

FREEDOM AND SERVITUDE IN *THE TEMPEST*: A THEOLOGY OF GRACE

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The Tempest is unusual in its epilogue. Instead of the actor stepping forward to discard his role and ask approving applause, he maintains his role as Prospero and draws the audience into the fictional realm of the play. It is the audience who will decide what happens next: they can keep Prospero on the island or send him on to Naples. Because he has pardoned his deceiving enemy he claims that it would be unjust 'to dwell / In this bare island by [the audience's] spell' (5.1.326). He asks for release. Helpless, now that he has only his own strength and no magic, he pleads,

And my ending is despair
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardoned be;
Let your indulgence set me free. (5.1.333-338)¹

This is a provocative advocacy. A Protestant audience might well equate the Catholic Church's teaching about indulgences with the mumbo-jumbo of magic. Prospero has used magic throughout the play only to discard it at the end, since it is the stuff only of illusion not of truth. When it goes, what is left? There are only two alternatives: one is the darkness of despair as one sees bleakly the derelictions of life that cannot be remedied by human effort; the other is gratuitous mercy from beyond, presumably from God. The immediate role of the audience, Prospero dares to suggest, is to be intercessors, earning and applying the indulgence which will directly free Prospero; and they are to be motivated by the hope that others will in turn intercede for them at the opportune time.

The elements of one of the crucial debates of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation period are in play within the drama. Servitude and sin are countered by grace and freedom. Strangely, by setting the action on an island remote from any recognisable location, and by investing it with the romantic use of magic, spells and spirits, Shakespeare makes the issues 'real'.

Every character in the play suffers a loss of freedom. The causes are many. Prospero is ousted from his dukedom by an envious brother, and his

confined to the island, although exile is softened somewhat by the merciful act of Gonzalo who had provided the castaways with

Rich garments, linens, stuffs and necessities,
Which since have steaded much; so of his gentleness,
Knowing I loved my books, he furnished me
From mine own library with volumes that
I prize above my dukedom (1.2.164-8).

The magic powers that Prospero learnt to exercise are not diabolical, but acquiring them in Milan by arduous study led to Prospero neglecting his duties of office and provided opportunity for his brother's malice. Although such magic was necessary for survival on the island, it could not provide a basis for real life in Milan, Naples, Africa - or London. From the very start of the play, then, magic has limitations and we ought not be surprised that it is discarded. The key, however, lies in the fact that it has to be voluntarily discarded. Just as Prospero had chosen to cultivate the magical arts with dire results, so he has to choose to relinquish them, not thereby directly to bring about his rehabilitation, but as an essential condition for grace to work.

But what is 'grace'? The meaning includes beauty, goodwill, gratitude, and gift. Theologically, it is the gift of God whereby man can hope to share in God's own nature. Such a state cannot be achieved by man's sole powers: it is God's free gift. It is a supernatural gift, that is, it goes beyond the natural composition of man's being.²

A classic locus for meditation is in St Paul's letter to the Romans (5:15-21)

Adam prefigured the One to come, but the gift itself considerably outweighed the fall. If it is certain that through one man's fall so many died, it is even more certain that divine grace, coming through the one man, Jesus Christ, came to so many as an abundant free gift. The results of the gift also outweigh the results of one man's sin: for after one single fall came judgment with a verdict of condemnation, now after many falls comes grace with its verdict of acquittal. If it is certain that death reigned over everyone as the result of one man's fall, it is even more certain that one man, Jesus Christ, will cause everyone to reign in life who receives the free gift that he does not deserve, of being made righteous. Again, as one man's fall brought condemnation on everyone, so the good act of one man brings everyone life and makes them justified. As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous. When law came, it was to multiply the opportunities of falling, but however great the number of sins committed, grace was even greater; and so just as sin reigned wherever there was death, so grace will reign to bring eternal life thanks to the righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ our Lord.

What is important is not simply the nature of grace as God's free gift sharing his own divine life with man; but also the psychological experience of grace. 'Faith' is the classic shorthand denomination. If you emphasise the innate

corruption of man, then there can be no remedy by man's efforts, and you can only have complete confidence that the merits of Christ are actually applied to us. Our sins are, as it were, ignored by God, so that our souls remain indeed hideous in themselves, but God covers them over with the merits of Christ so that these are looked upon by him as being ours. Our sins are not 'imputed' to us, but the merits of Christ are. In this view, good works are of no avail. Indeed they are impossible, since all our actions are made evil by the evil source from which they spring. Further, there can be no such thing as merit.

On the other hand, with a Catholic perspective, if you emphasise the all-sufficient nature of Christ's redeeming acts performed by the one divine Person who united perfectly in himself both the divine and the human natures, then the state of grace is possible for sinful man. There is an inner change by justification, not a mere external non-imputation of sins.

The simplest loss of freedom is that experienced by the sailors. Their calling places them at the mercy of the sea and its physical violence. They see nothing unnatural in their plight at the opening of the play, but the suggestion is of some sort of tacit sympathy which such men have for an over-riding providence that yet leaves room for human skills. The boatswain has no time for the pretensions of his passengers:

'Give thanks you have lived so long, and make yourself ready in your cabin for the mischance of the hour, if it so hap. (*To the Mariners*) - Cheerly, good hearts! (*To the courtiers*) - Out of our way, I say! (1.1.23-6)

Gonzalo, the good councillor, sees the sense of this, while Sebastian and Antonio can only judge the seaman as a 'bawling, blasphemous, incharitable dog'. Equally, the boatswain has a blunt rejoinder: 'Work you, then' (1.1.40). Good works may be spiritually ineffectual, but when your life hinges on them you leave such niceties aside. The scene concludes with the sailors doing what they can, and when that is insufficient, turning to prayer. The play concludes with the boatswain's amazed testimony. Gonzalo teases him, 'Now, blasphemy, / That swear'st grace o'erboard, not an oath on shore? / Hast thou no mouth by land?' (5.1.218-19) The seaman is not a theologian, but he recognises the facts of his life: a wrecked ship is truly restored. The freedom to exercise his calling as sailor is restored; so, one might conclude, is the possibility of spiritual regeneration made clear.

By contrast Sebastian and Alonso are mean-minded plotters and would-be murderers. They learn nothing. They 'entertained ambition, / Expelled remorse and nature... / Would here have killed [their] king' (5.1.75-

7). Their sole importance is to provide an earnest of the depth of Prospero's conversion when he forgives them. They remain obdurate, and hence are described as 'unnatural' (5.1.79). Even the restoration of the dukedom is *forced* upon them, and so can be no mitigation to the evil in which their will is fixed.

So far I have spoken of the Milanese who came to the island. Other arrivals were from Africa. Sycorax, her offspring Caliban, and the island's elemental spirits of whom the chief is Ariel, are all of a pagan dispensation.

Sycorax's past is sketched briefly but terribly. 'Mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible / To enter human learning.' (1.2.264-5) led her to banishment from Algiers, since her sole claim to mercy was that she was pregnant. Her magic is different in kind from Prospero's. She enslaves the good spirits of the island to which she is banished, contaminating the natural goodness she finds. The scope of her evil is all the more horrible in that it cannot be controlled even by its instigator. She confined Ariel, when nature led him to refuse 'her earthy and abhorred commands' (1.2.273), in such torment that his

groans
Did make wolves howl, and penetrate the breasts
Of ever-angry bears - it was a torment
To lay upon the damned. (1.2.287-90)

Its hellishness was so complete that even Sycorax 'could not again undo', and 'age and envy' (1.2.258) confirmed her in evil.

Hence Prospero's assumption of mastery over the elemental spirit differs from Sycorax's. He freed Ariel from confinement and required fidelity of service, as it were by right. Evidently the condition for such service - accepted by both Prospero and Ariel - is that it should be faithful and temporary. Ariel demands liberty as of right (1.2.245) and even reminds Prospero that he promised 'to bate... a full year' (1.2.249) for good behaviour.

Caliban is a worthy 'son that she did litter here, / A freckled whelp, hag-born...' (1.2.282-3). Commentary on *The Tempest* has often considered the relevance of colonialism.³ However, Caliban is native to the island, as the son of an exile. His appreciation of its beauty is not of the island as a prelapsarian Eden. How could it be? Evil is embodied in Sycorax's presence there; Caliban approves her actions, and recognises that this 'dam's god Setebos' (1.2.372) is weaker than Prospero's. This perception is repeated at the end of the play (5.1.261) after Caliban has attempted to conscript Stephano

and Trinculo as protective gods against Prospero. Their pretension to rule are mocked by Prospero:

You'd be king o' the isle, sirrah? (5.1.287)

The surprise of some readers at Caliban's lyric praise of the island is surely because they think Caliban can have no natural appreciation of his surroundings.

Be not afeard, the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voices,
That if then I had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again, and then in dreaming
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me. (3.2.133-140)

This is the picture of man without supernatural grace. He is able to respond naturally to creation, but cannot penetrate to the Creator. There is even the pagan pathos of 'when I waked / I cried to dream again' (3.2.140-1), and his attraction to Prospero's teaching insofar as it 'name[d] the bigger light and how the less, / That burn by day and night' (1.2.335-6) - a minimalist echo of the Book of Genesis.

Miranda's teaching on moral and intellectual matters fell on deaf ears (1.2.350-361). He may have learned the content but had no will to apply it. He used language to curse (1.2.362-4), and attempted to violate his teacher (1.2.347-8). Shakespeare's island is not to be peopled with Calibans. Because he lacks the will which prepares the way for the gift of grace, Caliban must stay as he is. The possibility of justification is carefully left unspecified. Caliban rues the trust that he put on Trinculo:

what a thrice-double ass
Was I to take this drunkard for a god
And worship the dull fool! (5.1.295-7)

Whether he will indeed act on this perception so as to 'be wise hereafter, / And seek for grace' (5.1.294-5) is not clear. Everyone has to learn, including Prospero. Certainly he acknowledges responsibility for Caliban with 'this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine' (5.1.274-5). Supernature builds on nature, and it is fairly clear that Prospero has to accept this fact. The task will be hard and more complex than the tests that young Ferdinand had to pass -

hard physical labour performed faithfully out of devotion to beautiful grace in Miranda.

What is also sure is that the work of grace is embodied in Miranda and her name ('that which is to be wondered at and marvelled over'). She is the only character in the play who suffers no servitude, and acts with the freedom of grace. She has given Caliban his chance and although she is angry at his attack, not bitter. She loves her father, and as is natural can proceed to her future husband, Ferdinand. Where Caliban stays at the level of unregenerate nature, Miranda can choose to build upon nature. The process toward perfection will be never-ending, but that reflects the truth of God's own unlimited powers of giving gifts. Some critics have laughed at Miranda's appreciation of such a mixed crew as the shipwrecked survivors. Rather, her response is right:

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world
That has such people in it! (5.1.181-84)

She is speaking of the inherent goodness that is present in creatures made in the image of the Creator. In this, she is superior to her father, for all his acuteness. By comparison with her refinement, all his 'potent art' is but 'rough magic' (5.1.50). It has to be cast aside freely, so as to allow him to attain the freedom always exemplified in his daughter. He who had always wielded power now looks for the strength that God gives to the weak, especially at the intercessory prayers of the community (cf 2Cor12: 10ff, Heb 11:34).

As you from crimes would pardoned by
Let your indulgence set me free. (5.1.337-8)

The audience is invited to imitate God, the giver of all grace, at the request of the actor, who links the continual demonstration of acts of grace in the play with the real world and its audience.

REFERENCES

¹ William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. Stephen Orgel (Oxford: 1987).

² *Sunna Theologise* I-II, q.110, a.1.

³ Stephen J. Greenblatt, 'Learning to Curse' in *First Images of America*, ed. Fred Chiapeli (Berkeley: 1976), pp. 561-80, and Leslie Fielder, *The Stranger in Shakespeare* (New York: 1972) pp. 199-253.