

A NOTE ON 'THE TEMPEST'

THE UTOPIAN NOTION IN SHAKESPEARE

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my ending is despair
Unless I be reliev'd by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults,
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

(Epilogue to *The Tempest*)

From this speech of Prospero's, we imagine a person who has undergone many sufferings, and, supported by a strong will for the ultimate Thule, seeks for some sort of bond which unites human beings in a happy state. *The Tempest* is one of the last plays of Shakespeare. Since writers more or less speak of themselves in their works, the quoted passage may be one of Shakespeare's own wishes, although it is often said that his plays seldom reveal the author himself. The fact that his plays are not subjective merely indicates that Shakespeare's characterization is far beyond other dramatists' in success, or that Shakespeare had incomparable knowledge of psychology. If one reads Shakespeare from his early plays to the very late ones, he must find strings of ideas, of some kind or another, traced from the early ones to the last. My chief purpose in this short article is to draw one thread out of many, namely, the thirst for utopia, with the focus on *The Tempest*.

The parallel passage about mercy already exists in *The Merchant of Venice*. However, *The Tempest* is the only play in which Shakespeare constantly emphasized the importance of mercy and forgiveness throughout the whole play. *The Merchant of Venice* is a pretty play with the fairy-tale element and humour in it, but *The Tempest* is more than that. It is Shakespeare's last experiment with his life long wishes after passing

the world of despair and unbelief toward human beings, the world of *Lear* and other plays.

In his histories and tragedies, there is always the strain of anger and disappointment toward the masques of pretence and deceit. In the histories of his early days, he is almost buried among the wrongs which the kings and the lords have done in acquiring high social positions. Yet those kings and lords are never at peace in their minds; to them, the anxiety that "some unborn sorrow, ripe in fortune's womb, is coming towards me," (*Richard II*, II, ii. 10f.) has always accompanied them even after they got their position and power. Therefore, they are often alien to the society of trust and friendship and warm hearts. He develops, in his four tragedies, such a world of masques of trust and deceit, truth and pretence, mingled with other questions of life and death.

Gonzalo, an honest councilor in *The Tempest*, shouts, "We split, we split, we split!" (I. i. 65) He may have shouted it out of despair and horror of the tempest in the sea, but we may be allowed to interpret it also as out of despair and horror of the tempest of human society, for this tempest is not a natural phenomenon, but an artificial one caused by the magic of Prospero, and the tempestuous sea was what "dashes the fire out, mounting to th' welkin's cheek." (I. ii. 4f.) Light or fire usually stands for righteousness and social order in Shakespeare; and darkness, without light, means some wrongs. Therefore, this tempestuous sea which "dashes the fire out" implies social disorder, and it sounds like a cry which sums up the events in the tragedies preceding *The Tempest*. Prospero is also a person who receives wrongs from those who "with colours fairer painted their foul ends." (I. ii. 143) This speech of Prospero's finds its kindred in Act II, "His forward voice now is to speak well of his friend; his backward voice is to utter foul speeches and to detract." (II. ii. 94-96) The paradoxical combination of the words, "fair" and "foul," is already familiar to us in *Macbeth* and probably in *Othello*, too. The phrase, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," by three witches indicates the crooked relation between the outward appearance and true quality, and this paradoxical theme is flowing like

a torrent under the psychological development of *Othello*. Here at this point, we know that *The Tempest* is closely linked with other plays, and Prospero is a man who has lived through ages of suffering, and also he may be the shadow of Shakespeare. To such a man, the happy state of *bygone* days is remembered in the heart's core:

What seest thou else
In the dark backward and abysm of time?
(I. ii. 49f.)

This is what Prospero asks his daughter, Miranda; but, at the same time, we feel his heart-ache for what is lost infinitely behind him. And when he remembers the wrongs he received, his heart-ache almost becomes anger, which again changes into a sigh, like

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick! on whom my pains,
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost!
(IV. i. 188-90)

What he sees far behind is probably the golden age as Gonzalo sees it. Shakespeare allows Gonzalo to speak a unique idea:

I' th' commonwealth I would by contraries
Execute all things; for no kind of traffic
Would I admit; no name of magistrate;
Letters should not be known; riches, poverty,
And use of service, none; contract, succession,
Bourn, bound of land, tilth, vineyard, none;
No use of metal, corn, or wine, or oil;
No occupation; all men idle, all;
And women too, but innocent and pure;
No sovereignty.
All things in common nature should produce
Without sweat or endeavour. Treason, felony,
Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine
Would I not have; but nature should bring forth;
Of it own kind, all foison, all abundance,
To feed my innocent people.
I would with such perfection govern, sir,
T' excel the golden age.¹

(II. i. 147-68)

¹ The "golden age" is not capitalized, but it probably has two possible meanings; one is the religious aspect of purity and innocence before the Fall of Adam and

This utopian notion is emphasized and developed throughout the rest of the play, mainly by Prospero. However, the difference of the quality between Gonzalo's expressed notion and Prospero's utopia is that Gonzalo is speaking as a ruler of this utopian state, while Prospero is thinking of himself neither as ruling nor ruled, but as a mere human creature.

Prospero knows that human beings are weak and almost like the toys of fortune and nature :

There they hoist us,
To cry to th' sea, that roar'd to us; to sigh
To th' winds, whose pity, sighing back again,
Did us but loving wrong.

(I. ii. 148-51)

This again is exactly the echo of the world of Lear. He still continues :

What strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint. (Epilogue)

And it reaches its summit in the following passage :

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-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this unsubstantial 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.

(IV. i. 148-58)

Such recognition of vicissitude is brought about by the realization of the danger of his own death, plotted by Caliban. The realization of his own mortality draws out his sympathy towards everything which is mortal. When there is nothing steady in things built by man, and all glories,—

Eve, and the other is the political freedom of Greece for which most Renaissance people felt nostalgia. (From Dr. Evans' lecture on Shakespeare at Mills College in April, 1953).

the towers, the palaces, the temples,—are but fortune, there is no reason for the men to fight each other. Because of this sympathy for mortal creatures, Prospero becomes merciful and pardons all faults.

For Alonso, Antonio and others to receive this pardon, the first necessary state is penitence. When they hear the strange and solemn music of the island, Alonso can not understand it. He says, “what harmony is this?” and Gonzalo replies, “Marvellous sweet music.” (III. iii. 18f.) Their sleeping minds are awakened only when they hear something which is different in quality from the things in their society.

Methought the billows spoke and told me of it;
The winds did sing it to me; and the thunder,
That deep and dreadful organ pipe, pronounc'd
The name of Prosper.

(III. iii. 96-99)

The billows, the winds, and the thunder are ruled by the laws of nature, and they may well be interpreted as the beatings of conscience which is the great source of the activities of the human mind. Conscience works here for the first time in the minds of Alonso and his followers. In Shakespeare's former plays, conscience also works in the hearts of villains, but it is usually of no use; the villains and the wrongs are always doomed to receive their rewards, vengeance and punishment. Claudius and Macbeth die their fittest death, and, in those plays, Catharsis always works at the end of the plays; that is to say, the dramatic unity of those plays is given by the sword of justice. However, we have, in *Lear*, another tragic feeling which can not be washed away by Catharsis. We find there the fundamentally tragic nature of human kind, which can not be eased by revenge or punishment, nor even by justice. We are left to gaze at sad human nature, which nothing can affect, but we have to endure. However, Prospero, having understood the nature of human beings, does not punish but forgives all faults. This is a marked difference between *The Tempest* and earlier plays.

Nevertheless, since Shakespeare does not apply any religious meaning to this conscience and repentance, neither conscience nor repentance is the definite condition for being pardoned, but it is only the first step.

To be really qualified to be pardoned, one has to be charmed. The stage directions are as follows:

Here enters Ariel before; then Alonso, with a frantic gesture, attended by Gonzalo; Sebastian and Antonio in like manner, attended by Adrian and Francisco. They all enter the circle which Prospero had made, and there stand charm'd;

(V. i. after l 57)

and Prospero, observing that, speaks,

A solemn air, and the best comforter
To an unsettled fancy, cure thy brains,
Now useless, boil'd within thy skull!

(V. i. 58-60)

They are charmed by "a solemn air" or "solemn music," (V. i. the stage direction after l. 57) that is, charmed by something exquisitely beautiful. If we express this charmed state in other terms, it is the moment of the purification of mind, and, in this charmed moment, the devil in the mind is purged. Such a charmed moment is when people lose themselves and are not possessed of selfish desires. Prospero speaks about the instant when one comes back to himself immediately after being charmed.

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

(V. i. 64-68)

The mind, purified in this way, gets rid of the "ignorant fumes,"—"ignorant" in the sense of "stupefying,"¹—and regains its "clearer reason," which is the power of understanding. It is this understanding which fills up the gap between individuals and harmonizes them all, as Prospero says:

Their understanding
Begins to swell, and the approaching tide
will shortly fill the reasonable shore,
That now lies foul and muddy. (V. i. 79-82)

¹ Schmitt: *Shakespeare's Lexicon*.

To Shakespeare, every man has clear reason, which, though it sometimes becomes "ignorant," is the only bond uniting the individuals. This clear reason, even if it is "ignorant," can be set aright by being appealed to by the clear reason of others, and regains the ability of understanding. Prospero trusts this reason in each man and seems to believe in its effect. Therefore, Alonso and his followers are pardoned and set free from the burden of their crimes. The joy of being freed by mercy is most vividly expressed by Ariel, although Ariel is not a follower of Alonso:

Where the bee sucks, there suck I;
In a cowslip's bell I lie;
There I couch when owls do cry.
On the bat's back I do fly
After summer merrily.
Merrily, merrily shall I live now
Under the blossom that hangs on the bough.

(V. i. 88-94)

The expressed joy of this song implies a new happy state of life, which Ferdinand calls "a second life." (V. i. 195) Of course, the direct and outward meaning of "a second life" is Miranda. However, Ferdinand thinks of Miranda as the top of admiration and almost as the symbol of innocence and purity which he has not been able to find till then. And again, the literal meaning of Miranda is wonderful and admirable.¹ Therefore, Miranda stands for a joyous utopian world to Ferdinand; yet he should not have been able to obtain Miranda, or the utopian world, without Prospero's generosity. Ferdinand can recognize this new happy state of life because he has seen evil and pollution. This happy state of life is a new second life to him, which is different in quality from the polluted society he has been living in, and can be recognized only when compared with evil society, or after one knows evil. It is the same, though it works in the contrary way, with Milton's Satan, Adam and Eve, who could recognize their former happy state only when they knew evil after their fall. Alonso and Antonio, too, receive a new life through mercy after evil. Therefore, this world of new life is not a thing con-

¹ cf. T. Saito: *Shakespeare*, p. 385.

fined to purity and innocence, but it is a world rebuilt from evil. Such a new world is no other than Shakespeare's utopian world, and it is based on pardon. Prospero not only pardons others, but also acknowledges that he is one of sinners, and he asks also to be pardoned.

As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free.

(Epilogue)

Thus Shakespeare's utopian world has a realistic aspect, and in this way he sets up his utopia, not as a far-away dream, but within his reach.

Nevertheless, we of the modern world may feel an optimistic element in it. When Prospero abjures his magic and drowns his book in Act V, he is full of confidence and hope, but the passage sounds rather idealistic. Prospero's staff and book have been playing the role of justice in *The Tempest* till then, but he buries them in the depths of the earth and drowns them in the sea, forever. Yet his utopia is not especially supported by religion:—there the question still exists whether we really do not need justice to act. The modern mind is apt to say with Galsworthy that there is no apple tree in the garden, singing and gold. However, in the time of Shakespeare, people thought that certain elements are a priori bestowed on human beings, and the lack of any one of them makes a man spiritually unbalanced. Such a tendency is also found in *The Tempest*:

You, brother mine, that entertain'd ambition,
Expell'd remorse and nature.

(V. i. 75f.)

Therefore, the villains, being without remorse and nature, will be cured if remorse and nature become theirs again:—remorse and nature in the sense of Elizabethan usage as "compassion" and "native affection of the heart and mind."¹ Human beings are considered fundamentally good-natured, as Ferdinand suggests in his speech about the tempest:

Though the seas threaten, they are merciful.
(V. i. 178)

¹ Schmitt: *Shakespeare's Lexicon*.

Hence, Prospero's confidence and hope at the time of the abandonment of his staff and book may have been natural to him, or to Shakespeare.

Shakespeare was dreaming of his utopian world more than three hundred years ago. It depends on individuals whether we may or may not agree with Shakespeare, but he has much to suggest to us who are still seeking for the ultima Thule.

(All the quotations were made from Kittredge's edition published by Ginn and Company in 1936.)

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