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Performing Marriage in Shakespeare: *The Tempest*

Robert B. Pierce, *Oberlin College*

When we say that the conventional end of comedy is marriage, we mean both that the ceremony of marriage is staged or looming ahead as the play comes to a close and that in some way marriage is what the play has been pointing toward, that marriage is the purpose of comedy, just as in both senses the end of an Early Modern tragedy is death; and certainly that convention is true for both marriage and death in the drama of Shakespeare, who often enough scatters marriages around like confetti in the last acts of his comedies, as he does deaths in his tragedies. One might say that, in this respect at least, he is the most conventional of comic playwrights, except for the fact that there is something odd about his presentation of marriage as the resolution of comedy. First is the sheer heterogeneity of those marriages. We can perhaps accept the fittingness of Rosalind and Orlando joining hands, or even Viola and Orsino, but what are we to make of Touchstone and Audrey, Sir Toby and Maria, or even such central couples as Helena and Bertram, Angelo and Mariana? And, second, it is not true that Shakespeare actually stages marriage either at the ends of his comedies or during the bodies of his plays, that in this sense marriage is performed in Shakespeare's drama. Instead the plays repeatedly sneak up on the marriage ceremony, which nearly happens onstage, but not quite. In a way the paradigmatic Shakespearian almost-but-not-quite approach to marriage comes at the end of his early comedy *Love's Labor's Lost*, in which the Princess postpones any wedding for a year-long trial of the men's stability and Berowne exclaims:

> Our wooing doth not end like an old play;
> Jack hath not Jill. These ladies' courtesy
> Might well have made our sport a comedy. (5.2.864-66)

Indeed one might say that marriage in Shakespeare's comedy is like violence in Classical and Neoclassical tragedy, always there at the center of things but never quite present onstage, never actually performed. Like his fellow dramatists of the Early Modern popular stage, Shakespeare is willing, even eager, to show death on the stage, even in its most violent form—but for him not to show marriage. The marriage

equivalent of those offstage deaths in Greek tragedy does happen frequently in Shakespeare, as in Gremio's recounting of the farcical wedding of Kate and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Shakespeare has great fun with this set piece portraying Petruchio's blasphemous disruption of the traditional ceremony, to the mingled shock and amusement of both onstage and theatrical audiences, but he does not actually stage the outrageous wedding for us. And at the end of this play we see, not weddings, but a triple wedding feast. The same kind of feast marks the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. A marriage ceremony actually begins to happen in *Much Ado About Nothing,* as the priest starts to say the words that will join Hero and Claudio in wedlock, but then Claudio breaks off the ceremony to charge Hero with infidelity. The final plot-completing ceremony of the two weddings, Hero's and Beatrice's, will follow the dance that ends the play, but will follow it only in our imagination, offstage. Even in Shakespeare's tragedies marriages occur elsewhere, not before our eyes. Thus Friar Laurence hustles Romeo and Juliet away to join their hands, and we hear of Othello and Desdemona's marriage from Iago and Roderigo's report to Brabantio, but we do not see it.

In two different ways *As You Like It* stages the closest thing to an exception to this rule, once at the end when Hymen enters and ceremonially joins the couples' hands, but there Duke Senior at least seems to expect some more official ceremony: "Proceed, proceed. We'll *begin* these rites / As we do trust they'll end, in true delights" (5.4.196-97, italics added). Perhaps we are to think of Hymen's performance, not as a wedding, but as a sort of wedding masque, equivalent to Prospero's masque in *The Tempest,* to which we will return. Earlier in *As You Like It,* Rosalind almost performs an onstage marriage between herself and Orlando, rather shocking Celia by beginning to recite the actual wedding language of exchanging vows, as part of her supposed anti-love therapy for Orlando; but, in the midst of her pretense—pretending as Ganymede to be herself as Rosalind—she breaks the order of the ceremony, out of feigned eagerness to voice her own vows ahead of Orlando's. So she breaks off the wedding performance. The play earlier edges close to a marriage, a parody in advance of Rosalind's mock-marriage, when Touchstone and Audrey declare themselves ready to take vows before the egregious Sir Oliver Martext, until they are dissuaded by the rather

surprisingly decorous objections of Jaques.[1] Touchstone is of course easily persuadable to substitute living in “bawdry” for marriage (3.3.89).

If anything, marriages are even more shadowed than these examples illustrate when we come to the problem comedies and dramatic romances. Not only are the marriages still more extravagantly ill assorted among unlikely couples than before, but also they seem still more casually disposed of in the dramatic plotting. In *All’s Well That Ends Well,* we learn that Diana is to obtain some unspecified spouse at the king’s hand (after the end of the play). Helena and Bertram are of course already married before the denouement (offstage, naturally); it is simply that at the end the consummation of the marriage, fulfilling Bertram’s challenge that has taken the form of a locution for never,[2] is publically revealed onstage to have already occurred. In *Measure for Measure* we have at the end the less than edifying offstage marriage of Mariana and Angelo and the prospective mismatch of Kate Keepdown and Lucio. We never learn whether Isabella will accept the Duke’s sudden proposal (unless it is silently indicated by her taking his hand or something of the sort, though Shakespeare gives no stage direction). She will presumably need to be freed of her novitiate vows before any ceremony. *Troilus and Cressida* offers instead of marriage celebrations “Nothing but lechery!” to quote Thersites (5.1.98).

This familiar pattern of avoided ceremonies recurs in the dramatic romances as we skirt the contemplated marriage of Pericles and Antiochus’ daughter and then the actual one of Pericles and Thaisa, and we hear about the planned marriages of Perdita and Florizel and of Miranda and Ferdinand. In the first two plays we also hear of the usual odd pairings in throwaway marriages to come, those between Marina and Lysimachus and Paulina and Camillo.

Shakespeare loves to stage versions of actual ceremonies of all kinds in his plays— funerals, coronations, trials, etc.—though with some degree of caution about religious ceremonies and some foreshortening for dramatic convenience. What are we to make of his reticence about staging a ceremony that clearly fascinates him, in these plays that continually explore how marriages are arranged, whether by families or by the couples themselves; when a marriage has actually taken effect; the nature of the bond it creates; how that bond can be strained or broken and how restored?[3] Why does he tiptoe up to and around the ceremony of

marriage but never quite stages the thing itself, teasing us as if with forbidden fruit that he snatches away at the last moment?[4] His fellow dramatist and imitator John Webster shows the Duchess of Malfi tricking her steward Antonio into what at least she considers a valid ceremony of marriage, one that happens before our eyes. And when Shakespeare wants to give his most idealized picture of true love, by means of the lyric poetry of Sonnet 116, the words of the wedding ceremony come to his mind without embarrassment. But even there his verbal echo takes a negative form: he says that he would not be the one to stand up and interrupt the ceremony setting forth such a love by daring to "admit impediments."

Perhaps the explanation for this absence of staged marriage in Shakespeare's dramatic performances is that he felt something magical, something absolutely powerful, in the actual words of the ceremony of marriage, in a way that seems unsophisticated to our age dominated by linguistic nominalism.[5] The wedding ceremony is for most of us conventional, acquiring whatever force it has by social agreement; the world itself does not change at the exchanged vows of the couple. The officiant's utterance "I now pronounce you husband and wife" has validity only in the sense that we agree by law and custom that it does so, and for us the term "conventional" that we often apply to such matters carries a sense of the unreal, being a matter of mere words, the epiphenomenal, not the material, things as they are—class interests, power, or whatever strikes us as what counts in the world, the really real. And perhaps for most of us the marriage ceremony itself partakes of the unreality that its verbal forms have for us—we dwell in an age of omnipresent living together and of divorce and serial marriages. But there may be more justification for Shakespeare's attitude of reticence before the words (if he did think and feel differently from us) than modern nominalism admits. J. L. Austin, who is anything but a Platonist or romantic idealist, finds a way out of this familiar modern dichotomy of words and reality. He would classify the marriage ceremony as a performative. That is, it does not, by what its words mean, assert or describe some truth about the world. Rather it performs marriage, makes it really happen in the world. "I now pronounce you husband and wife" does not claim the truth of something to which the words point, but brings something about, namely the condition of being married. Hence to say that the marriage ceremony

is a matter of convention is not to say that it is unreal but to describe where its reality lies: a reality created by the laws and customs, the social agreements (and coercions) that come together to make it up. Under proper conditions the various utterances and symbolic acts of the participants perform the marriage, bring it into being.[6]

At any rate, Shakespeare does not quite perform marriage in his plays, and in particular *The Tempest*, a play that builds toward a royal marriage between Ferdinand and Miranda that is central to the play's structure and meaning, as it is to Prospero's project, does not perform that marriage. What it does perform as the play approaches its denouement is a wedding masque, the spectacular pageant that Prospero commands Ariel and the other spirits to enact for the young couple; and then it performs a symbolic tableau, the moving picture we see when Prospero pulls open a curtain to reveal Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess for the onlooking Alonso and the others. Let us see how using Austin's concept of the performative can illuminate those two parts of the play.[7] We will be seeking, not for the *meaning* of what we see and hear in the sense of expressing a set of ideas, but for what is performed, what the different characters (and especially Prospero) are *doing*—performing—with that masque and tableau.[8] What exactly does happen onstage, if not a marriage, as *The Tempest* draws toward its end, and who makes it happen in these two symbolic performatives of masque and tableau?

To start with the masque that Prospero presents to Ferdinand and Miranda, if we can think of him as its author and so as an agent who is performing an action, he tells Ariel what his action is, what he performs:

I must
Bestow upon the eyes of this young couple
Some vanity of mine art. (4.1.38-40)

Let me unpack the three key words *bestow, art,* and *vanity*. First of all, the masque is *bestowed* and thus constitutes an act of giving, his wedding present to the young couple. In it he intends to give them a compensation for the suffering he has put them through; and so the purpose of the act, in that sense its meaning, would seem to be triple: to give them pleasure, to give honor to their nuptials, and to offer an ideal shape for their marriage to take on. In some sense the masque will make a variety of assertions in symbolic form—that chastity rather than unbridled desire is

to be the essence of this union, that it will be blessed with happiness and fertility, and other such moralizings—but these asserted truths play a role in the three larger purposes rather than constituting the purpose. One might say that Ferdinand and Miranda can fully receive the gift of the masque from him and thus take their part in Prospero's purpose only because they already accept the masque's assertions about their impending marriage, however difficult they may find it to keep their ardor within chaste bounds. But they do willingly play their role, and Ferdinand proclaims his chaste intentions. Giving is after all a social phenomenon, dependent on the receiver and the whole social framework as well as the giver.[9] What Prospero explicitly asks them to give in order to receive his gift is their silence, thus having them enact the ideal role of the monarch in the court masque as both center of the audience and center of meaning within the masque itself. Prospero's gift will not be given and received unless they play that role.[10] Gifts are complex social phenomena. If the giving is to be felicitous in Austin's sense, if the performative is to be carried out, a whole social complex must come into play. Among other qualities must be an element of self-abnegation for the giver. After all, Prospero, who dominates the whole action of the play in carrying out his his project, turns over to Ferdinand and Miranda the central place in the masque, that of its royal audience. But his abnegation is not complete, since he also acts out his habitual controlling self when he instructs them to exercise self-control and demands their silence while he offers them this text of his creating. And likewise the young couple need to combine self-abnegation—allowing themselves to be passive, silent receivers—and acceptance of their new social primacy as recipients of this honor. Their larger action as they watch the masque is a transition from subordination to power: they are moving from Ferdinand's enslavement and Miranda's pupilage, taking their place as the new sovereigns who will unite Milan and Naples.

Second, Prospero's gift is an example of his *art*. To present the masque, he exercises what is both magical and theatrical art. Thus this performance is one of the last displays of his magical power before he renounces it, just as the shipwreck has been the first demonstration of it that we see.[11] But is Prospero indeed the author and magical creator of the masque? It is of course Ariel and his fellow spirits who do the actual presenting—they are the *actors* of the performance—and beyond that, in

the fiction, it is Iris and especially Ceres and Juno, three goddesses, who are the *characters* that exercise divine power to bless Ferdinand and Miranda's marriage. In that sense they give the gift. Perhaps these spirits and goddesses are to be thought of as emanations of Prospero's magical power and thus aspects of him and his agency; in particular Ariel does not seem to be entirely separate from Prospero, a partial merging that many modern productions suggest by various methods of staging. On the other hand, the play repeatedly shows Prospero's magical control over Ariel to be tenuous, demanding his constant reassertion to restrain Ariel's restiveness, his hunger for freedom. And the same ambiguity may be found beyond the play, in theatrical and poetic art generally. The artist both is and is not the source of what he or she creates: that is the truth embodied in the idea of the muse as fountain of artistic inspiration, expressing a power that is both within and beyond the artist. Prospero as artist wills the masque into being, yet his will is only part of what makes it real. Ariel can be thought of as the Inigo Jones in this artistic collaboration, the scenic designer, as it were; and Ferdinand and Miranda as silent audience must contribute their "imaginary forces," as the Chorus entreats the audience of *Henry V* to do. Furthermore, this theatrical art turns out to be vulnerable as well as collaborative. The masque is abruptly interrupted when Prospero remembers the plot of Caliban and the others. One might think of their arrival onstage as the antimasque, that grotesque, often comic opposite to the high idealistic spectacle of the masque proper, but normally the antimasque comes first, before the masque proper or its symbolic resolution, as the name implies (also "antemasque"). However, this antimasque breaks off in its midst the celebratory dancing that rounds off Prospero's masque, upsetting Ferdinand and Miranda as well as Prospero, and in that sense his masque-gift is never made complete.

Finally, Prospero describes his masque as "some *vanity* of mine art." Partly he means that, in presenting it, he is showing off, allowing some expression to the quality in him which Milton in "Lycidas" calls "that last infirmity of noble mind." Of course one of the pleasures in all giving is the reward to the giver's ego—we take satisfaction in showing that we can afford the gift and in demonstrating that we have the taste, perspicacity, and empathic understanding to choose the gift so well. But "vanity" also means "emptiness," evoking the desolate pessimism of

Ecclesiastes. Speaking to Ariel, Prospero describes the masque as “such another trick” (4.1.37), with some of the dismissiveness we express in the term “magic trick.” Prospero’s masque captures our fancy for a moment, just as we enjoy the colorful handkerchiefs appearing out of the air when a magician waves his hand; but the magic is all a fleeting and somewhat trivial pleasure. Prospero acquiesces in the breaking of the spell, the dissolving of his gift, in his famous speech about the illusoriness of all human striving, all our projects:

> Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
> As I foretold you, were all spirits and
> Are melted into air, into thin air. (4.1.148-50)

The world-weary pessimism voiced by the old magus as he looks toward his own death and the death of the universe is a strange consolation for him to offer in response to the momentary unease and disappointment of the young couple, and probably one that he well knows they in their innocence cannot yet feel or even understand. But his voicing it does free them to return to their own youthful happiness.

The second allegorical performative that Prospero offers as he completes his project, the tableau of Ferdinand and Miranda playing chess that he presents to Alonso and the others, can again be seen as a quasi-theatrical representation of their marriage; and again the tableau is Prospero’s gift, most dramatically one to Alonso, giving back to him the son that he thought dead, a future ruler who with Miranda can renew the life and health of the whole commonwealth by the marital union that the chess game symbolizes.[12] In this case Prospero’s art is much less magical than theatrical, though, in a paradoxical way for theater, its art replaces the real-life illusion of Ferdinand’s death (and Miranda’s) by an artist’s tableau of the new life that will be embodied in their marriage as the viewers return to their world of Italy. Thus Prospero invents, or collaborates in creating, a tableau made out of the actual living couple.

To what extent is Prospero the artist here, the one who performs this tableau? In some ways he is like the artist of found art, who makes the object into art by presenting it as such. He is the agent who pulls the curtain and so inspires the wonder of his audience, Alonso and his fellows, but there is no reason to think that he has controlled what the couple are doing as we see them in the tableau. Their agency that has produced the game of chess itself, and their free response to each other in

what they say after the curtain is drawn expresses what this game of chess tells us about their union. Indeed the meaning of the picture is somewhat equivocal. Does their verbal exchange indicate some real emotional tension between them? Has Ferdinand actually cheated in the game? How serious is Miranda's accusation of him, in the light of his denial that he has cheated and her avowed willingness to let him cheat all he wants? At any rate, they are visibly the young couple who have chosen each other with their own willful determination, however much Prospero may have set them up in his project. Thus he and they are portrayed by Shakespeare as joint creators of this marriage. Similarly, along with him they are agents in this performative tableau, and indeed Alonso must perform too in the role of receptive audience, whose acceptance of what he is shown is necessary for the gift to be felicitous and the whole play's ending to be happy.

Prospero's Epilogue reminds us that the larger performative which is the play given to us, *The Tempest* itself, can be seen as parallel to Prospero's project within the play. Surely one of the *meanings* of this piece of theatrical art, as an older tradition of critical analysis argued, is that Prospero is, like Shakespeare, an artist, his project parallel to the theatrical performance we have just seen. And, again, as performative this play *The Tempest* is a gift to the audience from Shakespeare and Prospero. But like all gifts, in order for it to be felicitous, the original audience and we later viewers and readers must carry out our roles magnanimously. Prospero, Ariel, Caliban, and the others can be freed from the confines of this artfully shaped island only if we freely play our part, if we perform everything that is symbolized in that final gift of our applause.

Thus we can usefully seek to understand Shakespeare's play as a performance that is indeed a performative in Austin's sense. In one way it does perform the ceremony of marriage onstage after all, by participating in the conventions, social and theatrical, that create the reality of that ceremonial act; and that original performance in Early Modern London, as a performative utterance, was an act of giving by Shakespeare and his fellows, a gift that we can receive in the twenty-first century if we play our part with generosity and sensitivity.[13]

Notes

1. A spoilsport on principle, he is perhaps inclined to interfere with whatever the people around him want to do, as with his objections to Duke Senior's men hunting down those citizens of the forest, the deer.

2. That is, a way of saying that something will never happen: "I'll do that when Hell freezes over."

3. Much scholarship has explored these issues. A seminal text is Neely.

4. One possible explanation is the censorship exerted by the Master of the Revels, though Dutton's thorough study shows that the censorship was never systematic and tended to be more interested in plays' giving offense to powerful people and in their commenting on immediate political issues; the actors seem to have cooperated in avoiding what might offend the censor or important people or institutions, though they also seem to have enjoyed pushing the envelope (hence the tiptoeing-up to marriage). That kind of playing with fire was no doubt a popular element of the plays for their audiences. One exception to the ad hoc, unsystematic quality of the censorship was the ban on references to the Christian God, created by Act of Parliament in 1606. George weighs the influence of the dramatic need for foreshortening ceremonies, the constraints of censorship, and a variety of artistic aims as causes for the "Abbreviated Rites and Incomplete Ceremonies" of his title; for marriage in particular see 51-56. At any rate, my emphasis in this essay is on the feelings and attitudes toward marriage that lie behind Shakespeare's dramatic decisions as well as behind the constraints that others, including the court and his audience, may have imposed on him. Given that no one's political ox would be gored, why is it that seeing a completed marriage ceremony onstage might bother people, even Shakespeare himself?

5. Marlowe seems to have had no compunctions about staging the actual words with which Faustus summons up Mephistopheles, though one antitheatrical writer reports actual devils having appeared during a performance at Exeter, presumably summoned up in reality by the spoken words of conjuration (quoted in Palmer 206). The writer is surely suggesting that the players' uttering the words, even while playacting, constituted a blasphemous ceremony that allowed an actual demonic manifestation to occur.

6. Austin would have no qualms, if he were a playwright, about staging a marriage ceremony, which would not meet his criterion of being happy or felicitous and therefore creating a real marriage. Because the theatrical actors are not intending to take marriage vows and the actor-priest is not an actual ordained and licensed minister, no marriage occurs, any more than acting a death means that you really die. But then Shakespeare had not read Austin.

7. I am of course not the first to import Austin's concept to literary criticism. See Porter, Derrida, Butler, and, for more on the concept, Searle.

8. For a study of the marriage masque emphasizing its meaning and in particular its political significance, see Curran.

9. See Marcel Mauss's classic study of gifts.

10. See especially Orgel on the conventions of the court masque.

11. I think there is much to be said for a relatively modest shipwreck in modern productions, allowing the acting prowess of the sailors and Ariel's poetic language to create the storm and wreck in our imaginations, as a counterpoint, using the older style of the public theater, to the new, Italianate stage effects of the masque. One recalls the shift in the middle of Olivier's filmed *Henry V* from the old theatrical stage to cinematic effects as the English approach France and Agincourt.

12. Again Shakespeare uses the symbolism characteristic of masques and tableaux in the game of chess. Scholars have explored the symbolic meaning of the chess game (see especially Loughrey and Taylor), but our concern here is rather with its effect as a performative, not the discursive meaning that can be found in it.

13. Booth explores the role of the reader of fiction in these terms. I discuss what constitutes understanding the meaning of *The Tempest* in my essay "Understanding *The Tempest*."

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