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THEATRICAL DECEPTION:

Wight and Grant: Theatrical Deception: Shakespearean Allusion in John Fowles'

SHAKESPEAREAN

ALLUSION IN JOHN FOWLES'

THE MAGUS: A REVISED VERSION

Douglas A. Wight
and
Kenneth B. Grant

Readers of either or both versions of John Fowles' *The Magus* frequently express discomfort in assessing the work. One finds the 1966 original edition too difficult, labeling it "pretentious and self-indulgent" (Allen 65). Moderating this position, another critic praises its intellectual power and thematic resolution, but then calls the latter a "partial failure" (Rubenstein 339). Others acknowledge the author's ambitiousness (Scholes 12), one describing the novel as a "brilliant puzzle" (Rackham 95). The 1978 revision, *The Magus: A Revised Version*, meets the same uneasy and uncertain reaction as did the earlier edition. According to one reader, "The essential opacity of the original novel has not been removed in the revised version, yet the latter is unquestionably superior to the original" (Wade 716).¹ Another reader cannot see these "improvements" (Glasersfeld 444). And a third actually finds the new edition "not more polished or elegant than the earlier work . . . simply duller" (Lever 86).

Confronted with this disparity of opinion, what ought one think of this revised *Magus*, a version increasing the length of the already bulky novel by some 80 pages? And how is one to interpret the author's claim that in revising he left the themes of his work unchanged, but improved the style (*The Magus: A Revised Version* 5)? We believe *The Magus: A Revised Version* is not at all limited to 86 pages of stylistic emendation; rather, in conjunction with stylistic change, it profits notably from clarification and improved focus of theme. And no more clearly can these thematic betterments be seen, we feel, than in Fowles' extended use of Shakespearean allusions. Fowles employs these Shakespearean allusions, often ironically, to point up Nicholas Urfe's theatricality, misperceptions, and selfishness.

In both versions of *The Magus*, as early as the attempted suicide, we find Nicholas playing a role, a Shakespearean role intended by Fowles to display his protagonist's inauthenticity as a person. Having devised a method by which he can fire a shotgun at himself, Nicholas waits for courage to perform the deed. As he waits, he thinks:

All the time I felt I was being watched, that I was not alone, that I was putting on an act for the benefit of someone, that this action could be done only if it was spontaneous, pure — and moral. Because more and more it crept through my mind with the chill spring night that I was trying to commit not a moral action, but a fundamentally aesthetic one; to do something that would end my life sensationally, consistently. It was a Mercutio death I was looking for, not a real one. (64)

This passage, practically unchanged from the original edition, presents Nicholas' interest in a theatrical death, a death performed upon a stage, not a "real" one.² Thus, in this scene, he chooses to visualize himself as Mercutio, valiant, witty, oblivious to pain — Mercutio, the perfect showman. Here, and more importantly, in the subsequent scenes at Conchis' estate, Nicholas, habitual liar and user of women, seizes upon comparable Shakespearean roles. In both versions, he casts himself in theatrical parts serving to reinforce his heroic and inaccurate picture of himself. For the reader, the irony springing from this situation sharpens Nicholas' character and provides an additional layer of meaning in the novel itself. Even so minor an allusion as the one to Mercutio, for example, makes a significant difference. As Nicholas procrastinates, fumbles, and ultimately fails to commit suicide, Fowles reminds us of the bravado and dash of young Mercutio, gravely stricken and knowing it, dying in the street, but still able to scorn his wound with jest and pun:

'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door, but 'tis enough, 'twill serve. Ask for me to-morrow, and you shall find me a grave man. (*Romeo and Juliet* 3.1.97-100)

Nicholas, in contrast, with loaded gun still in hand, finally concludes: "I knew I would never kill myself, I knew I would always want to go on living with myself, however hollow I became, however diseased" (64). Thus Nicholas Urfe entertains romantic fancies but is governed by the non-Mercutian, ordinary common sense and emotions of an Everyman.³ Throughout the rest of the novel not only does he see himself thus, as any number of Shakespearean characters, but Conchis too employs this material in the course of conducting the godgame. By the end of the story, Nicholas has had his fill of putting on an act for the benefit of anyone, himself above all.

Obviously, *The Tempest* is the main literary allusion of the novel, original and revised versions alike.⁴ In both, Fowles makes extended reference to Shakespeare's enchanted setting by providing the *Magus* island, the Bourani estate of Conchis, with a cast including Prospero, Miranda, Ferdinand, and Caliban. Shortly after Nicholas' failure at suicide, he chooses to explore that end of the island where Conchis rules his estate. After serving Nicholas tea and *kourabiedes*, Conchis openly associates himself with Prospero:

"Come now. Prospero will show you his domain."

As we went down the steps to the gravel I said, "Prospero had a daughter."

"Prospero had many things." He turned a dry look on me.

"And not all young and beautiful, Mr. Urfe." (85)

This mysterious introduction to Conchis' domain, unchanged from the first edition, is followed by a demonstration of the wizard's powers as Prospero. From Nicholas' point of view, Conchis shows himself a potent magician like his Shakespearean counterpart, producing music and the stench of death and decay at will from the silent and pure Greek night. The next day, while swimming, Nicholas reflects on this Bourani Prospero, seeing Conchis as the magician/ruler who "had turned away — to talk with Ariel, who puts records on; or with Caliban, who carried a bucket of rotting entrails . . ." (139). In both versions, no sooner has Conchis identified himself with Prospero than Nicholas inquires of a Miranda. Methodically prepared by this atmosphere of Prospero's enchanted domain, no wonder Nicholas

Wight and Grant, Theatrical Deception, Shakespearean Allusion in John Fowles' Sexually preoccupied Nicholas is only too eager to cast himself as Ferdinand, since the part naturally suggests to him the possibility of wooing a Miranda, of adding yet another young woman to the dozen who separate him from his virginity.

Now we arrive at the point in *The Magus* where several changes in the two versions emerge distinct and important. As will be shown, these differences result primarily as Fowles pointedly extends his use of allusion to Shakespeare in *The Magus: A Revised Version*. First, in a critical scene, as Nicholas feigns sleep beneath a pine tree, Lily sits close behind him and "in a very low voice" recites that delightful *Tempest* passage about the pleasures of sleep and dream (208; *Tempest* 3.2.138-146). Her recitation finished, she lowers the Chinese carnival mask she holds and Nicholas observes:

"You make a rotten Caliban."

"Then perhaps you shall take the part."

"I was rather hoping for Ferdinand."

She half-raised the mask again and quizzed me over the top of it with a decided dryness. We were evidently still playing games, but in a different, rather franker key.

"Are you sure you have the skill for it?"

"What I lack in skill I'll try to make up for in feeling."

A tiny mocking glint stayed in her eyes. "Forbidden."

By Prospero?"

"Perhaps."

"That's how it began in Shakespeare. By being forbidden."

She looked down. "Although of course his Miranda was a lot more innocent."

"And his Ferdinand." (209)

This scene is especially significant as it is a product of Fowles' revision of the novel. Originally Lily recites the nursery rhyme "A Frog He Would A-Wooing Go," hardly a *Tempest* quotation. The revision, however, quickly broadens *The Tempest* allusion, far more clearly associating Lily with Miranda, Nicholas with Ferdinand. Thus, Fowles' addition stresses Nicholas and Lily's Shakespearean theatrics, heightening the novel's theme of authenticity versus role-playing.

Among other gains, here is added irony. While both characters affect moderately sexy roles in this bantering colloquy, especially in the last two lines, "suave" Nicholas has no idea of how sophisticated Lily really is, while *she* knows the full account of his boyish sexual exploits and surely finds them unimpressive if not outright naive. Consequently, in playing their Shakespeare game, although both characters advance deceptive portraits of themselves as available young romantic lovers when such is not really the case, only Lily/Miranda understands the true picture.

A second major change between the original and revised versions of *The Magus* results from further development of reference to *The Tempest*. In both versions of the novel, Conchis directs Nicholas to cut some wood for him, a substantial amount of manual labor for a man unaccustomed to such physical exertion. By so doing, Conchis continues to encourage Nicholas in his role as Ferdinand, since the circumstances directly refer to the same task set by Prospero for the real Shakespearean Ferdinand. In the original version, Fowles now drops the subject, satisfied with the simple parallels of plot and action. In a significant addition to *The Magus*:

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A Revised Version, however, he includes a conversation between Lily and Nicholas on the place of *The Tempest* in the events happening at Bourani.

She said nothing for a moment. "I don't think the *Three Hearts* story means anything. But there's a much greater work of literature that may." She left a pause for me to guess, then murmured, "Yesterday afternoon, after my little scene. Another magician once set a young man hewing wood."

"I missed that. Prospero and Ferdinand."

"Those lines I recited."

"He also brought it up on my very first visit here. Before I even knew you existed." I noticed she was avoiding my eyes. It was not, given the end of *The Tempest*, difficult to guess why. I murmured, "He can't have known we'd . . ."

"I know, it's just . . ." she shook her head. "That I'm his to give." She added, "Not you."

"And he certainly has a Caliban."

She sighed. "I know." (346-47)

This revision adds interest, complications, focus of theme, and deepened ironies. Not only does the new passage recapitulate previous *Tempest* allusions, but it also reinforces Nicholas in his role of Ferdinand. When Nicholas notices Lily avoiding his eyes, he naturally assumes that she is shy, that she knows as well as he the destined union of Miranda and Ferdinand at play's end. How foolish is Nicholas' assumption! This romantic expectation is, of course, unshared by Lily. Actually, she is toying with him as he has toyed with women; and Joe, the Caliban of whom the unknowing Nicholas speaks, happens to be Lily's lover, making a joke of her sigh and her little "I know."

In both the revised and the original *Magus*, Fowles continues with his comparison of Shakespeare's aristocratic Ferdinand and his own lesser man of the twentieth century. The Ferdinand of *The Tempest*, princely, straightforward, trustworthy in the company of the virgin Miranda, proves ideal in every respect. His counterpart in *The Magus*, however, when not teaching school or listening to Conchis' stories, can generally be found in hot sexual pursuit of the bogus Miranda, Prospero's stipulation notwithstanding. Although deceitful about Alison, sneaky about visiting a Piraeus whorehouse where he contracts a venereal disease, and forever coy about his sexual prowess ("By the time I left Oxford I was a dozen girls away from virginity" (25).), Nicholas upon several occasions refers to himself as Ferdinand. In fact, of course, apart from physical appearance, he is a parody of Shakespeare's Ferdinand, a mere dupe. Blind to these absurdities, at this stage Nicholas continues to accept without question his role as Ferdinand, accept it completely since it is a role others expect him to act and one which pleases his ego. So confident is he of his eventual conquest of Miranda that he daydreams about seducing the "twin" Miranda, Lily's sister June.

In *The Magus: A Revised Version* Fowles intensifies Nicholas Urfe's foolish sexual fantasy through a series of added *Tempest* allusions. Believing himself "sanctioned as the Ferdinand" to his Miranda, Nicholas romantically envisions June sleeping in his bed at Bourani when he is back at school, confident that the two

Wight and Grant: Theatrical Deception: Shakespearean Allusion in John Fowles' girls and he would happily share the rest of their lives. Two for the price of one" (377). Recalling *The Tempest* parallels, in the revised version, Nicholas assumes that Conchis' withdrawal of invitations to Bourani constitutes another of Prospero's trials, and expecting to be treated as a Ferdinand, he "refused to believe that he [Conchis] would really keep either Julie or the truth from me for another week" (390). But Nicholas' confident expectations are reversed when Conchis suddenly proclaims the game ended. After the godgame's curtain call and with Lily spirited away, Nicholas is enraged; in the revised *Magus* he interprets the situation to be a twisted *Tempest*, one with "Prospero turned insane, maniacally determined never to release his Miranda" (466). Thus, Fowles emphasizes and extends his theme of theatrical delusion, further developing his Shakespearean reference.

The scene at Conchis' house in town serves as the climax to the *Tempest* material in the revised version of *The Magus*, showing us Nicholas playing *his* Ferdinand, a role commanding him to act lies for the benefit of his audience. Fowles had prepared the way earlier by alluding to Shakespeare's Prospero enjoining Ferdinand to remain chaste before his marriage to Miranda, receiving Ferdinand's sincere vow never to allow that his honor turn to lust before he and his bride-to-be became properly married. Fowles' Prospero, Conchis, demands and receives a like vow from Nicholas. Nicholas, his interest in Lily, of course, being far more carnal than honorable, now in *The Magus: A Revised Version* attempts to make himself appear more attractive to her by telling repeated falsehoods, rejecting and distorting his experience in Greece with Alison. In supplying his reader with the added material of this scene in town, Fowles now causes Nicholas to reveal his most unsavory side, attempting to seduce one woman, Lily, by lying about another. Most un-Ferdinandlike behavior, especially since he mistakenly believes at this time that Alison, brokenhearted over not having won his love, has killed herself.

In *The Tempest*, the Masque directly follows the episode of Prospero's warning of Ferdinand; in both versions of *The Magus* what follows is the abduction and masque-like trial and disintoxification of Nicholas, the ending of his role as Ferdinand. At the disintoxification, a radical change takes place in the character of Nicholas Urfe, a transformation paralleled by a sudden change in the use of Shakespearean drama in the novel. Fowles turns his attention from the romantic phantasy of *The Tempest* to the somber history of *Othello*. Prospero, Miranda, and Ferdinand give way to Othello, Desdemona, and Iago. The tone of the novel darkens, a darkening reflected even in the quality of the film shown to Nicholas, the trial chamber, and in the dramatic tableau presented. Following the psychological panel's evaluation and the blue movie Nicholas is forced to watch, the room where he is bound is literally darkened, and in the reflected light he sees Lily lying naked upon a number of pillows, erotically imitating Goya's *Maja Desnuda*. Black Joe, the former Caliban, appears in the scene, and he and Lily make well-practiced love before the bound Nicholas.

. . . I began to understand I was Iago; but I was also crucified. The crucified Iago. Crucified by. . . the metamorphoses of Lily ran wildly through my brain, like maenads, hunting some blindness, some demon in me down. I suddenly knew her real name, behind the masks. Why they had chosen the Othello situation. Why Iago. (540)

At the conclusion of this sexual tableau, Conchis appears and instructs Nicholas to "learn to smile."

Adding further dimension to the Shakespearean parallels, in *The Magus: A Revised Version* Nicholas instead ponders upon the question of free choice in the roles we play, deciding "we have no choice of play or role. It is always Othello. To be is, immutably, to be Iago" (541). Remaining as theatrical as he was in the beginning, Nicholas moves from Mercutio to Ferdinand to Iago still without finding authenticity. In fact, manipulated into a new role by Conchis, he accepts it, but tries immediately to make his Iago better suited to his own self-image. Such theatrics reveal his continued blindness and immaturity. Although we find no further added Shakespearean allusions in the revised version, those already mentioned add meaning and effect to everything that follows.

In both editions, Nicholas returns to London and attempts to discover the identity of Lily. Even though he has given over much of his anger, he feels both amazement at Lily's proficiency at lying, and incredulity over her sexual performance with Joe. In recounting the course of his investigation, he quotes two passages from *Othello*, both showing Brabantio foolishly mistaken:

She is abus'd, stol'n from me, and corrupted
By spells and medicines bought of mountebanks;
For nature so preposterously to err,
Being not deficient, blind, or lame of sense,
Sans witchcraft could not.

And:

A maiden never bold
Of spirit so still and quiet, that her motion
Blush'd at herself; and she — in spite of nature,
Of years, of country, credit, everything —
To fall in love with what she fear'd look on!
(593: *Othello*, 1.3.60-64, 94-97)

Here, too, note the suggestion of Conchis as Magus, responsible for altering the character of Lily, transforming her innocence. Following the trial, Fowles replaces the recurring *Tempest* allusions with recurring *Othello* ones.

The *Othello* allusions emphasize the pattern of placing the idealized world of Shakespeare beside the real but comparatively tacky world of *The Magus* for purposes of ironic humor. Most obviously, Fowles reduces the dignity of *Othello* by one of Conchis' productions, the tableau and sexual performance of Desdemona/Lily and Othello/Joe. Witnessing the "white separated knees" and the "silently celebrated . . . orgasm," Nicholas drops the role of Ferdinand to become honest Iago, but with no success — no, even worse, with comic failure. When sacked for "unsatisfactory conduct as a teacher," for example, he responds with strong Iago-like threats:

Jesus . . . Now listen . . . I am going to Athens. I am going to
the British Embassy, I am going to the Ministry of Education,
I am going to the newspapers, I am going to make such trouble
that . . . (552)

But only a few pages later, his anger towards the school quickly dissipates: "My anger retreated before my desire to have it all over and done with." His malevolence

continues, however, though a long and remarkably unsuccessful search for an appropriate victim upon whom to wreak Shakespearean revenge.

Indeed, Nicholas' role as Iago continues in the novel when he confronts Lily's mother, Mrs. DeSeitis, at her home in Much Hadham. She charges him with behaving toward women as a collector: falling in love with the work, and then doing anything to acquire it. Angered, Nicholas responds:

"Except that this wasn't a painting. It was a girl with as much morality as a worn-out whore from the Place Pigalle . . ."

"Shall I call those two down there? Tell your son how his sister performs — I think that's the euphemism — one week with me, the next with a Negro?"

She let silence pass again, as if to isolate what I said; as people leave a question unanswered in order to snub the questioner.

"Does a Negro make it so much worse?"

"It doesn't make it any better." (613)

Nicholas' attitude in these lines recalls Iago's speech to the bigoted Brabantio.

Zounds, sir, you're robb'd for
shame, put on your gown;
Your heart is burst; you have lost half
your soul.

Even now, very now, an old black ram
Is tuppung your white ewe.

(*Othello* 1.1.83-86)

Nicholas, playing his Shakespearean role once again, engages himself as willingly as he did when he perceived himself as Mercutio and Ferdinand. Cast as an Iago at the trial, he continues to play the part, even to the point of issuing racial slurs against Joe. Still, Nicholas shows some improvement. Ferdinand has given way to Iago, a more suitable role for Nicholas since both he and Othello's ancient make a habit of deceiving people. Throughout the novel Nicholas has borne a sense of personal superiority, but here he must relinquish that superiority in the knowledge that his actions are no more virtuous than Mrs. DeSeitis', Conchis', or Lily's; and, in fact, his actions have been equally deceptive. Shortly after this visit he writes a letter to Alison, a letter he destroys not long after when he sees that the "injured Malvolio stalked through every line" (620).

Thus Fowles shows us Nicholas Urfe's character and his moral progress. The realization that he had written a letter to Alison as the injured Malvolio demonstrates the awakening of an accurate self-perception at last. Furthermore, his destruction of the letter evidences his progress. He has moved from Shakespearean romantic hero to Shakespearean fool: exorcism of any Shakespearean role now seems possible. Several days after his letter writing incident, Nicholas dines with Mrs. DeSeitas and admits:

"All right. I treated Alison very badly. I'm a born cad, a swine, whatever you want. But why the colossal performance just to tell one miserable moral bankrupt what he is?" (637)

Finally, Nicholas speaks of himself without the usual self-deception. And from here on, he works to do away with roles, false characters. With his dreams of grandeur

dissolved, he University of Dayton Review, Vol. 18, No. 3 (1987), Art. 9. honestly admits that he does not know what his reaction would be if Lily called to him. "The fact that I don't know and probably never shall," Nicholas tells Alison, "is what I want you to remember" (665). Here are no lies. Finally, he becomes able to observe: "There were no watching eyes. The windows were as blank as they looked. The theatre was empty. It was not a theatre" (666).

The additional theatrical allusions throughout the revised edition make Nicholas' statement even more pointed. Nicholas has become his own self, has come to understand love.

I understand that word now, Alison. Your word . . . You can't hate someone who's really on his knees. Who'll never be more than half a human being without you. (667)

The novel ends in tableau: Nicholas' confession made, time frozen, awaiting Alison's response. Fowles has skillfully prepared us, and we know Alison will accept Nicholas. The final scene is intended to support a position Fowles has Nicholas advance earlier in the *Magus*.

An ending is no more than a point in sequence, a nip of the cutting shears. Benedick kissed Bea trice at last; but ten years later? And Elsinor, that following spring? (657)

The final page is a "snip of the cutting shears," the snip in which a selfish young man renounces deceptive and self-aggrandizing role-playing in his ongoing struggle for authenticity.

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- ¹ See also Ronald Binns.
- ² Fowles removed two words from the original version: "only if it was spontaneous, pure, [isolated] — and moral. Because more and more it crept through my mind with the chill spring night that I was trying to commit not a moral action, but a fundamentally aesthetic one; to do something that would end my life sensationally, [significantly,] consistently" (*The Magus* 48).
- ³ Fowles himself sees Nicholas as Everyman. "Gradually my protagonist, Nicholas," writes the author in the Foreword to *The Magus: A Revised Version*, "took on, if not the true representative face of a modern Everyman, at least that of a partial Everyman of my own class and background" (9).
- ⁴ The importance of *The Tempest* in Fowles' *The Collector* has been pointed out by Thomas Corbett. See also Arnold E. Davidson.

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