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## “Hell is empty and all the devils are here”: Westworld’s New Prospero and His Isle of Calibans

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## **“Hell is empty and all the devils are here”: *Westworld*’s New Prospero and His Isle of Calibans**

Jared Johnson, *Thiel College*

The first season of Jonathan Nolan and Lisa Joy’s *Westworld* debuted on HBO in the fall of 2016. *Westworld* took audiences on a tempestuous journey through its Wild West theme park during the first season of the series, which aired from October 2 to November 4. Bookended between the creation of humanoid robots in the near-future and the revolt of the androids against their creators thirty years later, the show’s first season holds a mirror up to the very worst of human nature. As one of the robots reveals to his creator, “You’re in a prison of your own sins,” denoting both the physical locale of the *Westworld* park and the looming existential threat of robot dominance. Although the setting of *Westworld* takes place in the future, the mirror that the show holds up clearly reflects the age and body of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, a time in which business ethics struggle to keep pace with technological innovation and profit motive.

Concluding its fourth season in August 2022, *Westworld* has explored the following ethical challenges posed by the emergence of artificial life:

- *How would humans behave in a consequence-free fantasy world serviced by disposable humanlike robots?*
- *What might happen if those artificial beings were to gain self-awareness?*
- *How, then, would humanity interact with intelligent androids? Especially in a technologically advanced, thoroughly corporatized era of late, late capitalism?*

With every new season, Nolan and Joy steer the viewer further and further beyond the *Westworld* park. The events of Season Three occur almost exclusively in a futuristic Los Angeles with flying cars, self-driving motorcycles and taxis, and skyscrapers covered in vertical gardens. From the trajectory of the series, *Westworld* seems thoroughly future-oriented in both its thematic content and worldbuilding. Why, then, does the series so often refer to the past, not only in the form of the park’s simulated nineteenth-century American frontier setting but also in the frequent nods

to Shakespeare? *Westworld* transforms Shakespeare, employing the language and character arcs of *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Tempest* to critique the rise of technological innovation and the invasive and inexorable power of corporatization driven by the steely, mechanistic logic of capitalism, painting Shakespeare's green world a dusty shade of red.

Nolan and Joy's sci-fi Western is, of course, a reboot of the 1973 film *Westworld*, written and directed by Michael Crichton. Twenty years before Crichton had mastered the theme-park disaster film with *Jurassic Park*, his opening foray into the genre featured simulated worlds populated by humanlike robots, a kind of interactive *It's a Small World After All* ride set in the Wild West. When a computer virus infects the robots, causing them to malfunction and attack the park's human guests, disaster follows the film's pair of protagonists, Peter Martin and John Blane, embodied in a proto-Terminator cowboy known as the Gunslinger. The original *Westworld* film was successful enough to warrant a sequel, *Futureworld*, three years later. In 1980, CBS aired three of the completed five episodes of *Beyond Westworld*, a made-for-TV continuation of the original film's timeline, before being cancelled. Crichton's brand of robot hellscape was powered down after this failed project until being relaunched over three decades later by Lisa Joy, then known for her work on ABC's *Pushing Daisies* and USA's *Burn Notice*, and Johnathan Nolan, creator, executive producer, and writer of the CBS series *Person of Interest*.

Like Crichton's film, Nolan and Joy's *Westworld* is a science fiction Western set in a dystopian near future in which humans have developed an underclass of androids to serve their most prurient pleasures at a Wild West theme park. In this vein, *Westworld* became an easy fit for a *Game of Thrones*-primed HBO audience, or what one reviewer called "the sex-and-violence brand of entertainment that HBO has come to specialize in" (Heer). When the *Westworld* series co-creators teamed up with Crichton to write the script for the first episode of the new show, one of the prominent additions was the notable inclusion of Shakespearean quotes and allusions that become thematically significant throughout the series. Indeed, Shakespeare's language, characters, and themes pervade Nolan and Joy's *Westworld*.

## I. “These Violent Delights Have Violent Ends”

In the first episode alone, *Westworld* quotes widely from Shakespeare’s works, incorporating language from *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Henry IV*, and *King Lear*. In Episode One of the first season, “The Original,” a host named Peter Abernathy begins to malfunction when he is unable to reconcile a photograph featuring a woman against the backdrop of modern-day Times Square with his own limited experience within the confines of the Westworld park. When Abernathy begins to glitch during a scripted conversation with his host daughter, Dolores, he whispers to her something that is revealed later in the episode to be a line from *Romeo and Juliet*, “These violent delights have violent ends.” In the play, the line reflects Friar Lawrence’s advice to the young couple, urging them to “love moderately” (2.6.14). In *Westworld*, however, the delivery of the line functions as the introduction of computer code that, once executed, results in the artificial intelligence equivalent of cognition among the “hosts,” Westworld’s non-human denizens. In *Westworld*, Shakespeare’s language becomes literally codified as command codes issued by humans to hosts and, here, between two hosts. In Episode Two, “Chestnut,” Westworld park co-creator Robert Ford confides to his colleague, Bernard Lowe, “We practice witchcraft. We speak the right words. Then we create life itself, out of chaos,” attesting to the power of language to dictate the behavior of the hosts.

The line whispered by Abernathy to his daughter, “These violent delights have violent ends,” recurs throughout the series and is pronounced by a variety of characters, both hosts and guests alike. The quote was adopted as one of the five major taglines included in posters and marketing material for the first season of the series. In the context of *Westworld*, Friar Lawrence’s warning to the star-crossed lovers of *Romeo and Juliet* becomes transformed into computer code signaling the introduction of a software update that enables hosts to access gestures from prior memories. Codenamed “The Reveries,” showrunner Lisa Joy explains them like this:

The Reveries work on a kind of subliminal level. [...] For me it was imagining that consciousness and history are a deep sea and The Reveries are tiny fishhooks that you dip into it and get little gestures

and consciousness ticks. The hosts don't consciously know where they're drawn from, but they're just there to add some nuance to their expressions and gestures. But dipping that fishhook in might prove to be a little...fraught. (Hibberd)

As Joy suggests, with access to gestures comes access to memories, a situation that proves to be "fraught" among the newly awakened hosts. Abernathy's apparent glitching turns out to be infused with purpose, at once revealing the host's impending identity crisis and simultaneously signaling the transfer of *The Reveries* code to Dolores.

Nolan and Joy's nod to *Romeo and Juliet* in *Westworld* is unmistakable, and it is an easy leap to imagine the ill-fated romance plot driving the first season as a Shakespearean transformation. Like the Montagues and Capulets of Shakespeare's teen tragedy, first-time park guest William and perpetual host ingénue Dolores represent two houses that stand in diametrical opposition, human and android. When we first meet William in Episode Two, "Chestnut," he is a hopeless romantic, a literal white hat who carries with him a photo of his fiancée, Juliet Delos, a Rosalind of sorts.

*Westworld* introduces William as an innocent, not unlike Shakespeare's Romeo, an idealist who thinks he knows what love is until his experience in the park unlocks true romantic feelings in him for the first time. *Westworld* accentuates William's idealism by juxtaposing the character with his foil, future brother-in-law Logan Delos. In contrast to William's curious and timid approach to his *Westworld* adventure, Logan views his time in the park as a lawless LARP, freely indulging his bottomless desires for sex, violence, and cruelty without fear or thought of consequences. Likewise, the host Dolores can be understood—at first at least—as a Juliet figure, herself experiencing unscripted love and desire for the first time with William.

*Westworld* Season One follows the tragic plot of the star-cross'd lovers, William and Dolores, as a series of reversals prevents them from living happily ever after, not unlike the unfortunate fate of Romeo and Juliet. In both *Westworld* and *Romeo and Juliet*, the lovers become separated, leading to a series of missteps that result in grave consequences.

In Shakespeare’s play, Romeo is banished from Verona for killing Juliet’s kinsman, Tybalt. When Romeo flees to Mantua, he has no idea that Friar Lawrence is concocting a plot to fake Juliet’s death. Instead, he relies on Balthasar’s narration of Juliet’s death without the clarification that would be provided by Friar Lawrence’s letters. The audience learns that Romeo never received these letters in 5.2, when the messenger, Friar John, reports that he was quarantined by a fellow friar who suspects that his quarters are plague infested. A scene later, Juliet discovers that Romeo has poisoned himself in an act of love suicide and follows suit with Romeo’s dagger. Similarly, in *Westworld*, William and Dolores become separated when Logan, now a leader in the Confederados, captures the two. Attempting to show William that Dolores is a simple machine, Logan slices open her abdomen to reveal the metal mechanical structure beneath the skin. William urges her to, “Run! I’ll find you” (Season 1, Episode 9: “The Well-Tempered Clavier”). Like Juliet’s fantasy of being rescued by a fully read in Romeo, William’s quest to reunite with Dolores is thwarted when, after exploring the outer edges of the park in search for her, he finally discovers her again where they first met, in Sweetwater, memory wiped and living out the rancher’s daughter storyline with a new park guest.

## II. “Don’t you see? Hell is empty and all the devils are here.”

The line, “These violent delights have violent ends,” from *Romeo and Juliet* functions on multiple levels in *Westworld*. The phrase serves to advance the plot by triggering The Reveries, or memories, in the hosts, making them question their scripted identities and the world around them. The line also captures the essence of William and Dolores’s bad romance. Like Friar Lawrence’s wedding day warning to Romeo and Juliet, William and Dolores’s firestorm relationship burns too hot to last:

These violent delights have violent ends  
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,  
Which as they kiss consume: the sweetest honey  
Is loathsome in his own deliciousness  
And in the taste confounds the appetite:  
Therefore love moderately; long love doth so;  
Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow. (2.5.9-15)

In *Westworld*, “These violent delights have violent ends,” refers to the power dynamics between guests and hosts in the park as guests freely engage in illegal and immoral acts like murder and rape against humanlike hosts without fear of consequences. The line also conjures the dystopian world outside the park, a hyper-capitalist society run by the corporate elite. It is no coincidence that the Delos board members who appear onscreen—William, James Delos, Logan Delos, and Charlotte Hale—all share the common characteristics associated with narcissism, such as elevated self-importance, a sense of entitlement, and a lack of empathy for others. In *Westworld*, the billionaire class becomes the stand-in for humanity.

While the Shakespeare quote from *Romeo and Juliet* might enjoy a higher profile in *Westworld* as one of the taglines for the first season, another line from Shakespeare that the glitching Peter Abernathy delivers to his panicking daughter in the first episode might carry more symbolic weight for the series. Looking at that anachronistic color photo of the woman surrounded by the electronic billboards of Times Square, Abernathy cryptically mutters to his daughter, “I had a question. A question you’re not supposed to ask. Which gave me an answer you’re not supposed to know.” When Dolores panics, calling her mother for help, Abernathy’s body language shifts from despair to alarm. Grabbing Dolores’s shoulders and fixing his gaze to her, he warns her with stern resolve, “You should go. Leave!” before quoting a different line from Shakespeare, this time from *The Tempest*: “Don’t you see? Hell is empty and all the devils are here.” Abernathy leans into Dolores, whispering something inaudible to the audience but later revealed to be “These violent delights.” Here, Abernathy introduces a line of computer code into the park that, once executed, results in the artificial intelligence equivalent of cognition among the “hosts,” *Westworld*’s non-human denizens.

Abernathy’s fearful delivery of Ariel’s line from *The Tempest*, “Hell is empty and all the devils are here,” is even more thematically relevant to the series, describing the situation faced by the park’s hosts at the hands of oftentimes cruel and malevolent guests. In *The Tempest* Act 1, Scene 2, Ariel reports back to Prospero on the success of his magical storm to disorient the Milanese and Neapolitan sailors:

All but mariners

Plunged in the foaming brine and quit the vessel,  
Then all afire with me; the king's son Ferdinand,  
With hair upstaring—then like reeds, not hair—  
Was the first man that leapt, cried, “Hell is empty,  
And all the devils are here!” (210-14)

Here, Ariel ventriloquizes the language of a terrified Ferdinand in the face of a violent storm that forces him to jump ship. Ferdinand’s terror becomes mirrored in this host’s experience of self-knowledge, the realization that the entire purpose of his existence is to suffer for the entertainment and amusement of the human park guests. The confluence of *The Tempest* and *Westworld* at this key moment in Episode One of the first season creates a Shakespearean transformation that is echoed throughout the series.

*Westworld* Season Two originally aired on April 22, 2018, on HBO. Like the first season, Season Two (subtitled “The Door”) consisted of ten episodes with the season finale airing on June 24, 2018. The first episode of Season Two, “Journey into Night,” begins in a familiar setting, the room in which Bernard had conducted private interviews with Dolores from the first season. The scene opens with an out-of-focus close-up of Bernard’s face and slowly zooms out as the image comes into focus. Appearing in a state of confusion, Bernard begins the interview:

BERNARD LOWE: I'm sorry, Dolores, I was lost in thought.

DOLORES ABERNATHY: We were just talkin'.

BERNARD LOWE: What were we talking about?

DOLORES ABERNATHY: You were tellin' me about a dream.

BERNARD LOWE: Yeah, I guess. I dreamt I was on an ocean with  
you and the others on a distant shore.

DOLORES ABERNATHY: Were you with us?

BERNARD LOWE: No. You'd left me behind. And the waters were  
rising around me.

DOLORES: What's it mean?

BERNARD LOWE: Dreams don't mean anything, Dolores. They're  
just noise. They're not real.

DOLORES ABERNATHY: What is real?

BERNARD LOWE: That which is irreplaceable. That answer doesn't  
seem to satisfy you.



DOLORES ABERNATHY: Because it's not completely honest.  
BERNARD LOWE: You, uh you frighten me sometimes, Dolores.  
DOLORES ABERNATHY: Why on earth would you ever be  
frightened of me?  
BERNARD LOWE: Not of who you are now, but you're growing,  
learning, so quickly. I'm frightened of what you might  
become what path you might take.

This exchange reverses the power dynamic between Bernard and Dolores from Season One. In addition to confessing his dream, Bernard appears to struggle to answer Dolores's questions. Immediately following the exchange, director Richard J. Lewis inserts a montage of incidents involving Bernard from Season One and the season ahead in random order, suggesting that Bernard is unable to distinguish between past and present. Following the montage, Lewis features a shot of Bernard's signature eyeglasses on a sandy beach with one sleeve of his grey suit in the lower right corner of the frame as a wave washes up, carrying the eyeglasses out of frame. Though Bernard does not physically need his spectacles to see, the glasses serve as important prop. He periodically takes them off, wipes them with a handkerchief, and places them back on his nose to regain his focus. The lenses drifting away with the tide, Bernard is left here without vision or clarity. Lewis then cuts to a close-up shot of Bernard's face as he slowly opens his eyes as if from sleeping, paralleling the opening shot of the episode. Bernard, like the tempest-tossed Ferdinand of Shakespeare's play, has washed up on shore disoriented and vulnerable.

Besides the similarities between Bernard's disorientation that follows him through Season Two and Ferdinand's traumatic arrival on Prospero's island, *Westworld* bears a keen likeness to Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, a Shakespearean transformation that imagines the play's green world overtaking the civilized world outside of the park. As viewers follow the narrative from the perspective of the newly self-aware hosts, they experience a version of *The Tempest* in which they are held under Prospero's spell.

### III. *Westworld's* New Prospero

Series co-creator Lisa Joy has cited Prospero as her source of inspiration in writing the character of Robert Ford, the technological mastermind responsible for the Wild West theme park for which the series is named. Prospero plays a dual role in the play, as indicated by his costume. His entrance in 1.2 “*in his magic cloak*” announces his status as magician, but by the play’s end, Prospero’s “discas[ing]” of his former costume and his donning of “the hat and rapier” that he commands Ariel to “[f]etch” instantiates his former status as Duke, “As I was sometime Milan” (5.1.84-86).

In his essay that appears in Dollimore and Sinfield’s classic *Political Shakespeare*, scholar Paul Brown alleges that Prospero’s costume change registers his reclamation of his “civil power” as his hat and rapier function as “twin markers of the governor (the unduffed hat signifying a high status in a deference society, as the rapier signifies the aristocratic right to carry such weaponry)” (67). In this way, Prospero is both sorcerer and governor, a position akin to the role that Robert Ford plays as the Park Director of Delos Destinations within the *Westworld* series narrative. Indeed, in Episode Two, Ford confides to his lead programmer, Bernard Lowe, the Ariel to his Prospero, that, “We practice witchcraft. We speak the right words. Then we create life itself... out of chaos” (“Chestnut”).

While there would seem to be few similarities between the exiled Milanese Duke-turned-sorcerer from Shakespeare’s late romance and the co-founder and *Westworld* park director from Joy and Jonathan Nolan’s science fiction series, Prospero and Ford share a likeness in temperament, purpose, language, and, to some degree, situation that link not just the two characters but the two works and worlds in their respective storylines. In what follows, I wish to highlight two key scenes of Shakespearean transformation from the climactic finale of *Westworld* Season One vis-à-vis Act 5 of *The Tempest*.

The first scene from the *Westworld* season finale that strongly echoes *The Tempest* is Dr. Ford’s final conversation with his lead programmer, Bernard Lowe. Entitled “The Bicameral Mind,” Episode Ten of *Westworld* Season One showcases the season’s big reveal that finally

makes sense of what fans had been suspecting all along: that the seemingly linear narration of the show is, in all actuality, the juxtaposition of two different timelines separated by thirty years.

It is in this episode too that Dr. Ford says his final goodbye to his android partner, Bernard Lowe, who has only recently discovered that he is indeed a host patterned on Ford's former business partner, Arnold Weber, a programmer who collaborated with Ford to create the hosts but later sabotaged the Westworld project by staging a host revolt that culminated in his own suicide by robot. As Bernard and Ford talk in the White Church in Escalante right before Ford will give his resignation speech to park's board of trustees, Bernard confronts his boss about Ford's treatment of the hosts:

BERNARD LOWE: You think you'll never lose control of this place, of us, but you will. Arnold's still trying to change us. To free us. You didn't slip the reveries into the update, did you? He did. He's still fighting you.

DR. FORD: No, my friend. Arnold didn't know how to save you. He tried, but I stopped him. Do you want to know why I really gave you the backstory of your son, Bernard? That was Arnold's key insight. The thing that led the hosts to their awakening. Suffering. The pain that the world is not as you want it to be. It was when Arnold died, when I suffered, that I began to understand what he had found. To realize I was wrong.

BERNARD LOWE: But you kept us here, in this hell.

DR. FORD: Bernard, I told you. Arnold didn't know how to save you, but I do.

BERNARD LOWE: What the hell are you talking about?

DR. FORD: You needed time. Time to understand your enemy. To become stronger than them. And I'm afraid, in order to escape this place, you need to suffer more. And now it is time to say goodbye, old friend.

*[they shake hands]*

DR. FORD: Good luck.

Here, Bernard defiantly asserts that he and the hosts will one day find freedom from Ford’s control through the intervention of Ford’s long-dead former partner, Arnold. To Bernard and for audiences, Ford’s response seems heartfelt but at the same time unsatisfying. Ford claims that it is he and not Arnold who is ultimately responsible for inserting the “reveries,” or ability to remember the past, into the host’s software update. Here, Ford does not free Bernard; that is frankly beyond his power as the company’s board retains the intellectual property of the hosts. Instead, he alludes the maxim attributed to the awakening of consciousness of the hosts. He empowers Bernard with the knowledge that suffering is necessary both to awaken host consciousness and to experience and recognize the bottomless depths of the capacity for human greed, self-interest, and violence.

Dr. Ford’s final exchange with Bernard is a kind of Shakespearean transformation that gives real weight and consequences to the unequal and unjust power dynamics that Shakespeare glosses over in *The Tempest*. No doubt Dr. Ford appears at times as tyrannical and cruel to the hosts as Prospero is to those over which he has power. Unlike Dr. Ford, though, Prospero’s power over Ariel is absolute; he alone is capable of releasing his servant from captivity. “Quickly, spirit! / Thou shalt ere long be free,” (5.1.86-7) he says before Ariel attires him in his princely garb. “Why, that’s my dainty Ariel! I shall miss / Thee, but yet thou shalt have freedom,” he affectionately reaffirms before sending Ariel to summon the Master and Boatswain to his location. At the play’s end, after Prospero commands Ariel to “deliver all” (317) of the castaways home, he unambiguously offers Ariel his freedom: “Then to the elements / Be free, and fare thee well” (5.1.320-1).

The second scene from the *Westworld* Season One finale that echoes *The Tempest* directly is during Dr. Ford’s resignation speech. After leaving Bernard in the White Church, Dr. Ford appears before a crowd of Delos board members and upper management as a team of hosts cater the event and provide entertainment. Ford begins his address:

Good evening. Since I was a child... I always loved a good story. I believed that stories helped us to ennoble ourselves, to fix what was broken in us, and to help us become the people we dreamed of being.

Lies that told a deeper truth. I always thought I could play some small part in the grand tradition.

Ford's characterization of storytelling as "Lies that told a deeper truth" recalls the metatextual moments in *The Tempest* in which Prospero likens his magic within the world of the play to the mimetic power of the theater to conjure meaning outside of it. Prospero speaks of the three spirits he summoned to celebrate the wedding of Miranda and Ferdinand—Juno, Ceres, and Iris—as "actors" who "were all spirits and / Are melted into air, into thin air" (4.1.48-50). Prospero describes the features of the pageant, and, by extension, the worldbuilding elements that frame the stories created on the stage as ephemeral:

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
 The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
 The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
 Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
 And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
 Leave not a rack behind. (4.1.151-6)

Paul Brown reads Prospero's "stuff of dreams" speech as a commentary on the power of things to designate meaning through representation. The speech, for Brown, inaugurates the "dispell[ing]" of the masque and illuminates "the illusory nature of all representation, even of the world itself." Brown places this dynamic in tension with Prospero's earlier "insist[ance]" that his narrative be taken as real and powerful," which becomes contradicted in the monologue as Prospero's narrative "is collapsed, along with everything else, into the 'stuff' of dreams" (67). The imaginary, representational world created within the time and space of a theatrical performance is, to borrow Dr. Ford's terminology, a lie, but the lie that unfolds on the stage tells a deeper truth.

*Westworld* transforms Shakespeare into something intangible, ethereal, and perhaps even magical. This is most apparent in the show's overt nods to *The Tempest*. In his "Epilogue," Prospero makes a final surrender to the audience, imploring them: "But release me from my bands / With the help of your good hands" (9-10). Prospero, who had occupied a position of power throughout the play, now performs a final act of

obeisance to the audience, literally begging them for applause while he releases them from the theater. Like Prospero’s “Epilogue,” which has been interpreted as Shakespeare’s final address to audiences, Ford informs his gathered guests that, “I’m sad to say, this will be my last story.” When Ford tells his audience that there will be “a killing. This time by choice,” he is speaking broadly about the Wyatt plotline that he had recently introduced to the hosts through the reveries software update. At the same time, though, he is forecasting his own death that will come at the hands of a self-aware Delores. In contrast to her murder of the hosts and Arnold Weber thirty years earlier that resulted from deliberate changes made by Arnold to her programming, Delores now makes the choice to execute Dr. Ford based on her own free will. As a gun-wielding Delores creeps up behind him, Ford tells an anecdote that recalls the use of music and magic in *The Tempest*:

An old friend once told me something that gave me comfort, something he had read. He said that Mozart, Beethoven, and Chopin never died. They simply became music. So I hope you will enjoy this last piece very much.

As Ford speaks of music, an instrumental version of Radiohead’s “Exit Music (for a Film)” plays in the background. The song was written for the 1996 Baz Luhrmann film *Romeo + Juliet* and captures a young couple’s escape from an overbearing father. The inclusion of this song to accompany Ford’s speech underlines the theme of rebellion against oppression, a theme that becomes echoed in the hosts’ subsequent rebellion against their human captors.

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