BRIDGEWATER STATE UNIVERSITY

Undergraduate Review

Volume 5

Article 21

2009

Is Prospero Just? Platonic Virtue in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Anthony Jannotta

Follow this and additional works at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev

Part of the Dramatic Literature, Criticism and Theory Commons, and the Philosophy Commons

Recommended Citation

Jannotta, Anthony (2009). Is Prospero Just? Platonic Virtue in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. *Undergraduate Review*, 5, 104-107.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol5/iss1/21

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
Copyright © 2009 Anthony Jannotta

Is Prospero Just? Platonic Virtue in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

Anthony Jannotta

Anthony Jannotta is a senior from Franklin, MA. majoring in Philosophy and English. He produced this paper for Dr. James Crowley's Writing about Literature course. Anthony would like to thank Dr. Crowley for his support and guidance without which this piece would not appear as it does. Anthony plans to continue his study of Philosophy in graduate school.

The Tempest *is often regarded, and rightly so, as Shakespeare's last great play. Many scholars argue that Prospero is an analogue for Shakespeare himself, noting the similarities between Prospero's illusory magic and Shakespeare's poetic genius. The themes of imagination, illusion, and, indeed, theatre itself play an integral role. The line that is perhaps most often cited as evidence for this argument is Prospero's speech directly after he breaks up the wedding masque in which he refers to "the great globe itself" (IV. i.153).*[1] *There is a danger, however, in appealing to the author's biography or treating the biography as paramount, namely that the art work loses its autonomy. Barbara Tovey, while not adopting this interpretation per se, posits a species of this argument. She reads* The Tempest *as Shakespeare's direct response to, and defense of, Plato's conception of imitative poetry found in* The Republic. *Biographical criticism, however valuable it may be, will not be our main concern; rather, we will shift the focus from Shakespeare's biography to the text of* The Republic.

Tovey's essay, "Shakespeare's Apology for Imitative Poetry: *The Tempest* and *The Republic,*" is an exercise in both historical and political criticism that takes into account the ideal city of which Socrates speaks in *The Republic*.[2] A more psychological approach using Plato's *Republic,* however, can yield an equally valuable discussion. If we remind ourselves that the main concern of *The Republic* is not to provide a blueprint of the perfect city but rather to provide an account of the nature of justice, we can easily see that the tripartite ideal city is a metaphor or analogy for the human psyche. There are many parallels between *The Republic* and *The Tempest* and, indeed, Platonic philosophy in general. G. Wilson Knight, for example, in his essay "Prospero's Lonely Magic," mentions "Plato's two steeds of the soul" (Knight 137). This is, of course, a reference to *The Phaedrus*, another Platonic dialogue. Knight does not develop the idea fully, but if he had, it isn't obvious where that line of inquiry would have taken us. Knight makes an interesting observation, but a more profitable means of inquiry is to be found in *The Republic*. In order to accomplish this we need to take a look at what Plato considered virtues, which, if properly cultivated, help bring about justice. The Platonic idea of justice and virtue as a lens through which to examine Prospero reveals to us a better understanding of the development of his character throughout the course of the play. We should though offer a brief explication of Platonic justice before addressing *The Tempest*.

The Republic is concerned with the nature of justice in the individual, how Plato arrives at this point, though, is through a lengthy discussion of justice in the ideal city. Socrates states, "let's first find out what sort of thing justice is in a city and afterwards look for it in the individual, observing the ways in which the smaller is similar to the larger" (369).[3] This is not to say that *The Republic* doesn't contain any political insight; surely it does. Books VIII and IX deal with the way in which the various kinds of governments become increasingly less just i.e. the timocracy becoming the oligarchy and so forth. Again, Plato uses the constitutions of these various governments to talk about the similar process that occurs in the human psyche.

Plato's conception of the ideal city is tripartite; there is a ruling class (guardians), a solider class (auxiliaries), and a working class (craftsman). Likewise, the human psyche has three parts: the rational, the spirited, and the appetitive. The city and the psyche are analogous in that each section of the city has a particular function similar to the corresponding section of the psyche: the guardians, auxiliaries, and workers correspond to the rational, spirited, and appetitive, respectively. We will return to this shortly. After laying out the class structure of the city, Socrates' interlocutors urge him to continue his discussion of justice. Socrates remarks that "[he thinks the] city, if indeed it has been correctly founded, is completely good" (427e). He goes on to say that if the city is completely good then it will be "wise, courageous, moderate, and just" (427e). Socrates and company begin to examine the city with the hope of discovering justice through a process of elimination; finding the other virtues first will ensure that whatever is left over will be justice. Let's consider the city and the psyche simultaneously.

Socrates and his interlocutors discover wisdom first. Only the guardians possess wisdom which is defined as both good judgment and a special knowledge of ruling; knowing what is best for each part of the city. Guardians are also necessarily wiser than the members of the other classes because they are philosophers. Wisdom in the human psyche is located in "that small part of himself that rules in him and makes … declarations and has within it the knowledge of what is advantageous for each part and for the whole soul" (442c). The rational is most suited to ruling the psyche because it is the seat of wisdom, calculation, and learning.

The city is considered courageous "because of a part of itself [auxiliaries] that has the power to preserve through everything its belief about what things are to be feared" (429c). The upbringing of the soldiers allows them to unwaveringly internalize the laws of the city like well prepared wool that once dyed holds its color (429e). Likewise, courage is located in the spirited portion (the same portion that wills, desires, and emotes) of the psyche and we say one is courageous "when [the spirited part] preserves through pains and pleasures the declarations of reason about what is to be feared and what isn't" (442c). Courage is a kind of steadfastness or resoluteness which the spirited part exhibits when it obeys the rational part.

Moderation isn't localized in one class but rather it is shared among them. The city contains a diversity of natures: the guardians are, of course, the best natured while the majority of the remaining citizens have a poorer nature (431c). Nevertheless the "unanimity" or "agreement between the naturally worse and naturally better as to which of the two is to rule both in the city and in each one, is rightly called moderation" (432a-b). Moderation is akin to self-control. One may have self-control when the "naturally better part is in control of the worse" (431b). Likewise, when the larger worse part overpowers the smaller better part (of a person or city) "this is called being self-defeated or licentious" (431b). In the psyche, each part agrees that reason and the rational part should rule and do not seek to "engage in civil war against it" (442d).

The last remaining virtue is justice, what is "left over" in Socrates' discussion of the city's virtues. Socrates states that "justice is doing one's own work and not meddling with what isn't one's own" (443b). A more psychic description of the just person is one who does "not allow any part of himself to do the work of another part or allow the various classes within him to meddle with each other" (443d). When reason is allowed to rule and the appetites and emotions are not trying to rule in its stead, only then can a person's actions be said to be just. The preservation of this "inner harmony" is justice and those actions that disrupt the inner harmony are unjust (443e). *The Tempest* offers us a vivid representation of many of Plato's remarks concerning the psyche and virtue.

We can point out the similarities and parallels between *The Tempest* and *The Republic* without making claims regarding Shakespeare's intentions. *The Tempest*, nevertheless, embodies or concretizes the parts of the Platonic psyche in its characters. Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban all exhibit more of one particular psychic portion: Prospero represents the rational, Ariel the spirited, and Caliban the appetitive. Tovey rightly observes that "Caliban is a creature of bodily appetites and impulses" and, indeed, "much of his talk throughout the play turns on food" (291). Each of these characters, though, is not a manifestation of just any spirited or appetitive psyche ,but rather, each character is a manifestation of Prospero's psyche; as Knight puts it, Ariel and Caliban "are yoked in the employ of Prospero" (137). While there is a definite master-slave relationship between Prospero and the other characters there is a great deal of Prospero's language that is dedicated to ownership

or possessiveness that suggests inclusion. It is not just any Ariel, it is "my Ariel" (I.ii.188) or "my delicate Ariel" (IV.i.49) or "my spirit" (V.i.6). Prospero speaks of Caliban, too, in the possessive but in a much more disparaging tone: "Caliban, my slave, who never / yields us kind answer" (I.ii.308-9). Let's examine these characters but with Prospero and the Platonic virtues in mind. We shall find that Prospero cannot be virtuous in the Platonic sense until the play's last act.

Prospero embodies the rational part of the Platonic psyche. We can see his inclination toward wisdom and knowledge in his recounting to Miranda of how it is that they came to the island. Prospero, "being transported / And rapt in secret studies" (I.ii.76-77), casts "the government … upon [his] brother" Antonio (I.ii.75). This in turn "[awakes] an evil nature" in his brother that ultimately leads him to usurp Prospero's dukedom, although Prospero is rightfully and technically still duke of Milan. His enthusiasm for the "liberal arts" (I.ii.73) leads him to "[neglect] worldly ends" (I.ii.89) and seek privacy for "the bettering of [his] mind" (I.ii.90). Even the dim-witted Caliban knows that if one wants to overthrow Prospero one can "brain him" (III.ii.88) but only after "having first seized his books" (III.ii.89). Clearly, if there is any character that embodies the rational portion of the psyche, it is Prospero.

Ariel represents the spirited portion of Prospero's psyche. Ariel's function on the island, at least to Prospero, is one of subservience. Plato also has this same role in mind when he writes about the spirited portion's function. Socrates asks Glaucon: "isn't it appropriate for the rational part to rule, since it is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul, and for the spirited part to obey it and be its ally?" (441e). The answer, of course, is yes. And indeed Ariel fulfills a similar function for Prospero. After all it is Ariel who "[performs] to point the tempest that [Prospero] bade [him]" (I.ii.194), divides the shipwrecked passengers "in troops … 'bout the isle" (I.ii.220), and stores the King's ship "safely in harbor" (I.ii.226). Ariel's service to Prospero continues into the play's last act. Prospero, when he demands Ariel's continued subservience in Act I, scene ii, even assigns Ariel the pejorative "moody;" here it means stubbornness but it can also connote emotionality, something for which the spirited portion of the psyche is responsible (I.ii.244). The other things that fall under Ariel's domain are things normally associated with the spirited portion: the songs he sings, the dancing spirits he summons, and the banquet he materializes and promptly vanishes for Antonio and company.

If we look at Ariel and Prospero in terms of Platonic virtue, thus far we see that Prospero, the rational, is in control of Ariel, the spirited, precisely as Plato suggests. It is a forced subservience but the "correct" arrangement; Ariel "obeys" and is a kind of "ally" to Prospero. Prospero, by definition, is not moderate since the arrangement is forced and not completely unanimous and therefore cannot be just. Both Ariel and Caliban protest Prospero's rule on the island and until all three characters can reach an agreement Prospero cannot be virtuous.

Caliban represents the appetitive portion and, like Ariel, dislikes his position in the hierarchy of the island. Plato conceives of the appetitive portion as the larger and baser portion that includes things like food, drink, and sex. One of the first things we learn of Caliban is his attempted rape of Miranda; Prospero used to allow him to stay in his "cell till [he] … [sought] to violate / The honor of [his] child" (I.ii.347-8). Plato also urged for a finer control over the appetites and we see Prospero continuously threatening Caliban with "cramps" and "pinches" at various points throughout the play. Ariel is quicker to obey than is Caliban. Prospero and Miranda "cannot miss him", though, because he does perform for them certain chores (I.ii.311). Despite our baser needs we cannot escape from them.

We have established Ariel's unruliness, but Caliban's is of a higher magnitude. Caliban's run in with Stephano and Trinculo reveals to us just how much Caliban resents Prospero. Caliban sees Prospero as "a tyrant, / A sorcerer, that by his cunning hath / Cheated [him] of the island" (III.ii.41-4). He proceeds to urge Stephano to "revenge it on him" (III.ii.54). If we recall that moderation involves each part of the psyche agreeing that the smaller portion, the rational, should rule over the bigger portions, the appetitive and the spirited, and that "they should not engage in civil war against it" (442d), we see that, still, at this point in the play, by definition, Prospero isn't moderate, not with his appetitive portion plotting to kill him.

Prospero's desire for vengeance, to repay his usurping brother, drives much of *The Tempest's* action. His treatment of Antonio and company via Ariel throughout the play's middle acts serves as a kind of vengeance so that by the time we reach Act V Prospero's character is transformed. Ariel remarks how Prospero's "charm so strongly works 'em / That if [he] now beheld them, [his] affections / would become tender" (V.i.17-9). Despite Prospero's indignation, he realizes that he should favor his "nobler reason 'gainst [his] fury" (V.i.26) and that "The rarer action is / In virtue than in vengeance" (V.i.27-8). Shortly after Prospero explicitly states he will choose virtue over vengeance, Caliban realizes that he mistakenly assumed Stephano "for a god" (V.i.297) and he remarks on "how fine [his] master is" (V.i.262). Prospero, in turn, says of Caliban, "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (V.i.275-6). A few lines later, Caliban, after Prospero instructs him to

prepare his cell, assures Prospero that "[he'll] be wise hereafter" (V.i.295). The appetitive and the rational both agree that the better part should rule. Prospero is finally moderate, but is he just?

All the parts of the psyche must be in harmony for one to be considered just. But in the final act of the play, Ariel is released from service and is no longer there to "obey" and be Prospero's "ally." While it seems impossible to divorce oneself from any portion of one's psyche, we can nevertheless regard Prospero's choice to let Ariel go as a just act. An action is just if it preserves the harmony among the portions of the psyche: letting Ariel go is just insofar as the action eliminates the strife we observed earlier in the play. There is agreement among both the spirited and the appetitive that the rational should rule and none is trying to do the job or perform the function of the other. At the close of Act V, we can regard Prospero as virtuous and just.

There is no doubt that Prospero undergoes a transformation; he can be regarded as vengeful up until the latter acts of the play. There are, of course, many ways to understand his transformation but the play seems to provide us with characters that fit neatly with Plato's conception of the human psyche found in *The Republic*. Prospero, Ariel, and Caliban can be understood as the concretized elements of Prospero's psyche. Prospero's transformation, then, is found in his movement towards Platonic virtue throughout the play. The tempest within Prospero quiets as the observable elements of his psyche, Ariel and Caliban, settle into harmony, each performing his own function and not interfering with the other.

To claim that Shakespeare had Plato's work in mind when he composed *The Tempest*, the position of Tovey and others, is to argue for a claim that, most likely, will go unsubstantiated. Arguments like these rely heavily, because they must, on primary texts and their intertextuality. But the next step, claiming that the author consciously incorporated elements of another text, especially when both authors have been dead for centuries, does little to bolster one's argument. There is no doubt, however, that Ancient Greek philosophy, especially Plato, has shaped the western consciousness. It is entirely possible—indeed likely—that Shakespeare was aware, if only through second hand sources, of basic Platonic notions. Platonic thought, specifically *The Republic*, is one of many underpinnings for *The Tempest*. Shakespeare's last great play moves us by virtue of its literary achievement while, at the same time, it resonates deeply with a broader tradition in thought and culture.

Notes

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. *The Riverside Shakespeare* 2nd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997). All references are to Act, scene, line divisions in this edition.

[2] Socrates is often regarded as a conduit for Plato. But to regard the character Socrates as such is potentially to undermine the dialectical nature of all of Plato's writings. For the purposes of this paper, however, "Plato" and "Socrates" will be used interchangeably.

[3] Plato, *The Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve. *Plato Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997). All references are to Stephanus numbers in this translation.

Works Cited

Knight, G. Wilson. "Prospero's Lonely Magic." *The Crown of Life*. (London: Methuen, 1947)pp. 25-28. *The Tempest: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Peter Hulme and William H. Sherman. New York: Norton, 2004. 137-141.

Plato. *The Republic*. Trans. G.M.A. Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve. *Plato Complete Works*. Ed. John M. Cooper. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997. 971 – 1223.

Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest. The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd Edition. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997.

Tovey, Barbara. "Shakespeare's Apology for Imitative Poetry: *The Tempest and The Republic Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 11.3 (Sep. 1983): 275-316.