizabethan world picture has been questioned by recent critics, the presence of the four elements in Shakespeare still plays an important role for the "scientific" theory, which can be found in McAlindon's approach:

> Shakespeare's understanding of nature was fundamentally traditional. Although the new science had already begun to change the whole picture of the universe and of humankind's relation to it, there are no signs of this revolution in his work. On the contrary he made full use of the established cosmological ideas (…) Fundamental to this system was the correspondence of the macrocosm and the microcosm and the fourfold of binary opposites inherent to all things – the elements (earth, water, air and fire), the qualities (heat and cold, moisture and dryness), and, in man alone, the humours (choler, melancholy, blood and phlegm). (McAlindon: 4)

Even though McAlindon's statement "that there are no signs of new science revolution in his work" may be questionable, it is nevertheless possible to determine that there is more about air and earth as well as water and fire. It is also necessary to keep in mind the dialectical aspect of the contents and how all elements have a 'bipolar' potential, good when harmonious and evil when disharmonious. This dichotomy can be negative in the Heraclitian sense which conceives the world as conflict and change, or positive in the Empedoclean[2] cosmos where chaos and order are reconciled. The purpose of this analysis is to show that the incorporation of the theory of the elements in *The Tempest* is much more problematic than it is generally assumed. The initial terrible storm is in a confusing and horrifying *medias res*, in that we are the instant witnesses of a storm which has already started and it is in the maximum of its fury. The tempest immediately introduces the different elements in their most frightening aspect: The "wild waters in (the) roar" (I,ii, 2) are getting a "stinking pitch" (I,ii, 3) from the sky, air is "wind bursting" (I,i,7) and there's "fire" (I,ii, 5) in the form of lighting. The only safe element is apparently the earth which, however small, can provide shelter even if it only offers "barren ground, long heath, brown furze,"(I,i,66). The steady simple earth is in contrast with the other three elements, water, air and fire which are unchained in a dangerously violent way. The interplay of the different elements and their everlasting presence is constant from the very beginning to the final lines of the play. After the turbulent initial moments, where all the elements contribute to general chaos, most characters continue referring to them in their speeches or embody them depending on their moods or their different inclinations. The elements are on the island and around it, they are mentioned by the characters and they are at the same time part of their essence. They are not simply mentioned by the characters but they constitute both the island and the people who inhabit it. Prospero is the character who is most intimately associated with the elements: he summons them and he reiterates their presence in the whole play, even towards its conclusion, before uttering the final words in his memorable speech in the mysterious epilogue. He mentions them

extensively: one passage is particularly striking for the abundance of the elements and it exemplifies the tenor of the entire text:

> I have bedimmed
> The noontide sun, called forth the mutinous winds,
> And twixt the green sea and the azured vault
> Set roaring 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. (V, I, 41-48)

The pervasive, almost obsessive, presence of the elements, which is, as we have already mentioned, remarkably higher than in other Shakespearean plays, confirms the complexity of the theme. The wild concentration of elements in *The Tempest* is even more spectacular and dense as the play actually represents the epilogue of a story that happened years before and of which we can get traces through summaries and flashbacks in the dialogues of the different characters, as Kermode well described:

> The play begins when the events of the *fabula* are near their end, with the ship buffeted by a storm and its occupants cast up on to the island. It then treats of the various confrontations between Prospero (with his assistants) and, on the other side, his brother and his associates. (Kermode, 2000: 286)

In particular we discover what happened twelve years before when Prospero narrates: "a series of events which took place 'there' (Milan) and 'then' in the dark backward abysm of time" (Berry: 83). The 'there' and 'then', where the elements are strangely not mentioned, has been replaced by a mysterious unidentified venue in the middle of water. The importance of the four elements is therefore not only special but it also has a temporal dimension. It is important to notice the phrase "abysm of time" (I, ii, 50) pronounced by Prospero. Water is not only the physical space element, it is also the symbol of an infinite chronology.

Water

Water is the primeval element and it is awfully dangerous as well sweet and appealing. A harmonious presence of water can be traced in the "fresh springs" (I,ii, 338) on the island. It can be found in the "Naiads" of the Masque (IV, I, 128), who, in Greek mythology, were the peaceful and delicate water-nymphs presiding over fountains, wells, springs and brooks. The Naiads were associated with fresh water and they conveyed a sense of purity and delicacy. Ariel appears as a "water-nymph" (I,ii, 310-320), its airy nature becoming watery, an aspect which

creates ambiguity and demonstrates the interchangeable presence of the different elements even within the same character, who cannot be identified with a single form. It is also interesting to remember that water, together with air and fire, was the element of purification for the souls in purgatory in Virgil's Aeneid, as it was clearly explained by Ian Kott in his analysis of the play (Kott: 113). The dangerous and stormy water of the sea could represent the purification for the sinning souls of King Alonso and his courtiers, but it may be the cause of change in Prospero as well. If we are to consider the theory of proportion of the elements, that we quoted before, we discover that the occurrence of water is excessive. The word "water" and "sea" are repeated fifty times in the text[3] compared to the thirty-four occurrences of air and the fifteen occurrences of "earth". The word "fire" has not the same frequency of quotations (eleven times) but it is present in the denotations and connotations of its essence. The menacing presence of water can be experienced at the beginning of the play directly in the terrifying storm but it can also be felt as a latent and pseudo negative entity during the whole story until its very end. Water is the element that surrounds the island and separates the protagonists from the rest of the world. It is embodied in the majestic stormy sea and it is the azure obstacle separating Prospero and his companions from the mainland at the end of the play. As we have seen before, the "wild waters in (the) roar" (I,ii, 2) turn the voyage of the King of Naples and his court into a horrible nightmare, they destroy the social order within the ship. No symbols of power can be maintained and the agitated water is not only threatening the life of people on board during the storm, it is creating an irregular human condition where pyramidal order no longer exists, replaced by an everlasting fluidity, where no human power can rule, as the boatswain exclaims: "You are a councillor, if you can command these elements" (I, i, 20). Even when the King, the courtiers and the crew sparsely land on Prospero's island, order is not immediately restored. Water takes on many other forms: it is presented as a "liquor" (mentioned as such for the first time in II, ii 21), in the form of the wine which obnubilates the minds of Trinculo, Stephano and Caliban. Water surrounds everything and everybody, it is the majestic entity which apparently drowned Ferdinand to his father's despair. But it is also the abyss which violently took his father away in Ferdinand's mind. It is an anguishing and engulfing presence introduced by the alliterative verse "which anticipates the metaphorical design that emerges though the dialogue of the whole play"(Brower: 166):

> Full fathom five thy father lies:
> Of his bones are coral made:
> Those are pearls that were his eyes:
> Nothing of him that doth fade
> But doth suffer a sea-change
> Into something rich and strange. (I,ii, 397- 402)

Most important, water is the mysterious element to which Prospero himself appeals before preparing the journey back home at the very end of the play,

which, however, we never actually witness. He promises a safe journey to the other characters:

> In the morn
> I'll bring you to your ship, and so to Naples (…)
> I'll deliver all,
> And promise you calm seas… (V,i, 307-316)

When Prospero is alone he hopes his "sails" will have a safe navigation, thus creating serious doubts about his concrete capacity to actually save the group and control the sea, as water had been connected so far with "drowning" "sinking" and "sea-sorrow". This aspect is ambiguous and it can hide deeper meanings. In this respect, it is interesting to mention the work of the Renaissance philosopher and magician, Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535), published some decades before the creation of *The Tempest*. He dedicates a section of his book on Magic to the essential interactions of the elements. In the following section he defines the importance of the elements with a particular attention to water:

> The other two Elements, viz. Water, and Air, are not less efficacious than the former; neither is nature wanting to work wonderfull things in them. There is so great a necessity of Water, that without it no living thing can live. No Hearb [herb], nor Plant whatsoever, without the moistening of Water can branch forth. In it is the Seminary vertue of all things, especially of Animals, whose seed is manifestly waterish. The seeds also of Trees, and Plants, although they are earthy, must notwithstanding of necessity be rotted in Water, before they can be fruitfull; whether they be imbibed with the moisture of the Earth, or with Dew, or Rain, or any other Water that is on purpose put to them. For Moses writes, that only Earth, and Water bring forth a living soul. But he ascribes a twofold production of things to Water, viz. of things swimming in the Waters, and of things flying in the Aire above the Earth. And that those productions that are made in, and upon the Earth, are partly attributed to the very Water,(…) Thence it was that Thales of Miletus, and Hesiod concluded that Water was the beginning of all things, and said it was the first of all the Elements, and the most potent, and that because it hath the mastery over all the rest. For, as Pliny saith, Waters swallow up the Earth, extinguish flames, ascend on high, and by the stretching forth of the clouds, challenge the Heaven for their own: the same falling become the Cause of all things that grow in the Earth. Very many are the wonders that are done by Waters(…) (Agrippa Von Nettesheim: 44)

From the very first chapters of his *Occult Philosophy*, Agrippa extensively describes the elements and while he defines their importance, he gives prominence to water as the basic fundamental entity necessary for all the other elements and for all creatures. He gives more importance to water compared to other occultists

or even to the original Aristotelian doctrine. The idea of the majesty of water is in partial contrast with other studies where this element is defined as cold and moist, or even inferior to other elements. In general, it is not given the emphasis we can find in Agrippa von Nettesheim in the text he wrote about Magic or the importance it is given in the Shakespearian *Tempest*. The elements are part of a philosophical corpus of research, their presence being the object of study of the ancient Greek philosophers and in particular of Plato and Aristotle but they also represent one of the essential components in texts about magic which were common also during the period of Humanism and Renaissance. Anna Zambelli remarks that Trithemius, Cornelius Agrippa and many others quote from Marsilio Ficino and from Pico, in particular, even though Pico's magic is "less natural" than in Cornelius Agrippa and generally as "dichotomous" as in Francis Bacon, who however "relegates magic to a negative semantic level". (Zambelli: 49-50). Prospero promises "calm seas" (V, i, 316) to the other characters on the island, envisaging a bright future which is opposite and symmetrical to the agitated world shattered by waves of the beginning. Prospero's statement is absolutely contradictory as he performs no invocation nor does he use any special powers or devices[4]. There is no clear or evident use of magic, which he supposedly abandoned moments before. In addition to this, he had claimed earlier : "I'll drown my book" (V, I, 57), communicating to the other people on the island (and to the public) that he was abandoning his magic art. For these reasons his promise of calm seas becomes problematic, as it is not totally credible. Water is the place of unfathomable secrets for all the characters and for Prospero in particular, even though he appears to be part of them. The relationship between Prospero and the sea is stronger than his interaction with Ariel and is even more complex and dense with meanings than his emotional connection to his daughter Miranda.

Earth

Even though there are fewer of them, compared to water, important segments of the play are dedicated to earth. Conversely, the recurrence of the earthly elements has been variously annotated by critics, more than the redundant water aspects, because it has been generally linked to the presence of Caliban and his earthly essence. In particular, *The Tempest* has been defined as a Pastoral play. Robert Miola, in his study about the bard's readings, defines the play as the culmination of the Pastoral genre and underlines the abundance of life and vegetation. This abundance represents the element earth but it is not as bucolic as a pastoral work may suppose. Earth does not only embody a pastoral idea. In effect Prospero talks about a "bare island" where he feels he is "confined" (V, I, 320-326), conveying a negative connotation of the place which finally corresponds to his brother Antonio's opinion uttered in Act II, scene I (35-40). Ferdinand names it "a prison" (I,ii, 491-494), even though it is acceptable for the presence of Miranda. In Ariel's song, the island is described as "yellow sands" (I, ii, 375). Adrian calls the island a "desert", "uninhabitable and almost inaccessible" (II,i, 36-40). Gonzalo's words

"How lush and lusty the grass looks! How green" (II,I, 53) represent an exception and a counterpoint to Adrian's words and a positive view of the surrounding earth. However, the element Earth is not only represented in the ambivalent and controversial beauty of the island. It is mostly embodied by Caliban in its allegedly potential negative traits of the element, as defined by Prospero's cruel words:

> We cannot miss him. He does make our fire,
> Fetch in our wood, and serves in offices
> That profit us. What ho, slave! Caliban!
> Thou earth, thou, speak! (I,ii,312-315)

Also in other characters' points of view, Caliban represents earth in its basest aspect even though he respects and appreciates nature: he knows where "the qualities o' th' isle" reside, he knows and delights in its fertility and its "fresh springs" (I, ii, 335-340). Surprisingly, also Miranda is defined in a way which is connected to earth. Her father calls her "Poor worm"(III,I, 32) in one aside. The expression "refers to any small creature; used variously to express affection, as here, or contempt; also a source of infection" (Orgel, 1987: 153). Even if it may be an affectionate expression, there is always a nuance of ambivalence in the value of the words and of the images. Although Caliban is thought to represent earth in its uttermost negative traits, other characters show similar characteristics in their attachment to earthly appetites, which are negative for Antonio, Sebastian, Trinculo and Stephano. As we have seen before, Antonio and Sebastian are interested in earthly domains. They despise the beauty of the island as it is not exploitable from their points of view, their idea of earth being Naples and Milan. In their opinion, the land on the island smells as if "twere perfumed by a fen" and "the ground indeed is tawny". (II,I, 49-55). Sebastian and Antonio consider the island as an "inaccessible… desert"(II,i, 36-39): in their opinion it is sterile and useless. They are so greedy about the possession of the dukedoms and reigns on the mainland that they don't seem to appreciate the natural and wild aspect of the island or its special beauty. On the other hand, Stephano and Trinculo, who are constantly drunk and addicted to wine and earthly pleasures, are willing to conquer the island and become Caliban's new masters and potential accomplices in the planned elimination of Prospero. They are very similar to Caliban, showing a lower aspect of human nature, namely earth in its most abject aspects. Prospero, too, is attached to the earthly elements since he is the master of the 'earth' on the island. Strangely enough, he was not able to manage the 'earth' of his own dukedom, as he lost it, a contrast which is emphasized by his being "hurried aboard a barque" then to "a butt" and "hoist(ed) to th'sea". (I,ii,144-150). He does not seem to like the earth of the island, he only uses it. By contrast, earth seems to have a positive connotation for the courtier Gonzalo who would like to be king on the island, as he appreciates the nature he can observe around him. In spite of the restricted space of the island, Ferdinand is able to imagine it as a paradise thanks to his love for Miranda. The element earth depends on subjective visions. It is impossible to define it either positively or negatively,

it is a constant oscillation between good and bad. Therefore Earth, like Water, presents a duality of forms in the play and a dichotomous essence. A positive earthly element is Ceres who appears in the Masque. The mythological creature represents the goddess of earth and the patroness of agriculture. She conveys the idea of the good mother earth and of fertility even though she suddenly dissolves because she is part of a magical illusion. For Rafael Lyne the end of Ceres' scene introduces a chaotic element, partially sensual and partially gloomy, with the entrance of the reapers, ambivalent creatures, often considered as harbingers of a gloomy symbology:

> Indeed the masque ends in a romping dance of reapers which suggests sexuality and licence rather than chastity. The reapers also evoke death, a strange presence on such an occasion. So Prospero's show gets a little out of control. (Lyne: 48)

In spite of the strange ending of her appearance, Ceres, who is impersonated by the airy Ariel[5], provides a positive message which represents the future, outside the island. The ambiguity of the dancers-reapers coming after her can suggest either positive or deadly images. Despite the latent problematic context that follows her lines, Ceres brings ideas of fertility to the union of Miranda and Ferdinand:

> Earth's increase, foison plenty,
> Barns and ganers never empty,
> Vines with clust'ring 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, 110-117)

"The benediction undoes the effects of Ceres' allusion to the rape of Proserpine" (Orgel, 1987: 177). There will be eternal summer and plenty of crops for the two lovers: Ferdinand and Miranda can enjoy limitless gifts and abundance from the Earth. They are promised the 'prosperity' which is part of Miranda's father name. The other spirit impersonating Juno, another symbol of earth and prosperity, wishes the couple a bountiful union:

> Honour, riches, marriage-blessing,
> Long continuance, and increasing,
> Hourly joys be still upon you! ((IV, i, 106-108)

Yet, some lines pronounced by Prospero's later on in Act V contain strange hints to Earth which cannot be easily deciphered, especially when he mysteriously claims:

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, oped, and let 'em forth
By my so potent art. (V,i, 46-49)

This statement by Prospero is disturbing because it goes beyond the tempest and all the events that have been so far described. It is not only "initiating the spectator in the mysteries of the night" (Tieck: 60) in a gloomy and Gothic way. Indeed, it seems to reveal some dangerous secrets that cannot be fully understood, an unspeakable power of life and death: "It is the most powerful assertion of his magic the play gives us. It is also a powerful literary allusion, a close translation of a speech of Medea's in Ovid, and it makes at least one claim for Prospero that is made nowhere else in the play" (Orgel, 2002: 183). It is nebulous and tragically full of anguish, there is no clarity about the nature of the sleepers that Prospero awakened, the real level of magic that he performed and what consequences these actions may have. According to Barbara Mowat, Prospero's magical identity can be read in different ways. Some critics see him as "the Renaissance philosopher-magus or theurgist, who exercises the supernatural powers of the holy adept" while other critics claim that Prospero is the "potentially damned sorcerer who shows in his actions something infinitely more malevolent than the positive magic claimed for the magus" (Mowat: 282).

Air

The airy element takes on multiple forms and meanings during the development of the story. The impalpable air is presented as dangerous and even lugubrious at the very beginning during the sea-storm. In a most dramatic moment, the boatswain urges the storm: "burst thy wind" (I,I, 7). Later, in Miranda's words, "the sky, it seems, would pour down its stinking pitch" and the sea is "mounting to th' welkin's cheek" (I,ii, 3-4). In Prospero's remembrance of his first journey to the island "the winds (…) did us but loving wrong" (I,ii, 150-151). When Ariel recounts the details of the storm he speaks about riding the "curled clouds" (I,ii, 192). Antonio's mood is described as "cloudy" by Gonzalo (II,ii 138), as if Antonio could embody the negative characteristics of air. It must be noted that all elements combine their negative traits inside Antonio, thus confirming his corrupted essence. In Act III, while playing the role of Prospero's doppelganger in order to frighten the group of courtiers, Ariel uses strong expressions saying that the sea: "hath caused to belch up you" (III,iii, 55). The sentence introduces a highly negative connotation of air linked to the courtiers. It is then said that their swords may "wound the loud winds" (III,iii,63). Air can be 'winds' that blow during the tempest (I, i, 7), the "winds" that Prospero remembers of his journey to the island (I,i, 150), the "sharp winds" Ariel has "to run upon" (I,ii, 254). Air can turn into "mountain winds" (I,ii, 500) that represent the freedom for Ariel. The "mutinous

winds" (V,i, 42) are the frightful makings of Prospero. Then they are defined in a positive way when they are in the present: "airy charms" (V,i, 54) or in the future: "auspicious gales" (V,i, 314) and "gentle breath" (V, i, 329), as conceived by Prospero's hopes. Air is present throughout the play under other forms. It is defined several time as a "spirit" or "spirits". The term is frequently found in the stage directions of the play as well, as it can be seen in the Dramatis Personae, which represents evidence of the existence of more creatures on the island:

> ARIEL, an airy Spirit
> IRIS, represented by Spirits
> CERES, represented by Spirits
> JUNO, represented by Spirits
> NYMPHS, represented by Spirits
> REAPERS, represented by Spirits
> DOGS, represented by Spirits
> Other Spirits attending on Prospero (*The Tempest*, List of Characters)

"Spirit" in the singular is the vocative employed by Prospero many a time to call or refer to Ariel therefore it has an ethereal value. Miranda uses the term to describe Ferdinand's admirable beauty (I, ii, 410-412) that has its counterpart in Miranda's wonderful appearance "O you wonder" (I,ii,424):

> MIRANDA What is't? – a spirit?
> Lord, how it looks about! Believe me, sir
> It carries a brave form. But 'tis a spirit. (I,ii, 410-412)

Antonio uses the term ironically: "a spirit of persuasion" (II,i, 233) referring to Gonzalo and his desire to soothe Alonso, crazed with fear about his son Ferdinand' s supposed death. "Spirit" is a synonym for fear in Caliban when he is afraid of Ariel's punishments. Prospero talks of "spirits" in the plural many times (five repetitions), even in his last monologue whereas Ferdinand, Caliban, Alonso, Gonzalo, Antonio, Stephano and even Francisco, one of the lords, all mention the word respectively, either to define their inner feelings, to refer to the strange entities populating the island or to try to explain its magically mysterious atmosphere. It is interesting to notice the various forms taken by air but it is equally important to underline the subjectivity of impressions on the airy element which is different in every single character. Another term which is recurrently connected with air is "invisible". In this case it is Prospero who pronounces it and defines the quality of Ariel and the other spirits he has evoked. Prospero. the magus, is aware of the characteristics of spiritual creatures. Mentioning invisibility and anaphorically referring to it is like denying its value or at least demonstrating his superiority to this characteristic, which he alone can recognize:

> PROSPERO Hast thou, spirit,
> Perform'd to point the tempest that I bade thee? (I,ii, 194-195)

The Masque is a sort of prosopopeia of air and gives Prospero the opportunity to muse about illusion, explaining to Ferdinand that reality is represented as seeming rather than being. Prospero tells him that the visions they just had:

> Are melted into thin 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 of. (IV, I, 150-157)

This piece of dialogue has been interpreted in various ways. What matters here is that it appears to deny all the promises of happiness just uttered before. The basic message is the vanishing of everything into "thin air", as in a reign of pure illusion. Air is the windy blow of the tempest but is also the ether symbolized by Ariel who, being a spirit, should be superior in scale to Prospero, who is human. However, the mysterious invisible and ethereal creature is at the service of the exiled Duke of Milan, therefore there is an unstable situation which does not seem to be part of the natural and supernatural order. He is promised by his master to be set free like "mountain winds" (I,ii, 500) but there is no freedom allowed within the text that we can actually witness, as it is always postponed to the future, even in their last dialogue:

> ARIEL [*aside to Prospero*]
> Was't well done?
> PROSPERO [*aside to Ariel*]
> Bravely, my diligence, thou shalt be free (V, I, 240-241)

It is not clear whether this statement by Prospero has a performative value, namely whether the words uttered by Prospero actually set the spirit free or whether there is a form of deceit behind it. Ariel does not speak anymore but his airy presence still lingers on, determined by anaphoric and deictic words pronounced by Prospero, when he is summoned once more to help his master and the group in their voyage back:

> I'll deliver all,
> And promise you calm seas, auspicious gales,
> And sail so expeditious that shall catch
> Your royal fleet far off. My Ariel, chick,
> That is thy charge. Then to the elements
> Be free, and fare you well – Please you draw near (V,I, 313-318)

Although the creature does not reply anymore, the words enunciated by Prospero provide clear evidence that he is still linked to Ariel, even at the very end of the play. Last but not least, another important aspect of the air element can be found in the rainbow, embodied by the beautiful Iris in the masque. Iris transmits the impalpable and pure nature of air, she is the "many-coloured messenger (…) with saffron winds" whose "blue bow does crown (Ceres's) bosky acres" (IV, i, 76-81). She exalts the virtues of Venus, "cutting the clouds towards Paphos". The Goddess is flying to Cyprus and she has put her "wanton charm upon this man and maid",(IV, I, 93-95), that is Ferdinand and Miranda. Their love is apparently blessed by superior beings. Celestial creatures protect the fire of their passion.

Fire

Although the word "fire" is rarely present in the play, as we mentioned before, the element is present in denotations and connotations of the word. It contains the same dichotomy that characterized the other elements. Fire is passion and love in its positive aspects whereas it is connected to fury and rage in its negative manifestations. It is in the dangerous lightning of the tempest that Miranda describes: "the sea, mounting to th' welkin's cheek" of the sky, dashes the fire out" (I, ii, 3-5). Ariel indulges the need to describe the tempest and his change into an entity of fire, thus reconfirming his protean capacity for transformation from one element to the other. He dives "into the fire":

> Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin,
> Flamed amazement. Sometime I'd divide
> And burn in many places; on the topmast,
> The yards and bowsprit would I flame distinctly,
> Then meet and join. Jove's lightning, the precursors
> O' th'dreadful thunder-claps, more momentary
> And sight-outrunning were not; the fire and cracks
> Of sulphurous roaring (…) but felt a fever of the mad
> (…) then all afire with me" (I,ii, 198-212)

Ariel clearly shows here that he can be a devastating force, apparently incompatible with the other milder aspect of air and earth described in the previous sections. During the tempest Ariel can be terrifying, he can urge the sea into "wild waters" (I,ii, 2) and at the same time he provokes "flame amazement" and he can "burn in many places" (I,ii, 198-199). He seems to share the extreme qualities of his master. Ariel and Prospero's somehow devastating fire has a destructive strength in contrast with the constructive force of passionate love in Ferdinand and Miranda. Prospero can be inflamed by a similar but totally inexplicable rage, which is witnessed by a rather puzzled Ferdinand and a Miranda who barely recognizes her father in his abnormal fit of rage:

FERDINAND This is strange. Your father's in some passion
That works him strongly.
MIRANDA Never till this day
Saw I him touched with anger, so distempered (IV, i, 142-146)

Prospero later acknowledges his strong passionate feeling of revenge against his enemies which is a connotation of fire. He admits unchaining "passion" like other human beings but he is ready to use his "nobler reason 'gainst" his "fury" (V,i, 24-26). It may seem that he is willing to eliminate the negative side of the element that was burning inside him. Prospero qualifies the love between Ferdinand and Miranda in a potentially negative way when he suggests that "The strongest oaths are straw To th' fire i' th' blood" (IV,i, 52-53). On the contrary, the good aspect of fire is part of Ferdinand's passion[6] and it makes him feel all the harmonious qualities of the elements through a delicate music which is everywhere, "I' th' air or th' earth, …upon the waters…"(I,ii, 388-392). Passion is a fire that can evoke the other elements. A strong connotation of the element can be found in the mutual feeling Ferdinand and Miranda experience, it is the superior force of love that nevertheless has destructive latent powers, especially when Miranda claims she "would the lightning had burnt those logs that you [Ferdinand] are enjoined to pile" (III, i, 16-17). The spirit Iris mentions the element fire when "Hymen's torch be lighted" (IV,i, 97) in her speech to describe the delights of love in marriage and the ever burning flame of love. The nature of Fire in the play is connected with extreme, turbulent and destructive forces of which Ariel and Prospero are the most important embodiments. Fire is equally strong but positive when it takes the form of passion for Ferdinand and Miranda, even though there might be latent dark sides in it.

Prospero and The Four Elements acting together

Like an almighty presence and like no other Shakespearean character before him, Prospero interferes with all the elements[7]. Thanks to his magic he can control and mould water, he dominates earth, he commands air, he has a passionate force of fire which is superior to all the other elements. His supernatural ability to mould the elements is apparently suffocated and eliminated in the very end. Prospero can command all the elements and is able to control them magically through Ariel, he can interfere with "..the ooze of the salt deep….the sharp wind of the north…the veins of th'earth", (I, ii, 252-256). He can have power on them physically through Caliban, whom he orders to prepare his "fire…and wood"…. and to find "the fresh springs"(I, ii, 310,-338) for him. But he is not the only one. Ariel seems to express pride about his faculties when he clearly utters his majestic power:

You fools! I and my fellows
Are ministers of Fate – the elements

> Of whom your swords are tempered may as well
> Wound the loud winds, or with bemocked-at stabs
> Kill the still-closing waters as diminish
> One dowl that's in my plume. My fellow ministers
> Are like invulnerable." (III, iii, 60-65)

Apart from the unusual vehemence with which the "delicate" Ariel expresses himself, here again we find that the words convey a deliberate vague meaning as we cannot ascertain who the "fellow ministers" may be. When Prospero supposedly releases Ariel, he proclaims: "Then to the elements, be free, and fare thou well" (V, i, 517). Prospero reiterates, as he did in his previous passionate and ambiguous monologue[8], that his power is unlimited. The elements are in turmoil: they were frightening at the beginning of the story and were the symbol of some terrible upheaval, they are now apparently calm, when the group on the island is ready to set off again. The disorder of the elements could be a metaphor: their lack of stability, determined by the remarkable prevalence of water, could symbolize the anguish of a dying century and of an era which is dissolving. Changeable water, which is supposed to be the minor element, is the really dominating one. The highly connotative expression "sea-change", used by Ariel to communicate to Ferdinand his father's death by sea, acquires a special relevance in the text and can be identified as a leitmotiv in the story. Steve Mentz develops his analysis on the importance of the sea from it: "these lines address the physical and metaphorical qualities of the ocean. The 'sea-change' into something rich and strange" (Mentz: 1). Ian Kott noticed the prevalence of the marine element in *The Tempest* and its mythic geography which he connected to Homer, Virgil and Ovid*:*

> Ariel's music draws Ferdinand just as the music of the Sirens tempted Odysseus' companions. (…) Shakespeare took the most dangerous Prospero's spells from Medea in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (…) The imaginary scenery of Prospero's island is astonishingly similar to the tiny islet on the Carthaginian coast in the *Aeneid* to which the refugees from Troy swam after the shipwreck. (Kott: 71)

Water is undoubtedly a very, if not the most, important metaphoric presence in the text. Prospero is the powerful symbol of the Renaissance Prince and the Man of infinite culture. However, dangerous plots destabilized his domain and may destroy him once more on the island over which he exercises his absolute sovereignty. We do not know what will be happening afterwards. Prospero's words in the epilogue are ambiguous since he, the one who dominated the elements, is apparently at their complete mercy now. We leave the characters on the island. An unpredictable sea, "an abysm of time", is still separating them from the mainland.

Hypotheses and Conclusions

The harmony of the universe has proven to be unstable and the future is uncertain. Prospero is the Renaissance man who played the Alchemist with the elements and thought he could be like God. He wanted to control them and he partially modified them. In so far as Prospero represents pneumatology in drama, he shows a vast knowledge of magic in the Renaissance context and can represent the figure of the philosopher-magus. "The 'practising magician' was the magician of contemporary actuality as distinguished from the legendary Merlin, a wholly literary figure" (Hunter West: 57). Frances Yates affirms that:

> Prospero, the beneficient magus, uses his good magical science for utopian ends. He is the climax of the long spiritual struggle to which Shakespeare and his contemporaries had been engaged. He vindicates the Dee science and the Dee conjuring. (Yates: 188)

Prospero has been studying his precious magic books in-depth: his "library was a dukedom large enough" for him (I, ii, 109-110). He has been using magic. Yet the definitions by Hunter West and Yates do not to seem to fit him after the short analysis we have carried out. He does not seem to "vindicate the Dee science and the Dee conjuring", on the contrary, he appears to be publicly rejecting his powers when he clearly affirms he is going to "abjure this rough magic" (V,i, 50-51). Curiously enough, Prospero's supernatural powers are accompanied by distress and anxiety which characterize his behavior and are not divine-like feelings. This characteristic in Prospero has been interestingly emphasized by Stephen Greenblatt:

> Since Prospero's art has in effect created the conspiracy as well as the defense against the conspiracy, and since the profession of infirmity comes at the moment of his greatest strength, we may conclude that we are witnessing the practice of salutary anxiety operating at the centre of the play's world, in the consciousness of Prospero himself, magician, artist, and prince. (Greenblatt: 145)

Francis Barker and Peter Hulme do not share this vision and in spite of the liberating moment of anagnorisis, they detect negativity in the final context. The revelation of Miranda and Ferdinand's love and the discovery about the real causes of the tempest are two epiphanies which apparently represent the real *dénouement.* On the contrary, as we have said, Barker and Hulme find the conclusion highly problematic. The finale seems to remove all predicaments from the story but other difficulties appear. They state that the "sudden and strange disturbance of Prospero" (Barker, Hulme: 202) remains a key dramatic moment. Prospero will have to go back to his old place but he does not know what will happen. The journey back to Naples and to Milan is like the journey of man into the new Century, that has recently begun. This return, which represents the

nostos in ancient Greek literature, does not actually take place as the play ends before the new voyage towards the mainland begins. The image is frozen, the characters become silent, the only person remaining on stage is Prospero and his words, forming an ambiguous monologue full of mysterious symbolism. The new atmosphere is in total contrast with the previous parts of the play. We may talk of a form of emotional paralysis, as a refusal to go back to reality. This refusal to return is explained in archetypal terms by Joseph Campbell:

> The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labour of bringing the runes of wisdom, the golden fleece, or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand world. But the responsibility has been frequently refused. (Campbell: 195)

What is interesting here is that Prospero does not return to his homeland, at least there is no proof he will do it. Parts of the final monologue contain problematic words which make Prospero unrecognizable[9]. His "high charms"(III,iii,88) do not work anymore, his strength is "most faint" (V, Epilogue, 3), he is "confined" (V, Epilogue, 4). He also claims that his "ending is despair" (V, Epilogue, 15). A form of ambiguous *melancholia* seems to have taken possession of him. The strange feeling, that is represented in other male characters[10] in Shakespeare, has mysterious origins and can have different explanations. It was not only common in literary works but it was also part of reality. In the 1628 extended medical study on melancholy by Robert Burton, which is a rich and interesting *summa* of all philosophical, metaphysical and medical ideas existing on the subject, the author identifies possible origins of a disorder, that is likely to be affecting Prospero himself:

> The materiall melancholy is either simple or mixt; (…) differing according to the mixture of those naturall humours among themselves, or foure unnaturall adust humours, as they diversely tempered and mingled. (Burton: 166-167)

An irregular combination of the basic elements can cause melancholy. But its genesis is not clear as the same Burton admits: "It is a most difficult thing (I confesse) to be able to discerne these cause whence they are, and in such variety to say what the beginning was. (…) Generall causes are either supernaturall, or naturall". (Burton: 166) Burton further describes various processes of melancholy, then he identifies possible forms and causes:

> From melancholy adust raiseth one kind, from Choler another, which is most brutish: another from Fleagme, which is dull: and the last from Blood, which is best. Of these some are cold and dry, others hot and dry, varying according to their mixtures, as they intended and remitted(...) ichores and

> those serous matters being thickened become flegme, and flegme degenerates into choler, choler adust becomes *œruginosa melancholia*, as vinegar out of purest wine putrified or by exhalation of purer spirits is so made, and becomes sowre and sharpe; and from the sharpness of this humour proceed much waking , troublesome thoughts and dreams". (Burton: 167)

What can be inferred from other pages of Burton's text is that the use of magic interfering with the elements may alter the humours in the body. It may be thought that Prospero, the Magus, cannot control the elements anymore because magic has dramatically changed his essence, turning him into a melancholic being. However, there is no real proof in the text that he has actually been changed, apart from some vague hints of his weaknesses in the words he pronounces in the last lines of the play. An interesting essay on melancholy reveals some crucial aspects that can be connected to Prospero's emotional state:

> In this transitional period the very strength of the emotional pressure made *Melancholi*a a merciless reality, before whom men trembled as before a 'cruel plague' or a 'melancholy demon', and whom they tried in vain to banish by a thousand antidotes and consolatory treatises (Klibansky, Panofky, Saxl: 233)

The same authors also mention the existence of studies on Melancholy, which appeared to be increasing at "the door of the Reformation" (Klibansky, Panofky, Saxl: 233). This is an interesting hypothesis referring to the period when Shakespeare was active: The Reformation and the Counterreformation had unchained religious wars which conveyed torment and uncertainty. An illustrious victim of the anguish provoked by the new unstable world at the end of the 16th century was Torquato Tasso who had filled his *Gerusalemme Liberata* with painful obsessions and dramatic religious visions. Another contemporary of Shakespeare who resented the changes of his age was Miguel de Cervantes whose protagonist navigates in the context of a new world that he is not able to recognize. It may be possible to justify Prospero's feelings and consider him a melancholic who "primarily suffers from the contradiction between time and infinity" (Klibansky, Panofky, Saxl: 234). Prospero realizes the presence of time passing when he pronounces these words: "and time Goes upright with his carriage" (V,i, 3). This sudden awareness may be responsible for his new melancholic state but it is not the only agent for it. The difficult times were like dark waters in turmoil which destabilized the existing sense of harmony, experienced during the Humanism and the Renaissance. The new dramatic contrasts unveiled the terrible contradictions inherent in the world and in the same figure of God. Everything was surrounded by a sense of anguish and pessimism. Using Dollimore's analysis, Debora Kuller Shuger underlines that:

> Luther and Calvin have no illusions about the absence of order and justice in history (…) Luther confesses with 'dangerous clarity' that ' God governs

> the external affairs of the world in such a way that, if you regard and follow the judgment of human reason, you are forced to say, either that there is no God, or that God is unjust.(Kuller Shuger: 2)

The traditional image of God becomes fragmented and is replaced by opposing ideas, each one claiming to own the final truth. However strong the religious trauma may have been, it is not enough to explain the ambiguous ending in *The Tempest* and there is no evidence it may be directly connected to it. As Robert Weimann's suggests, it is possible to say that: "at the play's closure, the representation is allowed to collapse" (Weimann: 213). Similarly, the luminous sky of the Renaissance was obscured by the "welking cheeks" (Act I, ii, 4). of pitch-dark clouds of the new century. A wonderful era has come to an end. Times change, Prospero cannot be able to use his magic arts forever. Maybe he is afraid that his powers could be considered dangerous and cause him to suffer the tragic destiny of the miller Menocchio, who was burnt for heresy in 1599[11]. The lurking dangers of the Inquisition inaugurate the 17th Century. It is not only religion which is undergoing dramatic winds of change. New forms of culture and rational methods in science are in the process of being created. Ideas are developed which seem to negate traditional knowledge. Paolo Rossi explains that in *Redargutio Philosophiarum* Francis Bacon's "attacks [against magic] are more explicit: if magic, encompassed in a framework of lies, is put to any use, it is only for its novelty, never for its worth. A peculiarity of philosophical demonstrations, continues Bacon, is that they make everything seem less admirable than it is; but to make things appear more admirable is a form of deceit. Bacon's target here was an attitude typical of all magic, but of Renaissance magic in particular" (Rossi: 31). This explanation, if referred to Prospero, may provide some clarifications, which are at the antipodes of what Frances Yates had stated about Renaissance magic and the protagonist of *The Tempest*. It is necessary to carefully read the text for clues and go back to the mysterious "drowning" of Prospero's "book". It is clear that Prospero still needs Ariel's invisible but mighty power, one of the symbols of his magic force being hidden under the water as, he had explained before, he would drown his "book" after he had promised to abjure his "rough magic" (V,i, 50-56). Whereas Ariel has been invisible so far and Prospero has kept him hidden and secret, now he speaks to him overtly in front of all the other characters, a behavior which is rather inexplicable. Apart from the remarkable ambiguity on the admission by Prospero of using "rough magic", what is really puzzling and strange is the statement about his books. When he solemnly pronounces his renunciation to magic art, he speaks about one "book" he will "drown". It must be noted that previously he had mentioned he loved "his books" (I, ii, 166) so much that Gonzalo had saved them for him before his escape from Milan. His books are several and we find other evidence of it: Caliban, in his frantic fear for punishment and desire for revenge, reiterates the idea that Prospero has many important "books" that he knows must be stolen to deprive the man of his power:

there thou mayst brain him,
Having first seized his books, or with a log
Batter his skull, or paunch him with a stake,
Or cut his weasand with thy knife. Remember
First to possess his books; for without them
He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not
One spirit to command – they all do hate him
As rootedly as I. Burn but his books (…) (III,ii, 87-93)

The fact is disconcerting and disorienting. After spying on Miranda and Ferdinand, Prospero says: "I'll to my book" (III,i,94) to "perform much business". From now on the book mentioned is only one. It is as if Prospero is willing to hide his magic erudition from the other characters that have become aware of his extreme powers. We may infer that Prospero is conscious of the new rational science which is becoming the dominating culture of the age. Only the mysterious abyss of the sea can help Prospero guard his precious secrets that he cannot renounce. So the words Francisco utters for Ferdinand may be used for Prospero's books of magic:

Sir, he may live.
I saw him beat the surges under him
And ride upon their backs; he trod the water,
Whose enmity he flung aside, and breasted
The surge most swoll'n that met him; his bold head
'Bove the contentious waves he kept, and oared
Himself with his good arms in lusty stroke
To th'shore , that o'ver his wave-worn basis bowed,
As stooping to relieve him. I not doubt
He came alive to land. (II, ii, 112-119)

When Ferdinand was prey to a tragic moment of despair, Ariel had tried to deviate his eyes towards the depths of the sea, "full fathom five", to look for his father there and prevent him from seeking for his parent anywhere else. It may be possible to infer that Prospero, too, is obliterating the truth and keeping it away from those who were the witnesses of his actions on the island. He is trying to divert the looks of the other characters and make them forget about his magic, pretending to be weak and powerless. As he did at the very beginning of the story, Prospero is once again using the sea: his precious magic books are concealed somewhere under the majestic water together with his special garments. The sea can keep Prospero's secret and hide his "rough magic". His books "may live" and emerge above "the contentious waves" to come to life again one day.

Notes

1 Shakespeare's sonnets make larger use of the elements through either direct or indirect references to them, as for example Sonnet 55 or Sonnet 129. The complementary sonnets 44 and 45, where the speaking "I" expresses his melancholia for the absence of his lover in the Petrarchan style, contains the four elements. In the former, the protagonist is of "earth and water wrought", as he cries and he is too physically distant from the lover. The latter, which is the ideal continuation of the previous one, mentions "air" and "fire", respectively the thought of love and the passion of the speaker:

> The other two, slight air and purging fire,
> Are both with thee, wherever I abide;
> The first my thought, the other my desire

In these two sonnets we find the common antithesis between the first person and the second person, "thou" (Melchiori: 27), where the " I" is obsessed with the distant and silent "you". The Sonnets introduce a subjective experience which is different from the general context of the four elements in *The Tempest.*

2 It might be interesting to remember that the pre-Socratic Empedocles (490-430 BC) was the first to mention and identify the four elements which he called the "Roots" which were responsible for the existing opposite movements of "Love and Strife" in the universe. Plato was the first to call them "the elements" in his work *Timaeus,* which were represented as solid figures (Cube, Icosahedron, Octohedron and Tetrahedron). Later Aristotle absorbed the platonic theory and changed the names of the elements into "Bodies" in his treaty entitled *Meteorology.*

3 Interestingly enough, the word 'ocean' is never mentioned in the entire play.

4 It is important to notice that the magic "cloak", "mantle" or "garment" of which he speaks and that he uses from the very beginning (I,ii,23-24) is mysteriously forgotten, or at least never mentioned again, except when Prospero wears his "robes" (V, i, 1). This represents a strange form of forgetfulness, which may hide deeper meanings.

5 Ariel can acquire the forms of any other elements. This capacity is in line with the explanation of Cornelius Agrippa: "…there is none of the sensible Elements that is pure, but they are more or less mixed, and apt to be changed one into another (…) Plato also was of that opinion that Earth was wholly changeable and the rest of the Elements, as into this, so into one another successively" (Cornelius Agrippa: 38-39).

6 Ferdinand defines his passion as "the ardour of" his "liver" (IV, i, 56). "The liver in the old physiology was the seat of the physical love"(Orgel, 1987:173). In Dante Alighieri, we find the very same idea of his liver being dramatically involved together with his heart and his brain in the process of falling in love. The episode is in the second chapter of Dante's *La Vita Nuova* (*The New Life*), when the poet describes his first meeting with his lifelong celestial lover Beatrice (Dante Alighieri: 7-8).

7 A partial exception may be found in the character of Oberon, but the comparison is not completely pertinent as Oberon is a magic creature whereas Prospero is totally human acting in a supernatural way. Even if they are present in Julius Caesar, Richard III, Macbeth and Hamlet, occult entities and powers are outside the protagonists and not controlled by them.

8 See previous mention of these verses in *The Tempest* (V,i,46-49).

9 The unusual turn of events and the change in Prospero has been considered as the

effects of waking up from a dream by some critics among whom we find David G. James with his essay published in the 1960s. The hypothesis is interesting but it does not explain the remarkable change and the excessive distress in the protagonist.

10 The most famous melancholic male character is represented in *Hamlet*. However, other characters are affected by this mysterious feeling, like Jacques in *As You like It* or the King of Navarre in *Love Labour's Lost*.

11 Menocchio was put trial and later sentenced to burning for heresy as he had developed a personal cosmogony, derived from his working experiences as a miller, the cheese and the worms being part of his personal imagined universe: "Menocchio frequently indicated that this or that book was the source of his 'opinions'. But what had Menocchio actually read? Unfortunately we do not have a list of his books" (Ginzburg: 28). The "books" are the source of potentially dangerous ideas but they cannot be identified.

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